

# **Resisting Processes of Othering**

## **Implied Stage Directions in Australian Theatre Productions of *Richard III***

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Caitlin Mary West

### **Abstract:**

Implied stage directions indicate what the words of a play should come to mean on stage by suggesting a physical and auditory context for their performance. Because these directions are spoken aloud as part of the performance, they can also be difficult to dismiss or ignore. Problems may arise when the meaning suggested by implied stage directions is incompatible with its performance context. This article explores three recent Australian productions of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, each of which attempted to resist the idea embedded in the text that Richard's immorality is a result of his physical impairment. The Bell Shakespeare Company's 2017 production complied with the play's implied stage directions, depicting Richard exactly as he is described in the text (i.e. with a hunched back, a limp, and a withered arm). In this way, it subtly undermined its own attempts to suggest that external factors were the cause of Richard's deviance. In contrast, two separate 2009 productions of the play, staged by Siren Theatre Co. and The Sydney Theatre Company, presented a Richard who bore little-to-no physical resemblance to the character described in the dialogue. These productions thus closed off any direct link between Richard's physical appearance and his behaviour. I suggest that a willingness to challenge or disobey the direct demands of the text can be necessary for directors who do not wish to uncritically represent problematic ideas embedded in Shakespeare's plays.

### **Keywords:**

Shakespeare; *Richard III*; implied stage directions; disability studies; contemporary theatre performance; Bell Shakespeare; Sydney Theatre Company; Australian theatre.



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Shakespeare's plays, in line with early-modern playwriting conventions, contain stage directions embedded in the dialogue. These "implied stage directions" (E. A. J. Honigmann 1998, 187; Michael Cop 2019, 31) set limits on what the performer can do on stage and disobeying them may create confusion or even incoherence. For this reason, many theatre directors and performers prefer to carry out their demands. However, implied stage directions, by suggesting a physical and auditory context for the performance of the dialogue, indicate what the words should come to *mean* on stage. By following implied stage directions, performers reproduce not only the words of the text but also the meaning embedded in it. This may not matter if that meaning is compatible with a particular performance context, but this is not always the case.

In this article, I demonstrate the potentially problematic consequences of following implied stage directions by analysing contemporary Australian stage productions of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. It is well known that implied stage directions in this play describe Richard as having a "hump, withered arm, and limp" (David T.

Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder 2014, 102), and the play's dialogue repeatedly suggests that these physical aspects are both the sign and the source of Richard's deviance, in line with the early modern concept of 'deformity' which supposed a relationship between physical disability and immorality. However, in a contemporary performance context the early modern conception risks perpetuating prejudice and processes that "other" physical disability, similar to the processes involved in "the labelling and degrading of cultures and groups outside of one's own" (Fred E. Jandt 2010, 50). In Australia, an increased awareness of the need to represent disability in more inclusive, positive, and three-dimensional ways has meant that the play's treatment of Richard sits uneasily with contemporary performers. In the Bell Shakespeare Company's 2017 production of *Richard III* (titled *Richard 3*), dramaturgical, casting and marketing decisions were used to re-frame the play and suggest that Richard's deviance was not a product of his disability but rather the product of his being rejected and abused by others. However, the fact that actor Kate Mulvany performed Richard's physicality in this production exactly as it was described in the text meant that the suggestion of a link between disability and evil remained available to the audience on a subtle or even subliminal level. This raises the question: how can performers respond to the implied stage directions in *Richard III* so as to avoid a problematic representation of disability while also ensuring that the performance is intelligible? I address this question by briefly offering two examples of performances of *Richard III* that were staged in Sydney in 2009. In these productions, Richard bore little-to-no physical resemblance to the character as he is described in the script. Rather than rendering the text incoherent, however, this performance decision drew out new meaning by entirely closing off any direct link between Richard's physical appearance and his behaviour. I conclude by suggesting that a willingness to challenge or disobey the direct demands of the text can be productive and even necessary for directors who do not wish to

uncritically represent ideas embedded in Shakespeare's plays that are considered problematic in a contemporary context.

