

## **Directorless Shakespeare**

### ***Richard II*, Embracing Alterity and Decolonising Theatrical Practice**

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#### **Abstract:**

Where do we meet Shakespeare's otherness with our otherness and make theatre that is meaningful? This article considers the many faces of otherness, in expected and unexpected places, and how Shakespeare is consistently othered through saturated assimilation and conceptual impositions when staged. It asks how to destabilise the entrenched hierarchies that inform Shakespeare, and the insistence that he needs to be interpreted through the medium of a director, by focusing on the case-study of Anærkē Shakespeare's *Richard II*, a UK-based company that works internationally and interculturally. Anærkē Shakespeare's production of *Richard II* was a theatrical experiment with three stagings in England and Germany between 2018-2019. The productions were directorless, ensemble driven, non-mimetic, embraced alterity and applied pressure to the notion of representation through fluid gender and race casting.

#### **Keywords:**

Directorless; Anærkē Shakespeare; *Richard II*; otherness; director; non-mimetic casting; representation; race; gender.

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The best-spoken, most emphatically and efficiently performed production of *Richard III* have seen since Steve Berkoff's much showier and conceptually stylized 1994 production in London and New York.<sup>1</sup>

So let us march ahead! Away with all the obstacles! Since we have landed in a battle, let us fight!  
... Before one thing and another there hangs a curtain: let us draw it up!<sup>2</sup>

Is there a way to uncover something new about Shakespeare's plays? Have centuries of performances, responses, and criticism mapped out plays that seem so familiar to us that all that is left is to re-appropriate, re-interpret, re-adjust, do something radical? And is there anything radical left to do? Shakespeare is other. His plays are other: written for performance conditions four centuries ago, in a language from which modern English speakers are increasingly alienated, replete with the historical embeddedness of uncanny voices which should render their easy appropriation by twenty-first century sensibilities problematic. And yet his

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Cartelli, unpublished review of Anòrkē Shakespeare's *Richard II*, The Rose Theatre, Kingston-upon-Thames, 24 March, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, 1949, para. 32.

canonical status, unlike any other author, means – especially in English-speaking countries – that he is ingested, whatever the dietary requirements, into the mouths of students. Further, his theatre, or derivatives of his theatre, colonise and occupy commercial stages. And yet, one often feels estranged in that theatre. Unrepresented. Unspoken to.

So, where do we meet this otherness with our otherness and make theatre that is meaningful with Shakespeare's text? This article considers the many faces of otherness, in expected and unexpected places. How the text can be othered, the audience, the actors, the characters othered, how gender and mimesis are forms of otherness, and even how Shakespeare is consistently othered through saturated assimilation. It asks how to destabilise the entrenched hierarchies that inform Shakespeare, the insistence that he needs to be interpreted through the medium of a director – this single dominating vision forcing an audience to ingest a pre-digested meal. It focuses on Shakespeare's *Richard II* performed by Anørkē Shakespeare, a UK-based company that works internationally and interculturallly. The *Richard II* production was a theatrical experiment with three stagings in the UK and Germany between 2018-2019, in which I was both a practitioner and a scholar.<sup>3</sup> The productions were ensemble driven, non-mimetic, embraced alterity, and directorless, in which relevance could be free and subjective rather than predetermined and imposed. Anørkē Shakespeare's fluid gender and race casting applied pressure to the notion of representation. All representation is difference. Representation is a repetition necessarily other to its initial iteration. It is different from the previous occasion and defers the final meaning (Derrida 1984, 1-28; 1988). This is especially true of theatre and exemplified by Shakespeare.

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<sup>3</sup> This case study relies on unpublished material, such as interviews with other practitioners, scholars, conversations with company members, audience members, email correspondence, unpublished reviews and comments. Permissions were granted to the author to use this material for the dissemination of the research.

Shakespeare's theatre was created and performed without the figure of a director. Within a mindset of collaboration, distributed authority and dispersed responsibility: "a process of joint decision making in a collective enterprise" (Wiggins 2018). But Western theatre is steeped in the tradition of the director. Of autocratic and hierarchical structures. Contemporary avant-garde theatre, moving towards post-humanism, is even pushing past the need for an actor.<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein reminds us that we always construct meaning against a hidden background. Before any change or revolution is possible we must expose what is there, we must see the invisible structures – the assumed structures – that keep us locked in unquestioned repetition: "What is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against whatever I could express has its meaning" (Wittgenstein 1984, 16). The hardest thing is to make this background apparent. This article, using as a case study Anōrkē Shakespeare's *Richard II*, seeks to do that.

