

***Richard II* at Shakespeare's Globe 2019**

A Collective Perspective

Delia Jarrett-Macauley, Emer McHugh and Varsha Panjwani – with Adjoa Andoh and Dona Croll

Abstract:

In 2019, Shakespeare's Globe theatre in London ran a production of *Richard II* co-directed by Lynette Linton and Adjoa Andoh (who also played the title role of Richard II) and featuring an all women of colour cast, both on the stage and in the production team. In this collaborative article, Delia Jarrett-Macauley introduces the production and places it in the context of historical engagement with Shakespeare by artists of colour. Varsha Panjwani contributes a set of curated conversations with Adjoa Andoh and actor Dona Croll (who played John of Gaunt in the production) recorded for the 'Women and Shakespeare' podcast, and Emer McHugh reviews a filmed version of the production subsequently made available on YouTube.

Keywords: Shakespeare; *Richard II*; race; gender; performance; directing; collaboration.

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In 2019, Shakespeare's Globe theatre in London ran a production of *Richard II* in the indoor space of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse which was co-directed by Adjoa Andoh (who also played the title role of Richard II) and Lynette Linton and featured an all women of colour cast, both on the stage and in the production team. As Varsha Panjwani remarks in this article, this production represented a “wonderful glass ceiling shattering moment” in British Shakespearean performance traditions. It was also remarkable in being a consciously collective creative effort: Andoh and Linton chose a directorial approach that took the idea of ensemble-acting to a new level, working in line with current Globe director Michelle Terry's anti-hierarchical philosophy, as noted by Emer McHugh, also in this article. The following pages reflect that collective spirit by experimenting with a collaborative critical practice that also includes illuminating conversations with Andoh and with Dona Croll (who played John of Gaunt in the production). The first part is an introduction by Delia Jarrett-Macauley which traces the cultural pre-history of the production and its moment.¹ The present moment has seen increasing recognition of creative

¹ Jarrett-Macauley's introduction is based on excerpts from her pre-show talk at Shakespeare's Globe in 2019.

engagement with Shakespeare by artists of colour, although discrimination persists in many areas, but, as Jarrett-Macauley demonstrates, artists of colour in the UK have been engaging with Shakespeare for a very long time and their work provides an important context for the *Richard II* production at the Globe. The introduction is followed by curated excerpts from conversations with Andoh and Croll, recorded by Varsha Panjwani for the podcast series 'Women and Shakespeare', created and hosted by Panjwani, both of which provide backstage insights, explore creative decision-making, and discuss what it means to thoroughly diversify Shakespeare.² Emer McHugh's review of the filmed version of the production, later made available on YouTube, then analyses its key moments and contextualises its reception.³ The three parts thus work together in a productively unorthodox manner, combining scholarship, creative insight and access to multimedial sources, to reflect what was a ground-breaking moment in the history of representing *Richard II* on the Shakespearean stage.⁴

How did we get here? By Delia Jarrett-Macauley

On seeing *Richard II* performed by a company of women of colour whose backgrounds span Africa, the Caribbean and Asia: as audiences and scholars, we are bound to ask is this: what does their presence, what do their origins bring to the performance of Shakespeare? *Richard II* raises questions about nation and belonging, and with the Windrush scandal still fresh, one is bound to ask what are the feelings of those who came to Britain after World War II?⁵ And what do their

² The excerpts have been especially curated and edited for this article. The original podcast versions of both can be accessed on the ['Women and Shakespeare' podcast](#) created and hosted by Panjwani.

³ The production was recorded by Andoh's company 'Swinging the Lens' and is available on [YouTube](#).

⁴ Editorial note by Anne Sophie Refskou.

⁵ The Windrush generation in the UK is named after *HTM Empire Windrush*, the ship that brought nearly 500 Caribbean immigrants to the UK in 1948. In 2018, it was revealed that many members of this generation had been deported in error, or threatened with deportation, or been the victims of other discriminatory treatment. This became known as 'The Windrush Scandal'.

descendants now think about the state of the nation? I want to trace the cultural history that sets out how we got here – to an all women of colour production at Shakespeare’s Globe. For me, the starting point is the pioneering work of the elder statesman of race and Shakespeare studies, Eldred Jones, who wrote *Othello’s Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* at a time of colonial upheaval, the 1950s, when Africa’s radical thinkers were striving for independence. Jomo Kenyatta, Nkrumah in Ghana and other political activists across the continent were seeking to end the colonial ties with Europe and establish independent states. It was fitting that Jones should have been examining Shakespeare’s significance for Africans because language and literary canonisation are not cultural displays but political matters to do with identity, power and nation building.