### **Implied stage directions**

It is widely acknowledged that Shakespeare embedded stage directions in the dialogue of his plays. Although recent scholarship has focused on the role and presence of *explicit* stage directions<sup>1</sup>, implied directions were in fact the most common form of stage direction in early modern English theatre. Tim Fitzpatrick writes that, in Shakespeare's plays, "the relevant information for the actors is not in the stage directions, but in their dialogue" (2011, 10). John H. Astington writes that Shakespeare "leads and directs the actor's gesture through the logic of the text" (2006, 258). Aston and Savona, describe a range of performance practices described by what they term "intra-dialogic stage directions" (1991, 75), including the actor's physical appearance, their gestures, facial expression, and movement, as well as design elements such as costume, sound, set and properties (1991, 82-89). Examples of implied stage directions include descriptions of onstage action, such as "What, dost thou turn away and hide thy face?" (*Henry VI Part 2*, 3.2.74), and the location of the action, such as "Well, this is the Forest of Arden" (*As You Like It*, 2.4.13). Implied stage directions were a necessary feature of the early-modern theatre world, in which, according to Tiffany Stern, actors only received their own lines and not a full copy of the play (2007, 2). Because implied stage directions are spoken aloud on stage, ignoring or disobeying them can lead to incongruity and even incoherence. Evelyn Tribble gives the example of "Macbeth's plea to the ghost of Banquo to 'shake not thy gory locks at me'" and points out that "if the actor playing Banquo does not perform the required gesture [...] the effect is

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<sup>1</sup> See Dustagheer, Sarah and Gillian Woods (eds.). 2018. *Stage Directions and Shakespearean Theatre*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare. This volume focuses exclusively on explicit stage directions and makes no reference to implied ones.

unintentionally comic” (2011, 66). Tim Fitzpatrick explains that disobeying an implied stage direction can lead to “nonsense” (2011, 1), and Jean Alter writes that it can create “ambiguity” (1990, 181). In other words, breaching the performative directions or limits set by the text can disrupt the spatial or logical coherence of the performance in a way that is often immediately and distractingly obvious.

An awareness of this at times underlies the language of contemporary theatre directors. In 2012, the historical King Richard III’s body was discovered in a car park in Leicester, UK. Following the discovery, the *Sydney Morning Herald* asked prominent Australian Shakespearean directors and performers if their approach to performing Richard would be affected by the fact that the exhumed body bore “no evidence of hump, twisted leg or deformed arm” (Elissa Blake 2013), although it did confirm that the historical Richard had scoliosis. In almost every case, the answer was no. Bell shrugged off the discovery, saying that “it doesn’t make much difference, frankly [...] Whatever the evidence is, we’ll keep on playing the text” (quoted in *ibid.*). Actor Mark Kilmurry, who was at the time preparing to both direct and star in *Richard III* at Sydney’s Ensemble Theatre, insisted that “Shakespeare has written him as a deformed villain. Playing him with just a slight limp would undercut the play” (quoted in *ibid.*). Kilmurry’s response is particularly interesting because it suggests that the desire to perform Richard as he is written does not arise merely out of a naive reverence for Shakespeare, but is the consequence of an implicit belief that resisting the text will somehow violate it or disrupt its coherence.

By ‘playing the text’, however, directors concede not merely to a series of practical demands, but also to the values and ideas that those demands bring with them. W.B. Worthen writes that “plays become meaningful in the theatre through [...] acting, directing, scenography” (2003, 9), and these are the practices that implied stage directions dictate. Alter acknowledges the link between implied stage directions and

meaning when he writes that a “heavy accumulation” of implied stage directions “restricts the freedom to change meaning” (1990, 181). Of course, the meaning embedded in the written text and communicated in a performance might be compatible with the director’s vision for the production, but this is not always the case. When clashes occur, directors often seek to find creative ways to reinvent the text. And in the case of *Richard III*, this has become something of a contemporary imperative, given the play’s representation of Richard’s body.

### **Implied stage directions in *Richard III***

In recent years, scholars have argued that references to Richard’s physical appearance in *Richard III* are vague and indefinite. Katharine Schaap Williams argues that “Shakespeare’s play differs from other texts in refusing to specify the exact details of Richard’s form” (2013, 760), and Marcela Kostihová writes that “Shakespeare’s text [...] is surprisingly ambiguous in describing the physical nature of Richard’s deformity” (2013, 136). While it is true that the play does not contain the degree of descriptive detail that we see in, for instance, *Henry IV Part 2*, the idea that it is “ambiguous about [Richard’s] physical form” (Williams 2009) is not entirely accurate. An analysis of the function of implied stage directions function will help to clarify the ways in which the play does set a series of definite boundaries for how Richard’s physical appearance may be represented on stage.