Directorial, design-driven work has taken a hagiographic hold, a hold that has colonised even the acting process. The "Original Practice" work at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, London, which focused on the materiality of original staging rather than practical and structural aspects of rehearsing a play, had actors employ "a broadly Stanislavskian approach [...] and indeed some actors may have utilized it, not because they were asked to do so by Globe directors (though Mark Rylance and Mike Alfreds certainly encouraged its use) but because it is widely taught in modern actor training" (Purcell 2017, 69). The undisputed hegemony of the director exists deep in the colonisation of the actor's mind, right back to the training institutions, before the rehearsal room or the performance stage. Stanislavski – a director – breaks down the process, once belonging entirely to an actor, into a series of signposts on the road the actor needs to tread. Thus, the

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the work of Rimini Protokoll and Royal Shakespeare Company (2016).

theatrical space, once inhabited by a company of collaborative actors, has been colonised by directors, who usurp authority, occupy the territory of decision making, relegating actors to a servile function – blank canvases which directors paint on. Anārkē Shakespeare seeks to decolonise that territory, restoring autonomy to the original occupants. The hierarchical configuration of Western theatre, that lay with actors and playwrights till as late as the nineteenth century, has now shifted into the hands of directors, designers and producers. Actors are often the last consideration of a project that is well defined before they are invited to join: once conceived, the actors are cast into that conception. Acclaimed British theatre director Lucy Bailey engaged, at the time of her interview with the author of this article, in a five-month development for a new play with her designer, feels “the tools of the director and designer are brilliant at excavating certain worlds and not always are actors as brilliant as that, so what you are trying to get to with the actors is a playground that they can play in” (pers. comm. 20 January, 2020). Her resistance to directorless Shakespeare also lies in a well-touted truism that “at all points there would have been some form of leader [...] I’m sure he [Shakespeare] was very directorial in his approach to plays” (pers. comm. 20 January, 2020).

Moreover, British commercial theatre habitually relies on casting a famous actor, one often recognisable from the visual media of television and film. The character becomes even more estranged from the play and the audience: no longer Shakespeare’s Hamlet, but Benedict Cumberbatch’s Hamlet, or rather the director’s notion of Benedict Cumberbatch’s Hamlet. This conundrum is captured in Michael Billington’s review of the 2015 *Hamlet* at the Barbican Theatre, London: “My initial impression is that Benedict Cumberbatch is a good, personable Hamlet with a strong line in self-deflating irony, but that he is trapped inside an intellectual ragbag of a production by Lyndsey Turner that is full of half-baked ideas” (2015).

Simon Russell Beale discloses that an actor needs to approach Shakespeare’s text without “memory or desire” (2019). A director, by definition,

approaches the text with both. As much as an actor may try to free themselves to serve the text, they are confined by another's memory and desire. Working experimentally on the *Henriad* at the Globe, in Michelle Terry's criticised attempt to re-empower ensemble driven work,<sup>5</sup> Philip Arditti captures these invisible walls that surround an actor, hemmed inside someone else's mind, not the outer parameters of the text:

I've been an actor 20 years I've done lots of shows at the National Theatre and in the West End, you know, big parts small parts, and I think this is really, you know, this is a really great way for me to work, it works much better [...] the other element is also that directors decide on things, the other element is what we wear and the set and the whole concept of the production, which really bears heavy [...] So the other element is directors decide all of that and that is decided even before you've been cast and it's likely that you have been cast according to those things as well, so the other kind of maybe cage potentially, I mean some things are really liberating about that as well, but I think another thing that also happens is you find yourself inside someone's idea. (Arditti, pers. comm., 6 March, 2019)

The actor is othered completely. In a binary dialectic the director as 'Self' uses the actor, to reflect a projection of their fantasies, as 'Other'.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, the early modern theatre of Shakespeare had no director to other the actor. The theatrical profession was a tight and small community. According to John Astington "the total population of actors in London in the first decades of the seventeenth century must have stood between a hundred and fifty and two hundred people" (2010, 8). It was a somewhat exclusive membership with no vacuum created by the absence of the figure of director. The cross pollination among companies was notable in plays of

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<sup>5</sup> "If ever there was an argument for director's theatre it is this production of *Hamlet* which is so muddled, so various in style, so completely incoherent in action, that Terry finds herself beached in the centre with nowhere to go" (Tripney 2021). See also (Waugh 2018).

<sup>6</sup> The self/other concept is attributed to G. W. F. Hegel [1807] (1976).

the period, which referenced one another's work, in an industry fuelled by "imitation, borrowing and competition" (Clare 2014, 1). The culture of collaboration thrived across the whole structure – not only between players, but also poets and playwrights. G. E. Bentley notes nearly two-thirds of the plays that are in the accounts of Henslowe's diary are the work of more than one author (1971, 199). Theatre was created in a non-individuated process that did not require single locations of leadership and authority.

In the manuscript of *Sir Thomas More* we observe different authors adapting, rather than cutting, to Tilney's suggestions (Keenan 2014, 72). Even with the evidence of censorship and adaptation we see that "the relationship between players, playwrights and censor was collaborative" (Ibid. 85). The myth that Shakespeare as author directed his plays can be disabused by this multi-dimensional access and dispersed authority over a living and changing performance document, and the relationship of playwrights to acting companies. Playwrights were commissioned agents or willing merchants, often not actors in the company. Simply, Shakespeare would not have known what a theatrical director was. He would have had neither the word nor the concept.<sup>7</sup> His plays were conceived for, and created in, a theatrical, collaborative mindset, Shakespeare working in partnership on roughly a third of his canon.<sup>8</sup> The *actors* staged and performed the plays. Together. His plays did not require interpretation *before* they were performed, but *as* they were performed. This dynamic interchange meant "audience members could be highly active and independent agents when it came to shaping the meaning of contemporary plays" (Ibid. 157). There is evidence that "the

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<sup>7</sup> Although the function of a director first emerged in the figure of the actor-manager in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it took even longer to establish itself as an independently named role: "The OED records 'director' as a term of American origin. Its first example dates from 1911. The first example in British usage from 1933, from a film review in *Punch*. And its first example in a theatrical context occurs in 1938, in Somerset Maugham's memoirs" (Wiggins 2018).