The story of Black Shakespeare performance in the UK starts with the African-American actor, Ira Aldridge, (1807-1867), who became known as the ‘African Roscius’, most famous for his Othello, though he played Titus Andronicus and many other leading roles. Aldridge’s story, as a trailblazer of Black British culture, was recovered in the 1980s, and in 2012 playwright Lolita Chakrabarti honoured him in her play *Red Velvet*, which opened at Tricycle Theatre, London with Adrian Lester, her husband, in the lead role. However, as Ayanna Thompson remarks in her introduction to the play text, Aldridge’s story is largely forgotten; his name does not adorn streets or theatres. As Thompson suggests,

Aldridge’s story does not fit easily with the familiar refrain that Shakespeare is for everyone. Aldridge’s story, in fact, forces us to confront the fact that while we may want Shakespeare to be for everyone, all too often Shakespeare has been used as a gatekeeper; that is as a barrier to exclude and subjugate people of colour. (Thompson, 2014, n.pg.)

When Aldridge played the lead in *Titus Andronicus*, a play known for its vicious racism, amongst much else, the text was cleaned up and much of the racism

removed, and the critics found that quite acceptable. Sometimes the actor himself did not fit his surroundings. In one of the companies where Aldridge worked, the manager found his talent far exceeded that of the other cast members. In the 1930s, Ira Aldridge's daughter, Amanda, was a piano teacher in London. She gave Paul Robeson (1898-1976), the celebrated African-American singer and actor, the earrings her father had worn when playing Othello with the express wish that he would wear them when playing that role: a good wish token!⁶ The environment of the 1930s in which Amanda Aldridge and Paul Robeson found themselves decried the mixing of the races. The 'colour bar', as everyday racism was rather quaintly called, acted as a barrier to black people entering hotels, restaurants and public facilities; it prevented their access to some professional roles, the senior levels of the forces or the Civil Service, and generally served to keep alive the notion of white racial supremacy. Against that backcloth, Robeson played Othello with Peggy Ashcroft as his Desdemona. Robeson won great critical acclaim for his acting and international respect for his performance. Today the representation of black faces on multiple sites and screens is commonplace, but in Robeson's era, the invisibility of black creative talent was the norm and the picture of a black man sitting alongside a white woman would have been highly contentious.

Looking at the history of black women artists who have embraced Shakespeare and made him their own, two women stand out for me. First, the African-American writer Maya Angelou, whose first awe-inspiring autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was first published in 1969. In it, Maya, a young girl in Arkansas, a victim of sexual abuse, observes the racism and sexism in the community. She also explores the family relationships, the dynamics between the generations and writes poignantly about the separation from her parents. In painting a picture of her early life, and showing the stages of

⁶ Robeson became the first African-American actor to play Othello since Ira Aldridge with landmark performances in the US and the UK. For further analysis of the performances and legacies of Aldridge and Robeson, see also Jarrett-Macauley (2016); Newstock (2021) and Chakravarti (2021).

growth, coming of age, the value of literacy and her love of literature stand out as important aspects of her story. She refers to many literary works, but Shakespeare is central. Her playful approach is captured in the sentence “I pacified myself about his whiteness... he’d been dead so long it couldn’t matter to anyone anymore” (1984, 14), while her later oft-quoted statement “Shakespeare was a black woman” connects the young black female with the Bard and is valuable precisely because it shrinks the vast gulf – in time, space, gender, power and experience – to nullify it.⁷

Around the time that Virago, the women’s publishing house, decided to take a punt on Maya Angelou with a small print run which led to several reprints, another black woman pioneer, Yvonne Brewster, was forging the black theatre company in Britain: Talawa. This is how Jamaican-born director Brewster described pulling Shakespeare’s plays into the heart of Talawa’s offering:

I did *Antony and Cleopatra* (1991) because I really wanted to see what a Cleopatra I envisioned would look like.⁸ She was Egyptian. And then we did *King Lear* (1994). Norman Beaton was supposed to be in *King Lear*, and it was so sad... he was too ill, and he died soon after. So, we had to do a different kind of *King Lear*, a modern *King Lear* in black leather... And it did produce us David Harewood, Cathy Tyson, Lolita Chakrabarti, lots of people who are now on our television screens every evening. ... We did *Othello* (1997) and we haven’t done any since because I realised that the people we were using were being snapped up by the people who had the money. Shakespeare is expensive, and why is the Black theatre company doing Shakespeare except to give people the opportunity to act? (Qtd. in King-Dorset 2014, 35).

