



SHAKESPEARE'S GLOBE

Shakespeare's Globe's response to the conversation surrounding Richard III and disability:

We are aware that members of our artistic community have raised questions and concerns regarding the 2024 summer season production of *Richard III*, particularly in relation to Richard being played by a non-disabled actor.

We are committed to developing a culture of care, empathy, equity, conversation, and accessibility across all our work at Shakespeare's Globe and are keen to ensure communication remains open and careful as we keep this complex and vital conversation going both with our artists and our audience. We have been in personal conversation with many people, and anyone who has reached out to us, we have met with in the last few days. We will continue to be in dialogue directly with our artistic communities over the coming months and will be hosting conversations with further information on these to be announced in due course.

Some words from Michelle Terry:

Firstly, I want to acknowledge any pain or harm that has been caused by the decision for me to play Richard III and I hope to provide some context as to how that decision has been made. All programming and casting decisions across all seasons are made as consciously and rigorously as they possibly can be, and always in dialogue with members of our many communities.

What we do at the Globe is only possible because as people, we fundamentally believe in the transformative power of art and education. Shakespeare's plays provide us with an historical, theatrical, and imaginative framework which make transformation and progress conceivable.

We are in the early stages of research and development, and so have more questions than answers about this production, but a big question for us is: what is the play doing and is that a useful conversation to have with our audience at this moment in time?

Shakespeare is drawing parallels and connections between the political corruption in the play and the political corruption at the time of writing. Shakespeare offers us a world in which tyranny, despotism, populism, infanticide, corruption, ambition, abuse of power, misogyny, war, and abhorrent acts of violence are all being committed with impunity. How do evil and narcissistic bullies continue to find ways to gain and hold power, and why are people so fascinated and seduced by these people, even when they abuse their power and influence so openly, audaciously, and dangerously? What are the conditions of a world that allows that to happen?

And then of course, we have questions about the character of Richard. What is Shakespeare doing with the character of Richard and his self-titled "deformity". We know that Shakespeare was writing in a particular time; leaning on, amplifying, and sometimes exaggerating the early modern belief that a "deformed" body meant a "deformed" soul. We are asking whether this conflation of despotic evil with disability is useful. Then, as now, the illiteracy around ableism and disability justice is everywhere. Still, in our society, negative and pejorative unconscious bias asserts itself daily, and perpetuates inequity and injustice. Does the conflation of evil with disability in the play offer us an opportunity to expose bias, or does it compound it?

And then what play are we left to experiment with if this conflation is removed? We are left with a play about tyranny, abuse of power and toxic misogyny. And right now, we feel that this is something important to explore.

I will not alter my physicality to explore it. I will not be playing Richard with a visible or physical impairment, and we will frame this production in such a way as to make it very clear the lens through which this interpretation is being explored.

This production does not equal a permanent revision of the play or the eternal erasure of the character's impairment, or a rewriting of a historical figure. I acknowledge that for many, Richard III is an iconic disabled figure. I understand that this feels like a missed opportunity for a disabled artist to play a disabled character on a major UK stage, but it will come around again. There have been and must continue to be productions that explore how Richard's "deformity" initiates the action of the play, productions that explore how the oppressive structures of ableism have

disempowered Richard to such an extent that his rage against injustice leaves him with no other choice but to “prove a villain”, and then the very society that created him, also destroys him.

These plays consciously and unconsciously offer us an opportunity to be in dialogue with the self, and with each other. The dialogue is always personal and vulnerable, and when we seek to understand these deeply complex plays and make meaning out of the complex conversations they provoke, the outcome is always an interpretation.

Our interpretation does not mean that we have forgotten disability. The whole play is saturated with ableism that we will address and unpack throughout the process. This production in no way wants to undermine the need for disabled characters, disabled stories to be told or to diminish the ambition for greater representation in our industry. That is precisely why we have programmed and will continue to programme as many ways as possible for these stories to be told and conversations to be held.

We will continue to find as many ways as possible to diversify opportunity, to use the plays as a site for research, education, and discourse. We can always pay more attention, be more rigorous, more ambitious, not only as artists in the work that we make, but also with our audience and the role they play in the making of meaning and positive transformation. And therefore, we will continue to find as many ways as possible to use Shakespeare’s text as a blueprint for the regeneration of stories that have the potential to raise consciousness, illuminate and maybe even influence; to not only challenge the negative metaphors and stereotypes contained within the plays, but also create new spaces for new perspectives, to put these plays to work for now, learning and understanding as we move forward.

This is a journey, but we are on it. We are doing everything that we can to put this 400-year-old canon to work for now, and there will always be more to do as we decolonise these plays, our spaces and ourselves. Through these plays we can address great injustices, including ableism, racism, and sexism. The theatrical and imaginative framework of these plays means that we can open up all roles, to all brilliant artists, and create space for conversation with as much care as possible for both our artists and our audience. We’re not there yet, but we are using our position of power and privilege to keep going, with kindness, in the shared endeavour of equality, equity, unity and social justice.

Richard III is not the only character or play for these conversations to be held and much needed change to be made, but this moment has presented itself as an opportunity to push that conversation forward. We must come together as a sector, from all our respective communities, and collectively address the inequities and injustices in our industry and our society.

We are aware that many of our exceptionally talented recent, current, and upcoming disabled artists have been overlooked in the public conversation. This moment, and the work that we all have to do, must not mean the ostracisation, erasure or invisibility of all the amazing artists that have been and continue to work tirelessly to make progress possible.