<sup>8</sup> The *New Oxford Shakespeare* (2016) records the number at 17 plays.

spectators' 'judgement' [...] would shape what was to be altered or cut from the play" or even determine whether the play should be performed again (Stern 2012, 86). Now plays are generally interpreted before they are staged.

The still-prevailing fashion for director-led conceptualisation of Shakespeare's plays, to make them supposedly more relevant and attenuate their datedness, misogyny and racism, often enlivens the text in far less radical or accessible ways than the plays are in themselves. It others the otherness of the text in an attempt to render it recognisable. It begets a kind of egocentrism on the part of the theatre maker that passes up nuanced and democratic collaboration with an audience in favour of didactic and pre-digested interpretations imposed upon them. We need look no further than the famed *Julius Caesar* in Central Park, New York, with Caesar as Trump, to find a striking example (Paulson and Deb 2017). Once Caesar is reduced to a populist tyrant, there is no agony for Brutus, no obstacle for Cassius, no ambivalence for Mark Antony in his movement from friendship with "the noblest man / That ever lived in the tide of times" (3.1.282-3) to the political machinations of a public incitement for revenge and civil war. Once one piece is solidified, set in contemporary concrete, Shakespeare's moment-to-moment myriad mindedness is simplified, rendered singular and, worse, irrelevant, dating more quickly than the texts directors are trying to contemporise. *Measure for Measure* at the Donmar Theatre, London 2018, which offered a historical rendition followed by a contemporary retelling, exemplified this paradox (Pellone 2019): "the pertinence of the play to our own time emerges far more strongly when it is done in period" (Billington 2018). The contemporising of Shakespeare can be an attempt to obliterate its otherness under a layer of supposed familiarity.

So, is it possible to discover something inside Shakespeare's texts that has been consistently obscured by conceptual imposition, starting in the Restoration (with its fashion for changing ending and amplifying female provocation with newly allowed actresses performing on stage) and reaching its apotheosis in the

recent century? Anørkē Shakespeare's directorless productions aim to do just that. To re-embodiment Shakespeare's texts on the modern stage, without a director. Not in an attempt to re-create historical theatre, but to re-orient the entry position of inquiry. To start at a different beginning and to discover a different end. And to be unsure what that end will be. This is not authorial nostalgia. The actors freely respond to and imagine the plays in relationship to the nuances of the text, on the floor and in rehearsal, in order to engage in democratic complexity, and free the actors from a culture of servility. The text is part of the ensemble but is not a director. Directorless theatre does two things that are paradoxical and in tension. It recognises and engages with Shakespeare's otherness, but at the same time renders the otherness recognisable by attending to the subtleties of the play without imposing concepts upon that play by a single, authoritative figure. To pay attention to what the text is saying is not an imperative to do what the text is saying. Shakespeare's texts are full of complexities and contradicting theses. Anørkē Shakespeare's directorless experiment is an attempt to pay close attention to things that may have been missed or misunderstood, as so often we have inherited our understanding from performance traditions, and landmark productions. We think the plays are familiar, but, surprisingly, they may not be.

Directorless Shakespeare offers a response that is ensemble driven, effects diversity in casting, re-instates distributed authority to actors and text, and creates a living theatre that is myriad minded and not restricted to the nineteenth-century introduction of the singular vision of the director.<sup>9</sup> It destabilises entrenched hierarchies using scholarly research and experimental performance to challenge the way theatre is created and received, and to share Shakespeare's texts in democratic ways. Embracing the otherness in another way of doing things. It exists in small

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<sup>9</sup> A cultural phenomenon that also coincided with the rise of the conductor. See Norman Lebrecht (1997).

moments: the nuance of thought and feeling, in reaction, in interaction. And that is the fillip. The play is not completed when read, but it is also not completed when acted; it is only in its fullest stage of realisation when it is performed with an audience: the audience responsible for the final interpretation. It is the Brechtian notion of un-anesthetising and waking up the critical engagement of the spectators:

For such an operation as this we can hardly accept theatre as we see it before us. Let us go into one of these houses and observe the effect which it has on the spectators. Looking about us, we see somewhat motionless figures in a peculiar condition [...] They scarcely communicate with each other, their relations are those of a lot of sleepers [...] True their eyes are open, but they stare rather than see, just as they listen rather than hear [...] Seeing and hearing are activities, and can be pleasant ones, but these people seem relieved of activity and like men to whom something is being done. (Brecht 1977, 187)

To make the contemporary theatrical process democratic, to awaken critical engagement, it is not enough to empower the actor and free the text; it is also necessary to reinstate the status of the audience. Throughout Shakespeare's plays there are continual references to an audience-driven engagement: Hamlet, an audience member, tells the players to perform, what to perform and even how to perform; the Chorus in *Henry V* desires the audience to work their imagination; the epilogue in *As You Like It* appeals to a common hu(wo)manity for understanding; the aristocratic spectators in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* comment unabashedly on the mechanicals' play and Puck, in his final moment, begs forgiveness, friendship and a lending of hands; Prospero's epilogue owns that only the audience can set him free. The plays internally and circumstantially are strewn with examples of the audience's power; the players their servants. Anørkē Shakespeare's directorless productions, not conceived to please a single figure in the rehearsal room, release the audience from passive spectators to active participants, served by the company. Without a director to 'excavate' the play, the audience is free to

decide where their mind falls and how their loyalties lie. We must stop othering the audience.