⁷ This reference is included in Eaglestone (2000, 66).

⁸ Cleopatra in this production was played by Dona Croll, who played John of Gaunt in *Richard II* at Shakespeare’s Globe, as she describes later in this article. Croll discusses her experience of both productions in [episode 2, season 1](#) of the podcast ‘Women and Shakespeare’, while [episode 1, season 1](#) features an in-depth conversation with Jarrett-Macauley.

David Harewood played Edmund and was seen by Vanessa Redgrave who later took him on tour for Antony and Cleopatra, and when the National Theatre 'scooped him up' for *Othello*, Yvonne Brewster felt her work was done in showing that black actors could do Shakespeare.

In writing my own first novel *Moses, Citizen and Me* which used Shakespeare, I was also questioned over whether the Bard belonged in Africa, and specifically in the mouths of a company of child soldiers. *Moses, Citizen and Me*, which is set in post-civil Sierra Leone, centres around a family in which the youngest member, 8-year old Citizen, has been a child soldier. In the course of the novel, he is joined by other former child soldiers and they perform *Juliosh Siza* in the rainforest to an international audience. Their shortened version of the play in Krio was based on the translation by Thomas Decker, a civil servant who, in the 1960s, recognised the value of having African versions of Shakespeare. Like many other black artists before me, I reached for the Bard to explore universal themes and in particular the tragic nature of civil war. Long before I wrote *Moses, Citizen and Me*, I found adaptations of Shakespeare's verse in the 1930s poetry by the Jamaican feminist, Una Marson. We are not always conscious of our cultural and literary influences. Black British artists of stage and screen are frequently urged to look towards the US for employment and even for inspiration. But while our American cousins count several scholars of race and Shakespeare among their numbers and highly-regarded companies such as the Oregon Shakespeare Festival are producing modern versions of Shakespeare's play, this British *Richard II* production is still a first in many respects. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival has yet to stage an all women of colour Shakespeare production and no black woman in the US has yet played a king in one of history plays. It takes courage and imagination to step outside the norms. Adjoa Andoh's decision to direct *Richard II* with Lynette Linton builds upon the courageous adventures of other women artists: Angelou, Brewster, Marson and many others.

Directing *Richard II*: Adjoa Andoh in conversation with Varsha Panjwani

Varsha Panjwani (VP) ...The landmark production, *Richard II*, which you co-directed with Lynette Linton in 2019 at Shakespeare's Globe, and which you also played the lead part in: To begin with, I want to talk about the show's poster which was really arresting. It has your face in the foreground and the flag of St. George of England in the background. You've said in interviews that we, and by that I think you mean Black and Brown women, own this flag too, because we built this England, but over the years, how has England treated you as a black woman and as a black actor?

Adjoa Andoh (AA) Well, I went to see Michelle Terry (Shakespeare's Globe artistic director) about a different play, which wasn't available. But she said to me, "We have *Richard II*." And *Richard II* was going to be running during Brexit; when we were officially supposed to Brexit the first time (and then we didn't). At the time, the country was in this ferment, saying, "do we want to be in Europe? Do we want to be independent from Europe? Who are we? Are we Europeans? Are we British? What does that mean? Are you Scottish Irish, Welsh or English?" All of that. And so, when Michelle said that *Richard II* was available, the play that has the "This sceptred isle" speech in it – the great play that people take as their glorying of England and Englishness – I just thought, "That is a thrill. Give me that, I'm going to do that play."