Identifying and interpreting implied stage directions can at times be difficult, since they are not distinguished typographically, and their demands can be non-specific. David Bevington argues that implied stage directions are often “far from unequivocal on [their] requirements of gesture” (1983, 95). He also notes that lines can be interpreted differently in different historical periods and contexts; for instance, a line like “My hair doth stand on end to hear her curses” (*Richard III*, 1.3.303) cued the use

of a fright wig in eighteenth-century (Bevington 1984, 88). However, although the demands of implied stage directions are not always fixed and obvious, this does not mean that they do not influence on-stage action. Rather, their openness in these moments simply causes them to perform a more *proscriptive* than *prescriptive* function. A line may not tell the performer exactly what they should do, but it does place a *limit* on what they can do. The words “My hair doth stand on end”, suggest a performance of fear or horror, which may be expressed in any number of contextually appropriate ways, including through the uses of facial expression, gesture, or props (such as a fright wig). However, although there is room for interpretation, there is a limit to what the performer can do on stage. It would likely seem incongruous, for instance, if they spoke the line without showing any sign of emotion.

Returning to *Richard III*, it is clear that implied stage directions in this play perform a *proscriptive* function. They leave the performer free to some extent, while still placing a definite limit on what they can do. In the dialogue of *Richard III*, three key physical characteristics of the title character are described: a hunched back, indicated by the line “bunch-backed toad” (1.3.246); a pronounced limp, referenced both in the line “dogs bark as I halt by them” (1.1.16-23) and in Richard’s description of himself as a “cripple” (2.1.90); and a withered hand, indicated by the words “my arm is like a blasted sapling, withered up” (3.4.68-9). These three physical features may be exaggerated or played down to some degree, and they may be represented using prosthetics, costume, or the actor’s physical performance. However, performing Richard without any semblance of a hunched back, limp, or withered arm would seem incongruous, particularly considering the regularity with which Richard’s appearance is referenced throughout the play. Williams notes that the text presents a “multiplicity of viewpoints” about Richard’s appearance, and that Richard himself exaggerates and “performs” his disability at times, using “his body as a kind of prop” (2009). She

highlights the fact that there is a degree of malleability in terms of how Richard's body is represented on stage. However, the actor's performance is ultimately tethered at these three key physical points, which have been perpetuated in both scholarship (Mitchell and Snyder 2014, 102) and on the stage, where the vast majority of high-profile performers of Richard, (including Laurence Olivier, Ian McKellen, Kevin Spacey, and Lars Eidinger) have retained these physical features.

Susan L. Anderson notes that, in Shakespeare's play, "[Richard's] disability is both sign and signified as it both causes and represents his moral perfidy" (2019, 145).<sup>2</sup> When Richard describes himself as "rudely stamp'd", "curtailed of this fair proportion", "Deform'd" and "unfinished" (1.1.16-20) and explains that "since I cannot prove a lover [...] I am determined to prove a villain" (1.1.28-30), a common conclusion is that, "finding little in the way of salvation for his 'lowly form,' [Richard] throws in his lot with the misshapen and disfigured realm of demonic nature" (Mitchell and Snyder 2014, 100). Moreover, according to Mitchell and Snyder, the play signals that Richard's disability did not only cause his moral deviancy but is also a sign of it. They explain that Shakespeare's "metaphorical tactic", is to create a character whose "physical differences underline his own metaphysical unfitness to govern." (2014, 101). This idea arises out of an early-modern belief in a relationship between physical difference and moral deviance<sup>3</sup>. In a contemporary context, however, such a relationship is problematic, in part because the notion of deformity has been replaced

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<sup>2</sup> See also Tobin Siebers: "Shakespeare's Richard III is a hunchback, but his disability represents deceitfulness and lust for power, not a condition of his physical and complex embodiment" (2008, 48).