To lift Brecht's curtain – “Before one thing and another there hangs a curtain: let us draw it up!” (1949, para. 32) – we must clear the static, the distractions, the affectations, the amendments. We must focus more sharply and fine-tune the ear to the text. Beyond mimesis. Beyond a ‘contemporary’ concept. Jerzy Grotowski, rigorously testing theatre, alchemises it down to its purest and essential elements:

By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, “live” communion. This is an ancient theoretical truth, of course, but when rigorously tested in practice it undermines most of our usual ideas about theatre. (1967, 62)

But Grotowski has not considered taking himself out of the equation. He, as a director, is responsible for its purification, and not listed as one of the superfluities. The hierarchical structure, so deeply entrenched, is invisible. Even Billington, reviewing theatre productions for *The Guardian* newspaper in the UK for 50 years, had never seen a directorless production prior to Anōrkē Shakespeare's *Richard II*.

The directorless Shakespeare project has evolved into a philosophical concern to recover a mindset that seems an anathema to much contemporary performance practice: the mindset of distributed authority. There remains a conviction that a leader will always emerge, that Shakespeare *must* have directed his own plays and that, in the words of the British actor Dame Janet Suzman, it is human nature to follow a leader. To work without a director is not simply eliminating the figure. It is eliminating this mindset. The way actors are trained today, and 400 years of theatrical developments, means they look for a director.

Again, we witness the imposed servility of the colonised space. Many actors define their job as doing what the director tells them to do. Or as actor Christopher Eccleston puts it: “Actors don’t tend to be boat rockers. They might want to impart a little motion, but they’d be worried they’d be thrown overboard somewhere down the road. There is a definite idea that you can say and do what you want to actors because they are desperate for work” (2019, 173) Actors will look for reassurance, for information, for external authority; they have little practice in being responsible for costume or set design, which has become the domain and worry of other people. In order to give actors freedom, you increase their worries. In a directorless production the ingrained assumptions mean any act of authority and assertion in the room is tarnished as directorial. Interest in these other layers were once the provenance of early modern actors. However self-conscious the contemporary actor feels when offering a firm opinion, the collaborative process must not be apathy or an abdication of responsibility to anything other than their roles, but rather an increase in assertion and care for the entire production. Anthony Renshaw, member of *Anørkē Shakespeare*, remarked:

I’ve been a professional actor for thirty-six years now and been very lucky to perform in numerous productions at the National Theatre, the RSC and various tours all over Britain. I can honestly say this project of directorless Shakespeare has been the most exciting and invigorating and sometimes frightening thing I’ve ever done. Normally on the first day of rehearsal the company meets and everything has already been decided. The set design, costumes, even script cuts which may be deemed necessary. The director will have a very clear idea of what the play means and how he or she wants each actor to take their character. With *Anørkē Shakespeare* this is completely decided by the actors! Which is the most liberating thing ever. Also, it’s a huge responsibility. Some actors will thrive having that much input. It’s not for everyone. I know some actors have declined to take part in this process finding the idea too intimidating. The fact is, it is a

forgotten, extraordinary way of working that is so fulfilling and rewarding. The actual performance results have been wonderful too. So many audience members have said to me that the story and character relationships are so clear. I think that's what happens when actors work for each other and not a director. It's woken my creative soul up again and reminded me why I wanted to act. (pers. comm.)<sup>10</sup>

We are dealing with different, sometimes conflicting kinds of alterity. The historical, linguistic and formal otherness of Shakespeare's text that is paradoxically both attenuated and exacerbated by concept-driven authority; the colonising of the actor's active role by that authority; the relegation of the audience to Brecht's passive spectators; and the need to render Shakespeare more familiar by expurgating his otherness. Anørkē Shakespeare's working process to mount a directorless production of *Richard II* offers an alternative to this multiplication of otherness in the modern theatre by a collaboration of a myriad of minds on the alterity of Shakespeare's text.

Anørkē Shakespeare's *Richard II* premiered at the Rose Theatre, Kingston-upon-Thames, London, March 2018. The company was named in response to the strongly held opinion – expressed concisely by Joe Dixon, associate actor of the RSC – that without a director there would be “chaos” and “anarchy” (pers. comm.). Devoid of a synonymity with chaos, the etymology of “anarchy” is ironically appropriate. The word stems from ancient Greek, meaning “without ruler”.<sup>11</sup> The phonetics variably interrupt the negative connotations associated with “anarchy”, evoke the idea of “*arke*” (Greek word for origin), and remind us that Shakespeare's words need to be spoken to reveal their multiplicity. Nine diverse actors, spanning three generations, gathered: four women, five men, from South Africa, Trinidad, Italy, Australia/Italy, Wales, Sri Lanka/Netherlands, England. Jim Findley, a

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<sup>10</sup> All citations from the Anørkē ensemble are from discussions, recorded memos or written correspondence.