Michelle said, "Well, so what's your concept of it?" And I said, "We are in the middle of this conversation (Brexit) about who is part of this nation, about what it means to be part of this nation. I want to shake that conversation up, and the way I want to it is I want to have a cast of all women of colour and I want those women of colour to be from every part of the globe that Britain colonized." Because people from this country, Britain, went somewhere else, uninvited, made huge profits from their activities, and we've ended up having a relationship with this country. Having 'a relationship' is a nice way of putting it, I suppose. Basically, because of the

brutality, the kidnapping, the rape, the enslavement, the indentured-ness of adventurism from this country, the money was made that allowed Britain to become great. I mean, you can do simple equations with, for example, the number of black bodies trafficked from the coast of West Africa, into the West Indies, sold to the West Indies and America and the money that comes back to Bristol, and with that money, you build Queen Square, you build Park Street, you build beautiful Georgian crescents, and you bring in the industrial revolution. You bring in manufacturing, you bring in scientific discoveries, you bring in more exploration. Britain was fantastic at doing that at our expense. There is no Great Britain without the enslavement of people from across the Asian continent, from across the African continent and various other bits of the world, right across the Middle East. Everywhere there is a horrible mess, pretty much it's either Britain or Europe that's gone in there and stuck their oar in straight away.

So, I wanted to have this thought experiment: who is usually at the bottom of the heap everywhere? Women. And who was at the bottom of that empire? People of colour. So, let's have women of colour, the most powerless demographic within that empire, let's have them tell the story of that empire, because for me it is not enough to have people on the stage. It's not enough to have the brown window dressing. You have to have people in position of power and decision-making and in creative areas other than on the stage. That was my thesis with that production. And when Michelle said, "Who's going to play Richard", I was like, "I'm not doing all that work and not play Richard, are you kidding?". I was filming in Canada and I spent nearly all the shoot in Canada editing the play, because we only had 10 actors available, because the Sam Wanamaker Theatre was quite a small space. I had to get 26 characters in the play into 10 characters on the stage. So, I had to re-edit the text and that took a long time, but it was great, because it's a great way to get to know the play and also to get to know the lens of the play that you choose. I conceived that poster, because I wanted it to be arresting and I wanted it to be the

challenge that goes, “See that flag of St. George? We made that. We had a part of that and we’re going to be on it.” And the other reason was that I wanted to make an invitation to people of colour that this *Richard II* was available to them. I wanted to make that strong invitation. So that was the reason that I did it like that. And I knew that I wanted everybody involved in production to be a woman of colour, which caused its own aggro, But I went, “Yes, you can find all women of colour musicians. I’m getting a composer, photographer, designer, lighting designer, stage management, costume supervisor...”

VP All of those claims of, “Oh, there aren’t enough photographers or there aren’t enough people of colour who are musicians and so on”: your production proved them wrong. Your production proved that that is not the case. And I agree with you about the show’s poster. I think it was making a statement, something that is often forgotten, because Britain doesn’t like to think of itself as diverse when it clearly is.

AA I think the other thing to just say is that *Richard II* is a history play. My mother is a history teacher. I love history. And one of the things that I find most frustrating about the Brexit debate and any debates we have about citizenship in this country is that nobody teaches all the history. I don’t want Black History Month, you can keep it, you can tear it up and put it in the bin. I want all the history all the months, everybody’s history all the time. So yes, you can talk about how marvellous it was that we had ‘The Flying Scotsman’, or you can talk about great discoveries of this, that, and the other. But if you don’t talk about kidnap, rape, disenfranchisement, the Opium Wars, indentured labour in the West Indies, indentured labour in India, if you don’t talk about the violence, repression of the Mau Maus in Kenya; if you don’t talk about all the history, then you don’t get the full context. Talk about the facts of stuff that was really happening here in terms of people’s existence in this country. I mean, there was a black Roman general BC who was over here, who was involved with the building of Hadrian’s Wall. You

look at Nelson's column in Trafalgar square an iconic British symbol: Nelson is being held by a black sailor. Why? Because at the time of the Battle of Waterloo, a fifth of the British Navy were black. George III's wife, Charlotte, was mixed race. She was descended from a relationship between Alfonso III of Portugal and his African mistress. And when she was born, there were complaints about her thick lips and her flat nose and that she looked like a Mulatto and how dreadful it was. And then, she becomes the Queen of England. Everyone goes, "Oh, Meghan Markle." You kind of go, "Queen Charlotte."

