

Casting and Directing Disability in *Richard III* at Kronborg Castle

Lars Romann Engel and Nila Parly in Conversation

Nila Parly

Abstract:

In 2019, HamletScenen, the resident theatre and Shakespeare Festival organisation at Kronborg Castle in Elsinore, Denmark, staged an outdoor production of *Richard III* with a Danish-British-Irish cast for that year's festival programme.¹ The production was directed by HamletScenen's artistic director, Lars Romann Engel, and focused on creating an ensemble that included actors with disabilities. An overall conceptual framework was developed together with set designer, Catia Hauberg Engel, and dramaturg Nila Parly and with advice from national and international partner organizations with longstanding experience in creating theatre with Deaf and disabled actors, notably Graeae Theatre Company in London, UK. Here, dramaturg Nila Parly introduces the background and concept of the production and discusses the process and its outcomes with director Lars Romann Engel.

Keywords: Shakespeare; *Richard III*; performance; directing; disability; accessibility; diversity.

¹ See: <https://hamletscenen.dk/forestilling/richard-iii/>

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***Richard III* at Kronborg: Background and Conceptualisation**

The fundamental premise of this production was to establish an inclusive theatre practice which would work with disabled actors and make itself accessible to disabled audiences, actively seeking diverse representation on the stage and in the audience. From the earliest phases of the project, Lars Romann Engel consulted disability experts, and the production ran alongside a series of workshops, lectures and talks organised by HamletScenen and the Copenhagen-based disability consultancy Enactlab to explore inclusivity and accessibility in a broader social context. Conceptually, the production sought to investigate disability as a condition generated by the encounter with an environment created by and for able-bodied people (as opposed to a condition in and of itself). It was crucial to try to avoid stereotypical representations of disability and the problematic practice of ‘cripping up’ which has so often been seen in the case of playing Richard. Richard was played by an able-bodied actor who, together with the director and creative team, developed an interpretation that would represent disability as a stigma primarily effected by language; in this case, the language of Shakespeare’s play. That is, Richard’s ‘otherness’ was only shown as tangibly ‘real’, when it was articulated by

the dialogue spoken by other characters or by himself. At these moments Richard, played by Danish actor Casper Crump, would signal physical and psychological distress. The dual concept of stigmatization and self-stigmatization thus became an important tool in the characterization of Richard: Crump's interpretation portrayed Richard as (acutely) experiencing how language excludes and limits empathetic response. By casting an able-bodied actor as Richard, while casting disabled actors in other roles, the production sought to focus on agency rather than on limitation: the disabled actors were cast to bring artistic nuance, diverse training and international professionalism to the production.

Diversity and Disability

Nila Parly (NP) What does the term 'diversity' mean to you, personally and professionally, in relation to the process of staging *Richard III* at Kronborg in 2019?

Lars Romann Engel (LRE) For me personally, it means that I've had a serious eye-opener with regard to my self-perception and my limitations when it comes to working diversely. At a human-to-human level, it means I've re-developed my understanding of working with people who might be different and see things differently from me. I've had opportunity to train my 'empathetic muscle'. There's an overlap with the professional side: professionally working diversely is extremely instructive, especially when the work takes place in a group setting, where everyone's world view is challenged; everyone must re-negotiate their view of what they think is possible, who they are and how they define their artistic identity. The fact that everyone is pushed beyond their usual comfort zone is important and that no one should be able to fall back on playing any particular 'role' in the group – such as being the 'funny one' or the 'cool one' etc. Those kinds of behavioural patterns were broken down during the rehearsals of *Richard III* in a productive way, I think, because gradually nobody could insist on being their 'usual' self.

NP Could you give an example of this?

LRE Yes, absolutely. I remember very clearly when we held auditions for actors with disabilities in London – I’m very grateful, I should say, to Graeae Theatre Company for letting us hold the auditions there and offering us their guidance – I was very nervous, both about how to behave and ‘how be the director’, because I had not worked with disabled actors before. I was also worried about how the actors would respond to our concept for the production – would they like it, or would they disagree with it? But I remember that when we auditioned an actor who was missing both legs it seemed completely natural to get down on the floor when they did, so that we were literally seeing eye to eye. And I guess that’s what you do when you work in the theatre and what I always try to do when I direct: I try to get a sense of the person in front of me. So maybe that exemplifies how you adapt to a situation but also how the situation makes you change your way of being in the world. Later, I remember situations where I had to re-negotiate the tempo within rehearsals, because we were using both spoken language and sign language and everyone had to adapt to that. It was challenging, but I think the final artistic product is far more interesting when we are willing to place ourselves in challenging situations.

NP Can you talk about the process of working with disability as a central concept in the production?