<sup>3</sup> As scholars have long observed, the early modern concept in question here is that of 'deformity'. As Williams writes, the notion of deformity "existed 'before a social construction of disability'" (2013, 759), and it was underpinned by an "interpretive judgment about aesthetic and ethical value" which was often negative (2013, 767). See also Davis who argues that Shakespeare, "clearly holding to all these opinions" of the relationship between deformity and deviance, implies that Richard's "behaviour is the result of his appearance" (2002, 53).

by the concept of disability. In particular, the “social model” of disability distinguishes between physical impairment and disability, suggesting that “many of the problems which disabled people face are generated by social arrangements, rather than by their own physical limitations” (Tom Shakespeare 2013, 14). The social model of disability suggests that impaired body’s “aesthetic and ethical value” (Williams 2013, 767) is not inherent but is subjective and imposed on it by external forces. Williams points out that the concept of disability does not map onto the early-modern idea of deformity (2009), and this necessarily presents a problem for contemporary performances of *Richard III*, including the Australian examples, which I will analyse in what follows. How can contemporary performers critically engage with and resist the othering of the disabled body that Shakespeare’s play so explicitly articulates?

### **Performing disability in contemporary Australia**

Historically, Australia has lagged behind other Western countries when it comes to the representation and inclusion of artists with disabilities. According to Bree Hadley, “It is only in the last 5 to 10 years that problematic representations of disability, roles for disabled people, and the problem of ‘cripping up’ have begun receiving mainstream media attention in Australia, in alignment with similar critiques in the US, UK, Europe, and elsewhere” (2017, 309). This slowness to engage can be seen in the fact that there is a clear under-representation of artists with disability in the creative sector. According to a report from the 2018 Meeting of Cultural Ministers entitled *Research Overview: Arts and Disability in Australia*, 18% of Australians overall reported having disability in 2015 (9), while only 9% of employees in creative and cultural spheres reported the same (3). Artists with disability face numerous barriers to participation in Australia, including negative attitudes, a lack of awareness, and minimal access to training and professional development opportunities (DADAA 2012, 18). This lack of

access to professional opportunities has been exacerbated by the fact that characters with disabilities have often been played by actors without disability. A glance at recent performances of *Richard III* confirms this fact: in the last ten years, two of the three professional Australian stage productions of this play featured an actor without disability in the title role.

However, in the last few years there have been signs of a (slow) shift in some of these attitudes and behaviours. Hadley notes that in recent years, “references to disability, disabled artists, and disabled arts practices have become a regular part of theatre training, production, policy, funding, and critique” (2017, 305). There has also been a growing body of research and reporting on disability and the arts from sources such as Screen Australia and the Australian Council for the Arts over the last decade, and particularly in the last five years. Disability-led theatre and performance has become increasingly visible; productions such as Back to Back Theatre’s *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* (which toured in Australia and internationally from 2009-2014) and Emma J Hawkins’ solo show for the Melbourne Comedy Festival titled *I Am Not A Unicorn!* (2015) have been performed at popular festival venues around Australia. Professional opportunities for artists with disability have slowly begun to increase, and there has been a greater awareness of the need for disabled roles to be played by actors with disability. In 2017, Melbourne’s Malthouse Theatre staged a new play about Joseph Merrick entitled *The Real and Imagined History of The Elephant Man*. In this production, the lead actor Mark Leonard Winter was replaced by Daniel Monks, who has a disability, when it became clear to the cast during rehearsals that the role of ‘The Elephant Man’ should not be played by an actor without a disability (Bailey 2017). Although the novelty of the incident was evidenced by the consistency and enthusiasm with which the media pointed out and praised the casting change, it signified a step in the right direction.

This growth in visibility has led to more nuanced representations of disability on Australian stages. In a 2019 production of *The Lord of the Flies*, Monks was cast in one of the lead roles. He described the role as “exciting” because the character was so unlike the “meek and vulnerable” characters he was used to being cast as and did not fit the “disabled character trope of the Tiny Tims” (qtd. in Linda Morris, 2019). Discussing her show *I Am Not a Unicorn!*, Hawkins explained that her aim was to “take creative control of [...] defying stereotypes, talking about what it is to be ‘normal’ and ‘average’ in this life and questioning if any of us really want to be that?” (qtd. in Myron My, 2018). The desire to have actors with disability perform disabled roles on stage, and to represent disability in empathetic and complex ways, was reflected in Bell Shakespeare’s 2017 production *Richard 3*.