VP Yes. A history play makes that statement: "Look at your history again, look at what was there: rediscover it". I also have heard some really amazing things about the rehearsals of this particular production. So, Dona Croll was on this podcast and she was talking about a lot of dancing and an evening of cultural sharing and so on. But at the opposite end of the spectrum, I have often heard from black actors, again from Dona Croll, but also, I've read Dawn Monique Williams, who was saying, that, sometimes, white directors just don't know how to engage with or direct black actors, because they're either too afraid or they don't know how to bring in those cultural references. Is there any advice that you can give someone who is directing a black or a brown cast? What should they do?

AA So here's the thing. What often happens when you are the only person of colour, or if you're the only woman (because both things do happen quite a lot) is you feel that you are responsible to represent everybody of your race or everybody of your gender. And I hate that, all my life I've hated it. I'm like, "I'm not a thing, I'm Adjoa, I'm this unique person. And there is nobody else like me. And there was nobody else who would like the things I like in all the multifaceted ways that I do, (or don't like them). And there's nobody else with my flaws. And there's nobody else with my gifts." How should a white director direct a black actor? I don't know: be a person, direct a person, because there isn't a black actor or a brown actor. There's just a person there who hopefully has some silky skills as an actor. Direct

the person, work out how to work with them, because I can have a room full of black actors and each one will leave me to direct them differently, because they're a person. I mean, we have to come back to the conversation always that race is a social construct, because just scrape it off and underneath, it's Shylock, isn't it? "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh?" Skin colour is not the thing. What society does with it is the thing. So, this is all a social construct. The social construct is created in order to 'other' people. And when people are not regarded as being of equal value with you, then you can do what you want to them and you can feel less guilty about it. So, I would say, "Get to know people." I mean, in our rehearsal room, I did the cultural sharing, because I have a belief that when people have ownership of what they're engaged in, they commit to it. They're not doing it to please teacher. They're not doing it because they're scared, they're doing it because it's theirs. I had a theatre company for 12 years, 'Wild Iris', this was a while ago. And one of the things that we always said was everybody gets paid the same, because it's everybody's work. Everybody has to own it, we all have to be at the party, or else it's not a party. So, in our rehearsal rooms, I wanted to start off by everybody coming with something that resonated with them; I called it a cultural sharing. But I said, "You could bring a dance, bring a piece of music, bring a piece of fabric, poetry, a joke, a song, a film that you like, anything. But I want to know how you personally engage with this play that we're all embarking on together." Interestingly, what people brought knitted us together as a family, like you wouldn't believe. Everybody had something to say about what they brought: "This was my grandmother's. And when she was fleeing [XYZ], she brought it with her." So, we had a woman who was our fight director, and was Israeli-Jewish. We had Iraqis, Iranians, Guyanese, Bajan Trini, Ghanaian, Nigerian. It was endless, Chinese, Filipina, the variety of people who came with something deep and precious and it's like everybody put it in your bank account. And they said, "Here's my investment", and then when we did the play, we drew on all our investments to make it work.

And first day of rehearsals, we cried. Hard-bitten, old lags, like me who's been in the business for three and a half decades, we all cried. And we cried for the relief of just being in a room as an artist, not a woman, not a woman of colour, just an artist.

Performing in *Richard II*: Dona Croll in conversation with Varsha Panjwani

Varsha Panjwani (VP) I just want to know from you, what does the term black signify?

Dona Croll (DC) It means a specific experience something that people who are non-black will never have and will never understand or appreciate. And more importantly, the vast majority of non-black people don't acknowledge the experience. That's a huge difficulty.

VP It's much more, you're saying than say a political label, it's much more than even a cultural label, it's much more about that every day lived experience with all these inherited histories as well.

DC Yes. In Europe, certainly, and in America, absolutely. But if you live in a country where there is a majority black population, you don't realize you're black, because everyone's having the same experience. You only realize you're black when you rub up against non-black people. Being black in an all-black environment is joyous, if you have being black in a European environment to compare it with.

VP We did have this wonderful glass ceiling shattering moment didn't we, very recently in 2019 when you played John of Gaunt in *Richard II* at Shakespeare's Globe with an all women of colour ensemble. [...] Before we discuss the role and your take on it, what was your experience of working with that company of actors?

