

Richard III

by Mark Alan Anderson

Ian McKellen's portrayal of Richard III, in the film of the same name, is that of a delightfully malignant villain. In recent years, McKellen has convincingly brought to life the role of Gandolf in *The Lord Of The Rings* and the cartoon villain Magneto in *X-Men*, but seldom has an audience had the opportunity to revel in such sheer evil as that of McKellen's Richard III. This 1995 film adaptation of William Shakespeare's historical play, *The Tragedy of King Richard III*, has been transplanted into an early twentieth century England. The change in setting may account for the sheer accessibility that the cinematic production has over some stage performances. But make no mistake: Despite the trappings of relatively modern life, this is *still* Shakespeare's historical drama, filled with all of the twists, turns and deception that makes the original play so entertaining.

Shakespeare, much as did Dumas a few centuries later, took frequent liberties

with historical fact, bending and molding actual people and events to fit the context of his plays. The movie follows the original play, compressing years of British Monarchy history into a few weeks time.

The inspiration of setting the film in 1920's England allows director Richard Loncraine to create an impression that his characters are only a few generations removed from today. But part of the cleverness of this setting is also that the action takes place during a time of tremendous political upheaval in the *real* Europe of the early twentieth century. Although 1930's England didn't have a murderous, lunatic despot waiting in the wings, 1930's Germany *did*. One of the interestingly subtle costume developments of the film adaptation, is in the costume designer's gradual change from the clothing of innocent 1920's British gentry into uniforms that bear a frightening similarity to the black costume of Hitler's SS troops.

As Richard moves quickly into power,

murdering his way step-by-step to the throne – and growing crazier than a bug each step along the way – his retinue and his army gradually change into an eerie facsimile of Nazi storm troopers. Richard, more in the role of a dictator or Fuhrer than a king, continues on his merry way with his actions growing more and more sinister until he reaches the point at which even his strongest supporters begin to blanch.

Ian McKellen has been brilliantly cast in the role of Richard III. And the film – *being film* – allows the director to make liberal use of close up framing, cutaways and other cinematic devices not available in a stage presentation. This allows the film to successfully play with Richard's famous opening monologue, which in stage versions has Richard sharing his wickedness with the audience and detailing precisely how much fun he's planning to have by *continuing* to be wicked. The film splits the monologue into two parts. The first half is apparently part of an after dinner toast or speech in honor of Richard's brother, the newly crowned King Edward IV. The monologue seamlessly continues, with Richard making use of the royal lavatory, mumbling to himself and bringing bitter voice to the curveballs life has tossed his way. He continues to talk during his use of the urinal, his flawed character now in sharp and marked contrast to that of the polished peer of the realm, who'd only moments before spoken with apparent

grace and ease. Richard, wandering distractedly through His Majesty's washroom, quietly rants and stops to look in the mirror...and for the first time notices and *acknowledges* the film audience. This is a nice film touch that would be all but impossible to execute on the stage. It's effectively used too, because at this moment Richard shows just how deliciously lunatic he is destined to become. Richard confides in us, the audience – and from this point onward the drama takes on a roller coaster effect. We watch two actors: Ian McKellen playing Richard III – and *Richard* playing the various roles of benefactor, protector, loving brother, lover and penitent to all of those who will eventually fall victim to him.

And what a brilliant actor Richard turns out to be! He first manipulates the bereavement of Anne, convincing this widow of a royal prince that he has killed her husband *because of the love Richard feels for her*. We know – *because Richard shares with us his secrets* – that this, the first of Richard's many killings, was done in order to place Edward on the throne. But Anne, played by Kristin Scott Thomas, amazingly softens, falling victim to Richard's deceit. She will eventually marry him.

Richard's deception doesn't end with Anne, however. Clarence dies by Richard's plan, deceived to the end in thinking that his brother champions his cause; Buckingham, initially an unwitting believer in Richard's lies, becomes Richard's

staunchest supporter and a King-Maker; princes, brothers, uncles and peers are expediently eliminated. Richard is “convinced” to take the throne in place of his “bastard” nephews during an inspired act, leading the Mayor and his followers to believe Richard to be a man of chaste thought. This last scene has some terrific details, among which is the point when Buckingham implies that Richard is closeted with two men of the cloth, bowed in humble contemplation. In reality Richard is actually admiring a pair of smiling tarts! As always, there are two Richards: the public Richard and the private Richard.

In fact, Richard’s act fools nearly every other character in the film, with the notable exception of his mother, the Duchess of York, played to perfection by Maggie Smith. The Duchess sees through Richard’s mask and recognizes him, almost from the outset, for what he is. She’s also Richard’s one chance at redemption. As his mother, the Duchess is able to say anything she wants to Richard and, in fact, *does*. Maggie Smith can be haughty, bold and vitriolic – all while maintaining a *very* convincing royal manner. To her son Richard, she doles out acid by the tongueful, lashing Richard mercilessly and Richard – well, Richard *takes* it. Holding her in deference while the Duchess gives him a piece of her mind, Richard has the opportunity to change his course. In fact, Richard’s conversation with his mother is the movie’s way of showing the first crack in his aston-

ishing game of confidence.

But he is, after all, *Richard* – he’s not looking for redemption or escape. And that’s not what this story is all about anyway: We’d be disappointed to find Richard lacking in his resolve. Richard is unlike most modern *film* villains – he doesn’t have a conscience nagging at the back of his mind, he doesn’t have childhood abuse to use as an excuse and he doesn’t spend a whole lot of time worrying about his mental health: Richard is simply a bad seed. He’s the perfect villain and Ian McKellen takes advantage of the many film close ups to use a wonderful range of voice and facial expression to show us how *malicious* Richard really is.

Although *Richard III* is a film adaptation – with the usual baggage of edited original material and the creative interpretation of setting – it is still very recognizable as Shakespeare’s play. As in most film adaptations, some liberties had to be taken. Characters and scenes found in the original text have been dropped – or in some cases merged. Scenes, like the opening sequence, have been added. And while this may be disconcerting to the purist, the changes are understandable given the limitations of film. In fact, most of the alterations have not hindered the film and far from being objectionable, they tend to help move the story along.

One notable omission though, was the decision to eliminate the “ghost” sequence near the end of the story. I’ve always

thought that Shakespeare's use of one set for two simultaneous stories and locations was remarkably "cinematic" in nature – a bit like a split frame sequence. While the scene is actually a bit ponderous in the original text, the ghosts really show the audience that the good guys are going to prevail. I think the director might have made a terrifically bad nightmare scene for Richard had he chosen. One is reminded of the various dream sequences that have helped a film make a particular vivid point (Alfred Hitchcock's Salvadore Dali-inspired dream sequence in *Suspicion* stands out as a notable example.). I can't help wondering if budget and film length kept the scene out of the production.

Shakespeare seems to have been overwhelmingly interested in deceit as a story premise. *Richard III* is a masterpiece of deception layered upon deception layered upon deception, a characteristic of which the film takes full advantage. It may not be an exact rendering of the original play, but it is an hour and 44 minutes of entertaining villainy.