### **Bell Shakespeare’s *Richard 3*.**

In recent years, the Bell Shakespeare Company has deliberately explored the experiences of people who have been othered and marginalised, including people with disabilities. When beginning his tenure in 2015, Artistic Director Peter Evans made it clear that he wanted to cast actors in his productions who have been marginalised, explaining that he was “really interested in further exploring colour-blind casting, cross-gender casting and the role of women inside these plays” (quoted in E. Blake 2015). In 2016 Evans cast Samoan-Australian actor Ray Chong Nee in the role of Othello; in 2018 he assembled a racially diverse cast for a production of *Julius Caesar*; and in 2020 he cast a female actor, Harriet Gordon-Anderson, in the title role of *Hamlet*. Evans stated that “Having a woman play a major ‘male’ role as a man allows the audience as well as the actor to explore different facets of the character” including his “misogyny” (qtd in Ron Cerabona 2019). This desire to represent and explore the experience of marginalisation was evident in his production of *Richard 3*.

Evans avoided the practice of ‘cripping up’ by casting Kate Mulvany in the title role of *Richard 3*. Mulvany, according to Leslie Dunn, is one of six actors with disabilities who have played Richard internationally in the last twenty years (2020, 304-5). As a result of treatment for childhood cancer, Mulvany has “the exact same spinal curvature” as the historical Richard III (quoted in “I have the exact same spinal curvature as Richard” 2018). This has left her with one leg shorter than the other, with what she describes as a “wonky” standing and sitting position, and in “chronic and debilitating pain” (Mulvany 2017). The parallels between Mulvany’s physical experience and that of the historical Richard III were emphasized throughout the promotional campaign. The main promotional image for the production depicted Mulvany standing in a corset, with the top of her back exposed and arched forward, emphasising the curve of her spine. In an essay written for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Mulvany explained how this shared physical experience would influence her performance, stating that “while pretending to be the ‘bunch-back’d toad’, I finally won’t have to pretend to be straight-backed. I won’t have to hide anything. I’ll get to embrace every curve, creak and quirk of my body. With pride” (Mulvany 2017). Mulvany (who was also the production’s dramaturg) rewrote a line in the play (3.4.68), replacing the word “arm” with “body”, and spoke the line “Do you see how I am bewitched? Behold, my body is like a blasted sapling” while standing naked with her back to the audience, exposing the natural curve of her spine. By emphasising the physical similarities between Mulvany and the historical Richard III, the production shed the past practice of ‘putting on’ disability and required the audience to acknowledge the parallels between Mulvany’s body and Richard’s body.

This production also sought to resist the idea implicit in the play that Richard’s evil character is inextricably linked to his physical disability. Rather, it suggested that his malevolence was a consequence of the way others had treated him. Evans, in his

programme notes, described Mulvany's approach to Richard as "confronting because what she brought into the rehearsal room is the belief that he is created, not born. She sees the victim in him, so there is a sense of empathy" (Evans 2017, 11). This idea of Richard as a victim was highlighted in the final moments of the performance, when Mulvany remained on stage alone and performed an excerpt from Richard's well-known soliloquy in *King Henry VI, Part 3*:

I have often heard my mother say  
that I came into this world with my legs forward:  
[...]  
I have no brother, I am like no brother;  
And this word 'love', which greybeards call divine,  
Be resident in men like one another,  
And not in me: I am myself alone. (5.6.70-83)

Mulvany explained that her motivation for splicing these lines into the performance was "to question the audience on whether he was born a monster or made one by his family, and by society" (quoted in "I have the exact same spinal curvature as Richard" 2018). Richard's malevolence was not questioned in this production, but there was a clear attempt to emphasise the idea that Richard's behaviour was a reaction against the way he had been treated by others.