DC Well, just glorious. Totally liberating to be in a room full of people who have the same experience as you of life in Europe, to have the similar backstories. So, you say something and you're not thinking before you say, "Oh, can I say this because it might upset him or her or the director. They'll take it the wrong way". So, you keep quiet. But in that room, anything that anybody said, was understood...was taken on

board...wasn't judged because we all understood it was a common language. We all knew what we were talking about. So that was fantastic. And then having this shared experience, which is what I guess most rehearsal rooms are like, but not for us because usually we're the one black person in the room. So usually that's our experience, but to be with a load, it was, it was superb, I loved it!

VP John of Gaunt is an old man. And so how did you approach that?

DC As an old person; none of us played men. We played human beings who have objectives, who know what they want to do in the play, what they need to get done and some of them should plot away to get it done. But it didn't seem odd that I was playing a man. I'm just playing a person who has seen this in their lives and now sees the future differently and wants to get back to how things were. I think that's how I approached it.

VP ... And talking of what he has seen: In the 'sceptred isle' speech he talks about England as now "bound in with shame" due to its own leadership. And you were playing this when the Brexit negotiation ...

DC ...Was at its height, yes. The line is: "That England that was wont to conquer others/Hath made a shameful conquest of itself". When do people usually applaud during a Shakespeare speech? On that line, they applauded. It was extraordinary. Everybody on stage went "what, what?" And then after that, and on the press night, it happened almost every night. Who claps during a Shakespeare speech? But suddenly Brexit hit everybody.

VP But that night, the audience was with you. They did get a very different style of audience as well in the Sam Wanamaker at that time and I realized that everyone was attentive. They were with you...on that night.

DC I think Adjoa's publicity made sure we got out to the right people, because we didn't want just to sit on stage and look out onto a sea of old white faces. But the reaction...Nobody imagined that black women could tell a story. Nobody had seen that coming in the same way that they didn't see Maya Angelou coming or Toni

Morrison coming or Bernadine Evaristo coming. It's not because they haven't seen it before. They can't imagine it.

***Richard II* at Shakespeare's Globe. Review by Emer McHugh**

Since Michelle Terry's arrival as Artistic Director of Shakespeare's Globe in 2017, a larger focus has been placed on the formation of a Globe Ensemble for its summer productions at the main playhouse. As Will Tosh has explained, "taking inspiration from the ways in which early modern companies might have managed their own business of playing and business of performance. And that is (from our point of view and modern theatre) quite unhierarchised" ("Such Stuff" n.pg.). Whereas there has not been as much a focus on this experiment in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse's series of programming, the idea of the ensemble is integral to Adjoa Andoh and Lynette Linton's production of *Richard II* in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse in 2019. In the case of this production, where every member of the creative team was a woman of colour, this was a matter of equity – as Andoh puts it,

...We wanted to create a space where women of colour could for once just come and be artists. A space where you could leave all the "Oh my god, I'm the only woman in the room", "Oh my god I'm the only person of colour in the room" or a combination of the two at the door and, for once, just come and practise your art (Andoh and Morrison n.pg.)

At this point, too, I note Lynette Goddard's point that "[i]t is assumed that actresses will work their way up to playing more prominent and leading roles within the company, but such a progression is more difficult for black actresses due to the dearth of roles available because of tendencies to more readily cast white actresses in Shakespeare's leading roles" (Goddard 2017, 80). Whereas she writes specifically about casting women of colour in Royal Shakespeare Company productions, Goddard also illustrates a more-widespread problem of the pervasive

whiteness in most mainstream Shakespeare performance institutions. Andoh and Linton's production, led by a Black actress – Andoh herself – in the title role, challenges this pervasive whiteness. The poster for the production displayed Andoh's face against the backdrop of the St George's flag: a flag all too often co-opted by English white nationalists: indeed, Andoh herself declared she was "reclaiming the flag" (Andoh and Morrison n.pg). In the words of Jackie Kay, "[i]t seemed to Adjoa the right time for this story to be told by the people who are often told they have no right to claim the flag. (The posters on the Tube are striking. Adjoa's beautiful and uncompromising face against the red and white.)" (Kay n.pg).