<sup>11</sup> Anarchy as a philosophical principle and secret centre of power is explored in Giorgio Agamben (2019).

member of the company, captured the radical novelty of the work: “I realised the other day, it was my 40th anniversary of being a professional, that I have never done a project [...] without a director. I’ve always had somebody tell me where to stand, what to wear, what to say, how to say it, and how loud. So, I’m really excited by this” (pers. comm.). The text was cut collaboratively to avoid privileging a single interpretive eye. All staging and creative ideas were debated in an intensively short rehearsal period of six days.<sup>12</sup> There was a fluidity and ease in which all the actors used their experience and instinct to agree on the strongest staging and textual choices. The material requirements of the production were minimal. The costumes contemporary with a historical gesture. The lighting a single state. The set composed of variously sized solid wooden packing cases, the throne stamped FRAGILE:

The starkness of the studio staging, shared lighting, shrewd cutting of the text, continuous group engagement, and the lightning reflexiveness of the central performance, combined to make this production a revelatory X-ray of the deep structure of the play. (Wilson, unpublished review, 12 April, 2018).

Jack Klaff, a veteran RSC actor, remarked that every seven minutes he was discovering something new about the play (pers. comm.). The reason, according to another participant, David Schalkwyk, was that there was no single interpretive vision. People were unearthing the play without any table talk led by a director or dramaturg (pers. comm.). The play was not othered to the actors. It became a site for egalitarian exploration and distributed ownership. Theatre director Robert Icke, citing psychologist Douglas Winnicott, argues that “all dynamics are parent child

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<sup>12</sup> The main obstacle to a rewarding rehearsal period were the financial restraints. It is not ideal to place actors under so much pressure, but the funding did not allow for a longer rehearsal period. This is something that needs to be considered when attempting directorless work. Until it can be institutionalised commercially, there is always the hurdle of it being financially undernourished.

dynamics [...] ultimately the actor will always be a child role, and I don't mean that in a patronizing way [...] there is a level of release required for great acting and there is a level of fearlessness and abandon requisite in all really truly great actors [...] something out of control about it, something sort of sublime about it [...] all of those actors need someone to be the parent to enable them to be the child" (Icke, pers. comm., 25 November, 2019). But no one was parenting the actors in Anr̄kē's *Richard II*.

In act 4, scene 1 Richard is deposed by Bolingbroke and calls for a mirror to read his sins in the book that is himself, and see what face he has once it is bankrupt of his majesty. At the crucial moment in rehearsal, a masking tape roll was grabbed for to stand in for the mirror, no prop having been pre-designed. And that transformed into the actual mirror. A metal, hollow circle, resonant with the crown, and, as Richard looks through it, the audience is his glass. In a directorless environment, the actors responded unrestrictedly to an offer, opening up a myriad of possibilities, rather than being modulated or externally conducted.<sup>13</sup> "in this play particularly, the actors are musicians and the instruments they play are themselves" (Howard, pers. comm., 6 April, 2018). Like a jazz ensemble improvising on a particular theme. This is supported by the textual construction of the play. Lines mirror each other, inverted in ironical responses and rhyming puns. The thirty-seven speaking roles were distributed by actors choosing the characters they wished to play, whilst facilitating the logistics of doubling. Casting themselves gave strength to the framework of collaboration, the bridge of empathy to character central to unlocking text, more than overriding aesthetic and gender considerations. The authority to cast themselves and embody the thought-to-thought process of

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<sup>13</sup> There are directors who encourage collaboration and improvisation through rehearsals, such as Sam Mendes, but the salient point is that they are ultimately responsible for curating an over-all aesthetic and interpretation, and their word is usually regarded as final.

lines and interactions, released actors from an imperative umbrella, such as Rupert Goold's conception of Richard as Michael Jackson.<sup>14</sup> “Having the freedom to follow our instincts as actors was so refreshing. Not having someone trying to push you in a certain direction because that's their idea of where you should be was a great thing (Renshaw, pers. comm.).

The casting resulted in a female Richard and Bolingbroke among other nonconventional decisions:

To say that cross-gender casting in the two main roles made no difference in a performance of *Richard II* would understate the difference it did make in relieving the performance of the predictable imbalancings of hormonal masculinity that are only too thoughtlessly replicated in two recent stage productions that went on to become films, featuring a delicately poetic Richard in one version and an overtly effeminate Richard in the other, played by Ben Whishaw and David Tennant, respectively, with a solid-as-a-rock man's man occupying the role of Bolingbroke. Elena Pellone in the role of Richard presented the character with an assurance and self-possession, even under duress, that was positively refreshing while never having the audience think for a second that she was anything other than a she portraying a him. (Cartelli, unpublished review 24 March, 2018)