Mulvany's performance was received with enthusiasm by audiences and reviewers, and it won her a Helpmann award for best female lead ("2017 Nominees and Winners", 2017). Many critics noted the production's emphasis on the exclusion and mistreatment that Richard had experienced as a cause of his malevolence. One reviewer wrote that the "bitterness that has developed in response to an unloving and

cruel world seems almost justifiable in Mulvany's hands" (Ben Neutze 2017), while another claimed that, "Mulvany's Richard comes across so human and vulnerable that you can't help wonder if, had he been spared the systematic abuse and rejection, the horror and bloodshed might have been avoided" (McPherson 2017). It seemed as if Richard in this production had not been reduced to a caricature of a malevolent villain, whose actions could be explained away by the mere fact of his disability. Rather, the critical response signalled that Mulvany and Evans had successfully encouraged a more sympathetic and complex reading of Richard and his psychology. However, if we return to the earlier discussion of the relationship between implied stage directions and meaning, we can see how this production retained, on a subtle level, some of the very attitudes that it was trying to dispel. Despite the emphasis placed on the physical similarity between Mulvany and the historical Richard III, Mulvany was not playing the historical Richard. Although the discovery of Richard's body confirmed that he did in fact have scoliosis, there was no evidence that he walked with a limp, that he had a withered hand, or even that his back was noticeably hunched. In a medical analysis of the historical Richard III's skeleton, Appleby et al. state:

The physical disfigurement from Richard's scoliosis was probably slight since he had a well-balanced curve. His trunk would have been short relative to the length of his limbs, and his right shoulder a little higher than the left. However, a good tailor and custom-made armour could have minimised the visual impact of this [...] we identified no evidence that Richard would have walked with an overt limp. (2014, 1944)

Appleby et al. make it clear that it is unlikely that King Richard III was quite the hunch-backed, halting, withered man described by Shakespeare. And although the physical experience of the historical Richard was commented on in the publicity for the

production, it was not reflected in the performance itself. Rather, what was performed was Shakespeare's vision of Richard. Mulvany did not merely perform the scoliosis that the historical Richard had. Rather, in the vein of many other performers of the role, she played Richard with a hunched back, a noticeable limp, and – even though the line featuring a reference to Richard's withered hand had been excised from the script – with her hand twisted and tucked by her side.

By performing Richard with the characteristics implied in the written text, the Bell Shakespeare production subtly undermined its own reinterpretation of the play. When Richard accurately describes how he looks, and then tells us that he is going to be a “villain” because of the way he looks, there is no immediate, obvious suggestion of any other factors at play, and no need for the audience to look further than his disability as the cause for his villainy. Of course, many audience members will look further, and in this production a more complex (and arguably more convincing) explanation for his behaviour was offered, but that explanation did not cancel out the original one and audiences were not required to accept it – the door was left open to a reading that concluded that Richard's disposition was a consequence of his disability. Mitchell and Snyder write that “whether or not the relationship between physical disability and psychic malfeasance is reconfirmed, as in many performances of *Richard III*, or refuted [...], comes to be beside the point – filmed [or, in this case, staged] disabilities beg the question of their suspected linkage, and thus moral decrepitude shadows physical anomaly” (2014, 117). Or, as Lindsey Row-Heyveld more succinctly puts it, “incessantly asking the question keeps the possibility alive” (2018, 138). Regardless of how well the production was able to emphasise the treatment of Richard as a causative factor in his malignancy, the question of the role that his physical disability played, and the suggestion that it was the cause of it, remained present as an undercurrent. This was demonstrated in the reaction of a reviewer writing for the

*Sydney Morning Herald*, who praised Mulvany for her “masterful” portrayal of Richard, and enthusiastically described how “from the outset, she clutches fast the twin keys to Richard’s character: the limbs twisted in deformity and his charisma” (Woodhead 2017). Woodhead’s use of the term “deformity” suggests that the specifically early-modern concept of physicality and its relationship to psychology seems to have been subliminally communicated to and accepted by the reviewer. Moreover, referring to “limbs twisted in deformity” as a substitute for something like “psychopathy” or “malevolence” attests to the fact that this production did not preclude a problematic reading of Richard’s character.