LRE I was very conscious of being new to working with disability and I wanted advice from experts, both in Denmark and internationally. Graeae Theatre Company artistic director, Jenny Sealey, was invaluable and provided lists and lists of actors for us; I would never have been able to find the right people without her. We also had some very helpful conversations: I expressed my nervousness about being a beginner in a field that she’s worked in for forty years, and I think being honest about these things is important. That is, I tried to explain that I was a theatre director who wanted to collaborate and learn from her work, and that I would

probably say and do some wrong things along the way, but that I would like to be told directly when that happened and what to do instead. Among many things, she taught me to use the correct terminology: beforehand I would use ‘disabled’ as a noun on its own, instead of saying ‘a person with a disability’, for example, not realising the implications. Generally, I think we need to show willingness both to learn and to teach (by ‘we’, I mean the whole theatre sector), because, if we want truly diverse representation, different kinds of theatres need to work together, pooling our different resources and showing the world that solidarity and collaboration are possible.

NP What else made your preparation as a director different from what it usually is?

LRE I had lots of meetings with the Danish Association for Disabled People and the director of communication at the Enactlab group. We created a manual for communication, for example, and had conversations about how to communicate about disability without making blunders or offending people.

NP Do you think it was a mistake that we didn’t know more about the different kinds of disability that the actors had? Some of the actors involved in the production gave feedback on things that worked less well, such as lighting or the need for stage management with experience in working with disability access. They also noted the need to increase accessibility for audiences with visual or hearing disabilities.

LRE Absolutely. Even with all the help we had, we still made mistakes, but I hope we’ve learned from those mistakes. I simply lacked proper insight about, say, the difference between having a visual disability or a hearing disability. We could have planned better and paid better attention, if I had had more insight, there’s no doubt about that. Not least practically speaking.

NP One of the actors signed their lines by using a combination of British Sign Language and Vocal Vernacular, which is a mime-based sign language and

which we worked with in rehearsals. Their lines were also made available to read as surtitles, but this presented a problem, didn't it? The moments of silence when they signed their lines had an interesting artistic effect and encouraged a heightened awareness of the visual aesthetic of the production, but for audiences with a visual disability they were not accessible; they were simply moments of silence.

LRE Yes, that's another good example of how I wish we had had more foresight as well as more time and resources to plan.

NP How did audiences react to the diverse cast?

LRE I had a conversation with some audience members after one of the first shows, and during the conversation it turned out that they hadn't actually paid attention to the fact that some actors had a disability. I guess my ego wished they had been more aware of what we were trying to do, but on the other hand I hope it means that the artistic concept worked and that these audience members were looking at the people on the stage as people rather than as 'disabled'.

NP How did you move from a dramaturgical concept focused on disability – the exclusion of Richard by his surroundings and his self-stigmatization – to applying that in the casting process? You didn't plan to do that initially, did you?

LRE No, that's true. I think it came from getting a gradual sense of how complex a self-perception people with a disability might have. I mean, the complexity of having to both live with a disability and having to fight for your right to be who you are, but at the same time finding that the politics of that fight mean that you're still seen as different and 'other', you're still excluded. There's a paradox there, which is both extremely interesting and difficult. I think that kind of reflection led to the decision *not* to cast a disabled actor as Richard. I didn't want to fetishize Richard's disability, or create the kind of situation where people would be able to look at the actor in a patronizing way and think things like "Oh, look, he can play the lead, *even if* he has a disability". That's why we wanted actors with

disabilities throughout the ensemble, so we could at least try to prevent prejudice from taking over. We wanted to force our audience, and ourselves, to confront prejudicial expectations. And I do think that worked, because nobody simply labelled the production as disability theatre.

Rehearsals

NP Coming back to *Richard III* and our rehearsals: early in the process we had a memorable voice workshop where everyone participated, including you as director and me as dramaturg. Why was that an important moment, do you think?

LRE It's not usual for creative teams to participate in exercises during rehearsal or make themselves available to the whole group in a way that shows their vulnerability, but I think, as an artist, if you presume to engage with – or 'disturb' – other people's lives, the least you can do is make yourself available, even if those voice exercises were quite challenging for me.

NP It was also the first time we heard the voice of one of the actors who is Deaf. I remember that as a very powerful experience.

LRE Yes, one of the non-Deaf actors was so moved that they actually broke down in tears.

NP What do you think it was about that situation that touched us so deeply?

LRE It's very difficult to say exactly. I think it was somehow the privilege of suddenly hearing a voice that the speaker couldn't hear themselves. Like we were given access to something they didn't have access to, but were still willing to share with us.

NP But I also remember that the Deaf actor didn't think they were having that effect on us and explained that the emotional effect was quite 'one-sided' so to speak.

LRE Yes, they laughed at us for being so pathetic! But I think, for me, some of the emotion also came from seeing someone who was brave enough to let go and

give it their all without showing any fear, and then asking myself if I would be as courageous as that.

NP Yes, I too learned a lot about myself and my own limitations from witnessing that kind of courage.

Sign Language and Gender Dynamics

NP Do you think the fact that Jean St Clair, who played Queen Elizabeth, signed her lines had an impact on how the gender dynamics of the play appeared on the stage? Did it affect the power struggle between her and Richard, for example?

LRE I absolutely do. I mean, within the horribly patriarchal structure of the play, Queen Elizabeth is already struggling, so seeing her fighting that fight without being able to use her voice made patriarchal repression stand out even more. I think it provided a new and heightened impression of gender inequality for audiences.