When Richard is played by a woman he is othered, and yet paradoxically we can be drawn closer to him as a character. The audience is challenged to accept a picture that is supposedly incoherent or in conflict with the text. But who, other than the historical Richard II himself, well entombed, is the closest candidate to represent him? We must put pressure on the notion of representation itself, for, as stated in the introduction, all representation involves difference. In treating actors as varying

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<sup>14</sup> “I wanted to do a Michael Jackson themed RII and the monkey (King Richard has a pet monkey) is a tribute to that.” Goold (2012a n.pg.).

identities of other we obfuscate that all actors are other, and not other, to every character. All as close and far as expectation, convention, and prejudice place them. But mostly they are as close as their ability to imbue the role with something of their human spirit. The diversity that ensued from the casting process in Anṛkē Shakespeare's *Richard II* was not based on a conceptual design or interpretation, but obviated biases and preconceptions of gender and race as identity. There is a compelling contention that casting is never 'blind', nor should we desire to be 'blind' to our differences. "Fanni Green argued one could erase too much: '[...] I don't want you to forget that I was a black woman that played that man. Because otherwise ... I get invisible'" (Qtd in Howard 2007, 295). But Anṛkē's directorless work attempts to dislocate categories of definition by commencing with human actors playing a character as human. We are not blind to difference but interrupt the constructs of what the difference signifies. This challenges a fixation with the concept of mimesis, for what really can be regarded as the right casting or a coherent and visually acceptable tableau? In the Royal Shakespeare Company's newly commissioned work, *Imperium* (2017-2018), out of twenty-three actors only four were women. There were no female actors playing senators because there were no female senators in Rome. The inexpressible, hidden background lies in casting white English men or even a black Caesar. What is comprehended by mimetic casting? We are never able to achieve mimesis, in a Wittgenstein conundrum, we just assume it has meaning, but rarely question what our assumptions are. All mimesis is other. We must take a Heraclitan view: that one can never step into the same river twice. Professor Tony Howard reflected on Anṛkē Shakespeare's non-mimetic casting:

The diversity of the performance was an unalloyed and uncomplicated success [...] The male-female casting wasn't an issue [...] Similarly, the production made questions of ethnicity completely irrelevant. There is always an argument about casting black actors as English aristocrats in the Histories because of 'truth to the

facts’[...] And with a few exceptions even modern stage productions of *Richard II* tend to limit BAME presence to background roles - despite the fact that the anti-illusionist Shakespearean stage can be a crucible for change. But this production again benefited hugely from the experience and authority of its multiracial cast. That can't be overstated. (pers. comm. 6 April, 2018)

The Shakespearean stage as a crucible for change means that a lack of conceptual force externally determining interpretation and a tapestry of actors with no single congruent race, theme or political motivation could be revelatory.

The lack of fuss about mimetic casting, so that one simply set aside any concern with the identities of the actors and listened to the characters instead, cleared the way for the play to shine radiantly through. (Michael Dobson, pers. comm., 16 April, 2018.)

Academics in the audience reconsidered a play they knew intimately with newly awakened perceptions: “Richard's vulnerable dependence on his court, in a rapidly changing political environment, had never hit me so much before” (Wilson, pers. comm. 6 April, 2018). The directorless work proved that it is possible for things consistently obscured in the text to be noticed:

It also made a point I'd never thought of - that Aumerle is in the same generation and situation as Richard and Bolingbroke. I've always seen him played as a handsome, probably gay, young hanger-on/minion of Richard, as (often) were Bagot and co. And there's a lot of ‘weakness’ and ‘dependency’ built into those stereotypes. Now I've looked him up and see he was only about six years younger than his cousins Richard and Bolingbroke - and that makes sense of his rebellion scenes - it's not just a comedy with funny parents in a tizzy. He is a serious threat to the new King himself. You may have thought about that in rehearsal - I only realised it on Sunday (after many years!) because of the non-type

casting, which can truly free the spectator's imagination. (Howard, pers. comm., 6 April, 2018)

The general public also responded to this revelatory aspect and paradoxically found the story-telling clearer without reliance on conceptual hooks and “realistic” casting: “The characters came across strongly without any thought of the gender etc.”; “It made the production feel live + interesting”; “Made me think about the roles rather than the personalities”; “Perhaps heard the words better - simpler to understand the meaning rather than focus on the personalities” (anonymous audience feedback, unpublished data).

The production also disputed the need to rationalise with conceptual handles, such as staging Shakespeare in a women’s prison to justify female actors,<sup>15</sup> or in Africa to justify black actors.<sup>16</sup> There is no way to create historical accuracy nor any desire to do so in a play, which, as Shakespeare reminds us constantly, is what we are watching. A play as reflection and refraction. There is imaginative permission in Shakespeare’s plays, written for an audience unresistant to roles being played by the opposite gender, that permits serious as well as playful interrogations of identity. Actors are complex humans on stage, thinking, having relationships and affecting one another in transitive ways: “Showed that Richard is a person, undergoing an experience. ‘Character’ needn’t come into it at all. Gender certainly doesn’t” (Howard, pers. comm. 6 April, 2018).