### **Resistant readings of implied stage directions**

The question then arises: what are our options when performing this play in the twenty-first century? Should *Richard III* be avoided entirely because of its problematic and historically specific attitudes towards disability? I would argue that it is possible to perform Richard in a manner that does not leave the door open to a what in the present-day context is a problematic representation of Richard, but that this requires a willingness to challenge and resist the demands made by the text. Such resistance has the potential to create moments of incongruity, disruption, or dissonance, as described by Fitzpatrick and Tribble. However, as I argue, dissonance need not necessarily equate to incomprehensibility, but might allow the performance to draw out new meaning in the text. Indeed, *Richard III*, a play in which there are very few specific and prescriptive implied stage directions describing Richard’s physicality, lends itself in a particular way to such a resistant approach. In order to explore this idea, I will briefly analyse two Australian performances of *Richard III* that have reimagined Richard’s physicality and in so doing brought new meaning to the text in performance. In Siren Theatre Co.’s 2009 production (also titled *Richard 3*), the idea of disability was still explored, but the

causative link between it and moral deviance was disrupted. In the other, performed as part of the 2009 production of *The War of the Roses* at the Sydney Theatre Company, Richard's physical disability was excised from the production entirely, and instead the production explored how the power structures Richard is functioning within generated his malignancy.

In Siren Theatre Co.'s *Richard 3*, directed by Kate Gaul, the title role was played by Thomas Campbell. Campbell was interested in exploring the source of Richard's psychology, but did not play him exactly as he is described in the text by adopting a limp or a hunched back. Rather, the only point of physical connection between Shakespeare's Richard and Campbell's performance was the fact that Campbell was born without a left hand:

In terms of physicality, I basically played it as myself. The only explicit reference Richard makes to his appearance, apart from 'halting by', is that he has a withered hand. Everything else – people saying he's a toad and vulgar and so on – that's all lines of other characters. Most of the descriptions of him are things other people say about him. I wanted to make a point about people's projections onto other people. I was hoping that audiences would get that this guy has been so trodden on he's come to a point where he doesn't care how other people are treated because he's been treated so badly. (Campbell 2020).

As with the Bell Shakespeare production, Campbell's interpretation highlighted the role of Richard's treatment by others in the generation of his psychological deviance. However, this production went further and cancelled out the possibility of a reading that blamed Richard's behaviours on his physical appearance. Kostihová writes that "a theater audience needs to be both told *and* shown Richard's deformed body to subscribe

to the larger early modern ideological linking between bodily and psychological evil” (2013, 136). By choosing not to perform Richard’s physicality exactly as it is described in the text, Campbell made a literal understanding of a causative link between Richard’s disability and his psychology impossible. This becomes clear when we consider his opening soliloquy. When Richard describes himself as “deformed, unfinished, sent before my time / Into this breathing world scarce half made up” (1.1.20-21), but in reality is standing before the audience looking very much like everyone else on stage, except for the fact that he doesn’t have a left hand, it is immediately clear that Richard’s idea of himself as completely disfigured is unjustified and not grounded in reality. This makes his assertion that his malignancy is caused by his physical appearance unconvincing. Rather, the implication is that he is engaged in an act of self-othering, which immediately invites the audience to ask where he learned to see and speak of himself in this way. Later in the play, labels such as “hedgehog” (1.2.104), “bunch-backed toad” (1.3.246) and “abortive, rooting hog” (1.3.228) also take on a metaphorical significance. They do not refer so much to Richard’s literal appearance as to a projection of others’ ideas onto him. Campbell’s Richard was “a guy who’s deeply, deeply hurt, and has always felt rejected and othered” (Campbell 2020) and has responded with anger and eventually with violence to this experience.

In Benedict Andrews’ 2009 production *The War of the Roses*, Andrews and actor Pamela Rabe (who played Richard) set aside the idea of a physical disability entirely. Dressed in a “t-shirt and black trousers, her hair curtaining her face like an evil Joey Ramone” (Alison Croggon, 2009), Rabe adopted a shambling, loping walk that was less reminiscent of a limp than it was of a teenager’s lazy shuffle. One reviewer described her performance in *Richard III* as follows:

Equal parts sociopath and Machiavel, Rabe's Richard is shabby, brilliant, impulsive, conniving, bestial and disarmingly funny [...] Eschewing traditional portrayals of the character's limp and deformities, Rabe occasionally delivers mocking impressions of what such a performance could have been, as though revelling in her (his) inner freak ("The War of the Roses", 2009).