This ensemble emphasis in Andoh and Linton's production also enables us to read this play anew. *Richard II* is often seen as a star vehicle for whoever plays Richard (and Bolingbroke, on occasion), one of the many hoops that an actor must jump through in order to be considered a 'Shakespearean'. But this production is not just interested in the contrasts between Andoh's Richard and Sarah Niles' Bolingbroke, even though those contrasts between Richard's need to perform and Bolingbroke's impassiveness are drawn out with nuance and care. It is interested in the royal court and how that court operates – how members of that court relate to one another, and how that court splinters apart as a result of what happens in the play. As much I enjoy watching this play in performance, too often are Richard and Bolingbroke's friends and supporters filled with anonymous white men: *get to the next scene!*, I find myself thinking, *I don't care about these people*. In these productions, the lack of interest in the rest of the court is abundantly clear. It is rare that a production of this play emphasises that Richard's whims and Bolingbroke's uprising have consequences beyond just the main players. Watching Andoh and Linton's production on YouTube made me realise that *Richard II* is best played similarly to the *Henry IV* plays: the play might be named after one king, but it is truly an ensemble drama. I do not think I have seen a production where I have even cared about what happened to Thomas Mowbray, and yet India Ové's interpretation

of the role is one of the most memorable I have ever seen. Ové's Mowbray is all brash swagger and trash talk, a stark contrast to Niles' stoic strength, only for that façade to collapse when Richard decides to banish him from the kingdom. Ové, in one of the production's strongest turns, then effortlessly switches from the flamboyant Mowbray to the imperious Northumberland, Bolingbroke's smug right-hand man impeccably dressed in royal blue, all too happy to help engineer Richard's downfall. But in her scenes with Niles' young Bolingbroke Ové's Northumberland takes over where Dona Croll's John of Gaunt left off: an unshakeable loyalty to his chosen king, and a strong sense of camaraderie. Croll too is impressive and magisterial in her brief time on stage as Gaunt: whereas I am aware that theatre requires you to suspend your disbelief to varying degrees of success, I note that, here it is Gaunt's over-exerting himself that leads to his collapse and death, which seems like a more realistic scenario than Richard being roughly violent with him.

Elsewhere, this production finally does something with the Queen (a strong performance by Leila Farzad), and grants her agency (and a personality) through a simple production choice: having Richard genuinely be in love with her. Many modern productions focus on the king's relationship with Aumerle as a romantic subplot – but then, to play the king as someone completely disinterested in women, scenes that then feature the Queen feel like empty air. There is no urgency, then, to the stolen moments Richard has with her towards the production's end; it is hard to care about her when she overhears the gardeners gossiping about her husband. We do not care about her, because these productions do not care about her either. But Andoh and Linton's production, in its emphasis on the royal court as a whole, cares about how she feels about her husband, and cares about how she feels about the production's series of events – by placing her into Richard's close orbit. At the show's outset, we see Richard, his Queen, and Aumerle (Ayesha Dharker) play a puppet show together as the court assembles, and throughout the production

Richard and the Queen publicly display their affection for each other: dancing together, holding each other, stolen kisses. The tenderness in their final scene together feels earned, feels genuine. I do not want to suggest that we all cast Richard as a straight man from now on, though – indeed, loving the Queen does not make Richard straight. After all, we cannot fully quantify or conceive Shakespearean queerness, or queerness in general, along a gay/straight binary: “Homosexuality and its historical placement become synonymous with the queer. [...] If queerness can be defined, then it is no longer queer—it strays away from its anti-normative stance to become the institutionalized norm. Queerness is not a category but the confusion engendered by and despite categorization” (Menon 2011, 7). Andoh’s Richard certainly is not straight: he kisses Mowbray before the duel commences, and is very affectionate with Dharker’s Aumerle (indeed, according to Hailey Bachrach during the Twitter watch party organised by Varsha Panjwani, the two kissed during the show one night). Rather, this production re-emphasises that non-monosexuality (bisexuality, pansexuality) is its own distinct queer experience, especially one that is quite similar to the Shakespearean queerness that Menon defines. In any case, Andoh and Linton’s engagement with the Queen, as well as Farzad’s performance in the role, renders both Richard and the Queen as more complex, human characters.

Andoh and Linton’s *Richard II* is a ground-breaking landmark in contemporary Shakespeare performance, as well as striking new ground for women of colour theatre-makers and artists. It is also a sharp, careful reading of the play that tells us much more interesting things about the play, about Shakespeare, about Richard and Bolingbroke, and about the foundations of English rule than a production with anonymous cishet white men has in quite some time.

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