The directorless process allows for the otherness of the text – that is, its nuances, grey areas, ambiguities, liminalities, shadows lurking around its corners – to have space and breath on the stage. It circumvents Bailey’s notion that the director needs to create “a coherent, well thought through, understood, utterly excavated world” and “the moral framework of the play” (pers. comm. 20 January, 2020). Let us take as test case the historical performance practice of playing Richard

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<sup>15</sup> See for example Lloyd (2012).

<sup>16</sup> See for example Doran (2012); Godwin (2016).

as homosexual. Productions of *Richard II* on stage and screen are frequently pressured by the conceptual imposition that Richard is a weak, effeminate, gay man with ineffectual political advisors, who are his camp lovers.<sup>17</sup> The obvious problem is that this propagates a prejudice that equates weakness with being female or gay, but there is also little textual evidence to support this. Shakespeare invents a love scene – the historical Richard II was married to a nine-year-old at the time of deposition (Saccio 2000, 22) – marked by shared rhyming couplets, in which Richard and his wife exchange hearts. This is Shakespeare’s familiar convention of love language, immortalised in the preceding play *Romeo and Juliet*. This moment, between Richard and Isabel, is all but ignored by some contemporary productions: the lines are cut or the romance underplayed.<sup>18</sup> The single reference to Richard’s homosexuality occurs when Bolingbroke lists reasons to wash the blood from his hands at the execution of Green and Bushy, their capital punishment an act of treason while Richard remains King (3.1). The ambiguous homosexual charge is notably the only capital offence on the list: “You have in manner with your sinful hours / Made a divorce betwixt his queen and him, / Broke the possession of a royal bed, / And stained the beauty of a fair queen’s cheeks / With tears drawn from her eyes by your foul wrongs” (3.1.11-15). This accusation is contrasted with the sympathetic relationship between Bushy and the Queen (2.2) and the aforementioned parting love scene (5.1). It is Bolingbroke who finally stains the fair queen’s cheeks, Richard’s lament mirroring Bolingbroke’s discourse: “Doubly divorced! Bad men, you violate / A twofold marriage -- twixt my crown and me, / And then betwixt me and my married wife” (5.1.72-4). By not overtly suggesting sub-textual relationships, but investing in textual relationships, a directorless

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<sup>17</sup> See for example Goold (2012b); Doran (2013).

<sup>18</sup> See for example productions in footnote above as well Warner (1995).

company can allow the audience shifting viewpoints, the empathy and the freedom either to credit or to dismiss Bolingbroke's accusation.

Anōrkē Shakespeare's rendition of Shakespeare's historical tragedy without imposing an explicitly contemporary concept still offered a platform to reflect on unstable political machinations (UK in the throes of Brexit, Teresa May's deposition by Boris Johnson, his subsequent fall from grace once he assumed power, and the rise of autocratic and conservative governments in Europe), gender fluidity, and the tension between solipsism and shared grief. Interactive elements, working for and against each other, were released so that no single thesis or point of view was privileged:

These ideas came together in the permanent onstage presence of the seasoned company, whose varied reactions to Richard's unfolding disaster, whether of apathy or agitation, had the gripping compulsiveness of a Greek chorus. And they were personified by Elena Pellone's quicksilver performance as the doomed king, which was riveting not for its domination of the space, but for its responsiveness to the actions of the other characters. Much was projected through the actor's eyes: aptly, given the imagery of the play. The political complexity of the role of Shakespeare's Sun King, historically torn between absolutism and parliamentarianism, was brilliantly caught by this realisation of the company's collective thinking. (Wilson 2018)

Richard is defined in Shakespeare's play by his relationships. In Goold's adaptation for the first episode in BBC *The Hollow Crown* series, Ben Whishaw's highly affected Richard leaves the jousting field in the first act, interrupting the challenge between Mowbray and Bolingbroke, in a seemingly capricious moment to feed his monkey and decide – by himself – to banish them both. In the play, this decision is made after a parliamentary committee, to which Gaunt gives a party vote. Compressed to a few moments on stage, this historical council lasted two hours (Saccio 2000, 25). In othering Richard by turning him into Michael Jackson, as

Goold and Wishaw do (and Tennant did in 2013), there is a danger of again fetishizing individuality. The crowning lines of Richard's plea for his shared humanity in the "hollow crown" speech, is that he "need[s] friends" (3.2.81).

Two powerful and related intellectual ideas seemed to motor the production: that the dynamics of a Shakespeare play can best be explored by an ensemble working without the 19th-century imposition of the director; and that in this particular historical drama, the protagonist has to be viewed within the matrix of social relationships that comprise Shakespeare's representation of the Ricardian court. (Wilson 2018)

In a Q&A after one of the Anærkē Shakespeare performances, an audience member pointed out the fitness of a play about deposition performed by an ensemble seeking to depose the director. But the true deposition must happen in our minds. The crowning can then be of the collective enterprise, joint decision making and plurality of ensemble-driven work.