As the reviewer notes, Rabe and Andrews did not ignore the indicators of Richard's physical appearance. Rather, these indicators took on a metaphorical significance, becoming a means to express and explore Richard's psychology, rather than being a description of his physical appearance. According to Rabe, "we decided that a disability in this context didn't have a place. You can actually see the construction of this monster in the Henry plays so to just give him a hump would be too easy" (quoted in E. Blake 2009). Here, Rabe recognises the link that is drawn in the play between Richard's disability and his psychology and indicates that refusing to play him with a physical disability removes the possibility for this "easy" explanation to be assumed. Andrews' *The War of the Roses* was concerned less with questions of physical otherness, and more with exploring broader political questions around "the nature of the relationship between the vulnerable human body and the processes of sovereign violence" (Griffiths 2013, 94). Croggon writes that "in *Richard III*, we see what happens when desecralised power is put into conscious action" and called the production "a terrifying vision of amoral brutality" (2009). Dispensing with Richard's physical disability altogether meant that *Richard III* could participate in a more meaningful way in the broader aims of the production. These two examples offer different but equally interesting possibilities for performing *Richard III* in a twenty-first-century context. In the first, questions around the relationship between physical disability, otherness and deviant behaviour were still asked. However, Campbell's

refusal to comply wholly with the text's implied stage directions meant that disability became a metaphor for perceived otherness, and the othering of Richard became the implied cause of his violent behaviour. In the second, the idea of physical disability was resisted altogether, and this created an opportunity for *Richard III* to participate in a more complex, political exploration of the questions of how a 'monster' is created.

Perhaps one of the factors that made resistance possible in these performances is the fact that the implied stage directions that needed to be overtly resisted were so few. As previously noted, many of the descriptions of Richard in the play text are open and ambiguous, while the indicators that set specific boundaries around the actor's performance are few and far between. Kostihová writes that *Richard III* "invites a series of stagings" and "challenges each production to invent its own bodily projection of Richard's evil interiority" (2013, 137). Kostihová somewhat overstates the degree of freedom afforded the performer; as previously noted, there are key points at which Richard does become specific when describing his physical appearance, and at these points the text needs to be deliberately resisted if the production is to avoid making an implicit link between bodily impairment and moral perversion. However, the fact that this specificity is not reinforced throughout makes it easier for performers to reimagine Richard's appearance, and thus disrupt the value judgements embedded in the play.

## **Conclusion**

Australian directors and performers often reinterpret Shakespeare's plays via design, casting, marketing, and performance decisions that recontextualise and reinvent the text. However, there often remains a lingering unwillingness to resist any specific, clear demands for performance that the text makes. This instinct to comply with the text is influenced by the fact that Shakespeare's implied stage directions sometimes place seemingly immovable boundaries around what can and cannot be done on stage.

Performing within these boundaries, however, means that the performance will retain, even if only on a subliminal level, the historically-specific ideology of the play. The Bell Shakespeare's 2017 production *Richard 3* attempted to avoid a reductionistic reading of Richard by casting Kate Mulvany, an actor with the same spinal curvature as the historical Richard, as well as using dramaturgical, staging and performance devices to suggest that Richard's malfeasance was a product of the way he had been treated. On one level, this production provided a refreshingly nuanced vision of Richard and complicated the play's implication that he is simply a bad person because he was born with a disability. However, Mulvany's physical performance was obedient to the demands of the text, and in this way, it was unable to truly close off access to a reading that blamed Richard's disability for his moral deviance. As my examination of productions of this play by Siren Theatre Co. and The Sydney Theatre Company show, performances of the Richard that have been more successful in this regard have been able not only to recontextualise the text but to challenge it and its embedded assumptions on a deeper level by refusing to concede to the physical demands it makes.

This discussion has broader implications for performing Shakespeare in the twenty-first century. *Richard III* is by no means the only play in which characters are othered in ways that are problematic by contemporary standards. This case study suggests ways to respond to aspects of these plays that are challenging to twenty-first-century audiences. The productions of *Richard III* performed by the Sydney Theatre Company and Siren Theatre Co. openly refused to concede to the performance demands of the written text, and thus reimagined its meaning for a contemporary audience, inviting them to critically engage with the text. When resistance is overtly staged in front of an audience, the audience is invited to participate in that act of resistance. The friction between the written and performance texts is not smoothed over or done away with. Rather, it is brought out into the open, the meaning suggested by

the text is challenged, and a new interpretation is offered. Resisting implied stage directions can provide an opportunity to treat Shakespeare's plays as one half of a conversation, rather than as hallowed artefacts that need to be preserved wholly intact for contemporary audiences.

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