NP But one of the reviewers also noted that the role did not appear as victimized, because Jean forced the other characters, including Richard, to look at her when she signed her lines. They couldn't ignore her, because if they did, they simply wouldn't be able to 'hear' her.

LRE Yes, isn't that interesting? She also ended up being centre-stage a lot of the time.

NP The non-Deaf actors actually encouraged that.

LRE Yes, that's true.

NP And she taught some of the non-Deaf actors Sign Language in the Green Room, I remember. On stage, she would improvise a lot of her signing, but she always made sure to let the non-Deaf actors know their cue in the dialogue. It demanded heightened concentration from everyone.

LRE Yes, and it sharpened everyone's performances.

PR and Communication

NP There were some dilemmas about the publicity material and how the project was to be presented and communicated to potential audiences, right? What are your thoughts on that now?

LRE Politically speaking, I think we were right not to over-emphasize the production as working with disability or use that aspect to create some simplistic publicity stunt. People have asked why we didn't make more of the concept in the PR material, and of course we could have done that, but then we would again have fetishized the disabled actors and used that fetishizing to promote the production. We wanted to avoid that. On the other hand, I was sorry that we didn't reach more disabled audiences.

NP Precisely.

LRE So we could have been more explicit in that sense.

NP So in future would you do things a bit differently, PR-wise, to reach disabled audiences?

LRE Yes, clearly. I can't say that I know precisely what yet, because I still want to avoid the implicit stigmatization. I think it's more a case of ensuring that HamletScenen explicitly works with diversity, inclusion and accessibility on all levels, so that potential audiences know that that's who we are. That way it will be clear to anyone what to expect from our productions. So I think it's a long-term project.

NP Might we have created some kind of introduction to communicate the concept more clearly to audiences?

LRE I think so, yes. We should have spent more time investigating how to communicate the concept to everyone. I mean, we tried to develop inclusion on the stage, but in the auditorium we failed to some extent. Mainly because we simply didn't know how to do it. So that's an aspect to research and test. We re-built the auditorium to create easy wheelchair access, and we'll keep that in place of course,

but it wasn't really used. It's clearly a question of time before things change, so we'll just have to keep working.

(Lack of) Diversity in Danish Theatre and Breaking Down Barriers

NP Productions of *Richard III* almost always engage with disability in some form, but surely we don't just want to cast disabled actors when the play is 'about' disability?

LRE No, absolutely not. I think it would be wonderful to always think in terms of diverse casting. To keep challenging prejudice. The strange thing in Denmark is that what we see in the theatre doesn't reflect what we see in the street every day. I mean, it's almost as if the theatre only wants us to see able-bodied, white actors. As artists, we claim to be mirroring society, but that's clearly nonsense, because we aren't. I don't know what we think we are mirroring. Ourselves, maybe. It's not easy to change things and it takes time and effort, but we must do it.

NP Yes. How long do you think it will take Danish theatre to get to the level of diversity that we see in London theatres, for example?

LRE We know that London is about thirty years ahead of us when it comes to diverse casting, so it might well take a couple of generations. But it won't happen on its own, especially not if we all just stick to what we know and what we feel is safe. I mean, it's very easy for me just to hang out with people who look like me and it's easy to find excuses to avoid working in a way that will challenge myself and others. I don't think there's much courage around at the moment. I think we're being very conformist – I'm saying 'we', but of course I can only really talk about my own practice and I think I'm being too conformist.

NP What is needed for us to become more courageous? Would it help to collaborate more across the theatre sector?

LRE Definitely. What are the real barriers to achieving diverse representation that we're talking about here? We don't even know yet, so we need

to have that conversation. Our society is diverse, but as soon as we go to the theatre that diversity is nearly non-existent.

NP What else can we do? Could we create seminars and workshops alongside new theatre productions?

LRE Yes and make the agenda very clear: we want to work diversely, and by that we mean that every production needs to engage with diverse representation. We need advisory boards that help us ensure this and help us do it right. Otherwise it's still just white heteronormativity 'explaining' to the world what the world is supposedly like.

NP HamletScenen has an advantage in that its productions are done in English which means you can work with extremely professional international artists and maintain a high artistic level. But what other measures could we take in Denmark specifically?

LRE I think we need to provoke change at an earlier stage in the artistic 'food chain'. Education and vocational training for actors – and directors and set designers need to 'set the scene' for diversity, so that we have a larger pool of professionally trained actors with a disability.

NP What would you say has been the most important lesson from the *Richard III* project?

LRE To stop falling back on what I know and feel comfortable with. We all tend to get stuck doing the same old things, because it's easier to keep doing what we know will work. But that stops creative development, and I think, as artists, we are obliged to evolve our practice. With all due respect, I don't think we're very good at acknowledging that in the Danish theatre sector; there's a lot of 'copy-pasting'.

NP After *Richard III*, what would you do differently, if you had all the time and money available to you?

LRE I would love to create a truly diverse ensemble, where we could develop a shared methodology and collective set of references over time. That would be a dream scenario.