After the London premiere, Anærkē Shakespeare's *Richard II* toured to Würzburg, Germany, with a site-specific performance to over three hundred students and members of the public in 2019. The performance took place in a three-tiered liminal space of stairwells and thoroughfares, partly a cafeteria (the throne a metal food trolley), thus evoking the early modern practice of itinerant players who transformed spaces – such as manors, halls, inns, courtyards, squares – meant for another purpose. This raw form of theatre was received with a standing ovation, and Zeno Ackerman, Professor of British Cultural Studies, Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, noted how the directorless process of emerging meaning could be a more striking and provocative offer than German directorial theatre:

In a more direct and less artificial way than the usual directorial midwifery would have admitted of, the significance and the meanings of the play could be seen to emerge from a (certainly well-rehearsed) process of interaction – a process of

interaction that unfolded before the audience's eyes and on the very floor of the auditorium ... This Richard was not 'effeminate'; his fragility was the inescapable fragility caused by masculinist fictions inhabiting a human being. However, the insight into the historical constructedness of such masculinity – and thus of its necessary vulnerability in the face of human History – could be seen to be raised by the presence of a historical text, and not by the forceful imposition of directorial will. As a result, the Anørkē performance – in spite and by force of its limited expenditure or extravagance – proved to be considerably more convincing, striking and provocative than many artfully calibrated or outrageously daring instances of (German) directorial theatre. (2018)

The third production of Anørkē Shakespeare's *Richard II* took place in the historical foundations of the Rose Playhouse, Bankside, London in August 2019. The company now comprised of seven actors, making the doubling and concentrated collectivity even more acute, with Richard playing several smaller roles. Again, the audience responded to the fluidity and transparency of the meta-theatrical storytelling. A spectator, unfamiliar with the play and worried that she would not be able to follow it with the unconventional casting and numerous doubling (especially without the aid of a programme due to technical difficulties on opening night), responded that, where she usually found herself in difficulty, even with plays that were familiar to her, the story-telling was lucid. Additional audience feedback captured this central response (unpublished data):

\* the text sprang out with real immediacy [...] Seven actors performing all the roles between them, yet it was never confusing, because they allowed the text itself to tell us who they were.

\*seamlessly performing each with a variety of roles distinguished only by different crowns, hats, jackets and shawls. The handover of items of clothing marked each change to a different character and provided important cues to audience and performers.

\*At the end of the play, Richard says “Thus play I in one person many people.” This excellent, director-less production really takes this remark to heart, with doubling of parts (marked by quick-fire clothes changes) used to very good effect.

Actors changing on stage, and dressing each other, allow for the veil of pre-digested illusion to slip in a meta-theatrical complicity that means the audience see an ensemble in service of the play that exists as other to the cast in the space. The actors are not the play. The play always remains other through each iteration. But directorless work can make the other of Shakespeare familiar to the audience with all its complexity by exposing unabashedly its inherent meta-theatricality. Shakespeare transitions us constantly from a reminder that we choose to suspend disbelief and that it is our complicity that transports us. The actors and the audience face the shared moments of otherness in the liminal place between the theatrical experience and its meta-theatrical self-reflexivity. We are all players on the stage, in connection rather than estrangement. The final two-page soliloquy of *Richard II*, (usually truncated, but left wholly intact in our collective cutting) expresses a need for connection when Richard, once surrounded by the court, is othered in his cell, alone. He turns thoughts into words, words into a populus, casting away the performativity of self, moving from shadows to substance:

This utterly exposed and powerless man has performed to us in solitary intimacy. It is a completely different performance from the formulae of the challenge scenes or the commanding histrionic ironies of the deposition scene. Now the performance of self, the shadows of those performances, is the substance that he thought ineffable, hidden within, in the private consumption of grief. In the final soliloquy Shakespeare has forged a way for Richard to lament and to share that lament, not in public show but in our willingness and capacity to *follow* Richard, along the lines of a unique theatrical power that, miraculously, makes “that within” something shared. (Pellone and Schalkwyk 2018, 117-18)

On the Shakespearean stage, in the solitariness of despair, the connection between the actor and audience means that we are no longer other alone.

Directorless Shakespeare challenges the entrenched practice that elevates a star controller as the focus of attention, in the place where one would expect democracy to flourish. By dismantling habitual structures plays can be built on altered structures: forging a new(old) mindset that is arguably closer to the mindset of the world in which the play was created. What is revealed if the text is not bruised by external concepts impressed into it? If the director no longer imposes themselves between the text and the actor, and between the actor and the audience? That there are still things to be discovered in Shakespeare. A major resistance to directorless work is that an external eye needs to ensure the unity of the piece. We are fixated on unity. Scared of the rogue, unstable element. Of the other. And is there a single concept of unity? Anerkē Shakespeare's productions lack unity in a traditional sense. They included a conflation of non-mimetic casting, different accents, different genders, different performance techniques and even different languages. But we must ask ourselves, is unity intrinsically necessary and valued in and of itself, or are we displeased when it is absent because that is what we have come to expect when we see a theatrical event? A neatly packaged, well-thought out, decided, conceptual meal, already eaten and digested before it arrives on our table? We may discover that unity on stage is not necessarily worth striving for. That it is not reflective of the world we live in and can never be the "mirror up to nature" (*Hamlet*, 3.2.23-24). That we always are other and living with otherness.

Let us fight against a fixation with unity. Against the star individual. Against the homogenisation of thought and theatre. Let us lift the curtain together. In a collective enterprise of group decision making.

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