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ERIC NICHOLSON*

“La terra in palcoscenico”: Playing the Common Grounds of Aeschylus and Shakespeare

Abstract

These director’s notes offer reflections on as well as an account of the theatre project carried out in Spring 2017, in Verona as part of a practice-based research on Aeschylus and Shakespeare. The project involved the preparation, rehearsal, and performance of an experimental hybrid script, bringing together scenes in the original English and in Italian translation from Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes*. The final production, entitled “*Riccardo II in-contra i Sette contro Tebe*”, was performed by a cast of mainly student and non-professional actors, and was then the object of discussion within a seminar on staging kingship and power in classical and early modern theatre.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; Aeschylus; hybrid script; experimental performance

Reflecting on the “Practice as Research (PaR)” experimental theatre project that I conducted during the spring of 2017 in Verona on Aeschylus and Shakespeare, I have become increasingly mindful of Horace’s observation, made at the opening of his *Ars poetica*:

Say that a painter’s caprice joins the neck of a horse to a human
Head, and adds plumage of multiple hues to the random-assembled
Bodily parts, till the woman of beautiful features above ends
Up as a fish and disgustingly ugly below: on admission
Into the studio, friends, could you manage to stifle your laughter?
(Hor. *Ars poet.* 1-5)¹

Although the script that I prepared and edited, cutting and pasting together passages and scenes from Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes* and Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, was less outlandish and ludicrous than the bizarre creature concocted by Horace’s imagined painter, it did ensure that extraordinary risks and challenges would accompany an original and audacious endeavour. What was I presuming to do?! It already would be a major dare to ask a cast of part-time, mainly non-professional actors – many of them absolute beginners – to perform difficult scenes from either a rarely staged ancient Greek tragedy or a rhetorically intricate Shakespearean history play. To attempt both at once would border on the Quixotic, to say the least. An additional hazard was the fact that the actors had only one

¹ Translated by Charles E. Passage (Horace 1983: 359-60).

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month to study and learn the script, and only one week to rehearse it together, before our public performance at the Teatro Laboratorio, Verona. Thus the very logistics of the project increased the danger that instead of a bold, thought-provoking cross-pollination, our well-intentioned efforts would produce a random, grotesque distortion. While I was seriously attempting to emulate the ancient Roman dramaturgical practice of creative *contaminatio*, i.e. grafting two previous plays together to form a new one, I was well aware that – to borrow the words of Queen Isabel in *Richard II* – our unusual plant might “never grow” (3.4.101) and that our theatrical experiment could mutate into a strange laboratory animal. Like the mythical em-pusa or chimera, it would dissolve into a strange mixture of too many clashing, incongruous, and unpleasant elements.

It was something of a leap of faith, then, for me to supersede qualms about presumption, and stay committed to the goal of achieving a worthwhile theatrical experience. Paradoxically, the accident of the project’s unlikely inception turned out to be its eventual artistic design. In this regard, *tyche*, the aleatory factor of chance, proved favourable in various ways, the most crucial being the exceptional readiness of the ensemble to prepare themselves and collaborate constructively during a brief, pressure-filled rehearsal process.² At first we boosted ourselves with the awareness of our quirky originality, of our being the first group ever to stage any kind of amalgam of *Seven Against Thebes* and *Richard II*. Then, as the script took shape, and we explored its possibilities through the trials and errors of rehearsal in real time and space, we discovered a number of unexpected, dynamic connections between the two plays. What had seemed a blurry happenstance – caused by the fact that the Verona Festival Shakespeare was hosting the premiere of Peter Stein’s production of *Riccardo II* in July, and the Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico (INDA)’s adaptation of *Sette contro Tebe* in September – came into focus as both an enlightened and destined choice. In specific terms, how did the links between these two plays – so vastly different in time, plot, language, mytho-historical frames of reference, and dramaturgical devices – gain clarity and pertinence, evolving into a viable hybrid? Our experimental theatre practice was aimed at giving both actors and audiences the chance to address intertwining questions of kingship, state power, familial competition, military sieges, and civil wars, as played out from ancient to modern times. With the burden of having to limit the eventual performance time to a maximum of just over an hour, it was imperative to select scenes and passages that might have elements organically interrelated through parallels and/or contrasts. We needed to

² The production was accomplished through collaboration with Thespi Society, Verona, and Teatro Scientifico - Teatro Laboratorio, Verona, and was staged as part of the “Kingship and Power” international theatre studies conference organized by Thespi Society and held in mid-June 2017. My profound, grateful thanks and recognition go to Elena Pellone (Richard), Dafne Abbruzzino (Bolingbroke), Mario Cestaro (Gaunt/Messenger), Giorgio Rossini (Eteocles), Teresa Brenzoni, and Silvia Zambelli (Messenger-Spies), David Schalkwyk (Northumberland/Salisbury/Servant), Federica Murana (Queen Isabel), Francesca Annechini, Alessandra Bonetti, Alessandra Chiariello, Malina Gradinaru, Lidia Latella, Stella Martina Loiodice, Anna Marconcin, Carlotta Nua, Margherita Piccoli, Martina Piubello, Ludovica Ramponi, Jessica Turato, and Ludovica Turozzi (the Chorus), Noemi Bressan (Bushy/Gardener), Giovanni Centomo (Aumerle), and Salvatore Crucè (Carlisle).

locate at least one pervasive keynote or *leitmotiv*, or in more modern and precisely dramaturgical terms, a Brechtian 'gestus'. For this purpose, it made a positive difference to start not with the texts of the two plays, but with their physical-material apparatus: put simply, with their props and set items. *Seven Against Thebes* is famous for its lengthy set-piece descriptions of the seven giant and elaborately decorated off-stage shields wielded by the Achaian champions laying siege to the city, which then 'materialize' on stage in the one shield held up by the ruler and defender of Thebes Eteocles as he prepares to meet his brother Polynices in their mortal duel.³ On the other hand, the most prominent and suggestive prop in *Richard II* is the mirror brought to Richard at his request during the deposition scene, which he then contemplates, reflects upon, and shatters into "a hundred shivers" (Shakespeare 2011: 4.1.289).⁴ Contrasting emblems of kingship, then, the one expressing military strength and associations with heroic valour, the other evoking the widely read historical-political treatise *The Mirror for Magistrates* and the fragility of regal power; at the same time, they could be connected through similar shape, giving an essential quality to their metonymic significance for their kingly holders. Since shields of the Greek heroic age – the most famous, in both epic and tragedy, being those of Achilles and Hektor – are typed as circular, it was a straightforward choice to make Richard's mirror a round one. In turn, the circle became the physical and symbolic through-line of our hybrid production. The classic Greek theatre features a circular *orchestra* at its centre, where during the performances of tragedies a twelve-person Chorus danced, sang, chanted, and interacted with the individual characters. To replicate this layout, I arranged for a circular 'stage-within-the-stage' to dominate the central part of the square, wooden-floored playing space of the small 'black-box' Teatro Laboratorio in Verona where we would eventually perform. The circular zone beside and beneath Eteocles and Richard would itself mirror the shield and looking-glass they would respectively hold, while communicating the key idea that the stories as well as the semantics of the two plays – sharing such elements as tensions between *genos* and *polis*, kin-murder and civil bloodshed, and difficult questions regarding divine right and will – formed part of a repeated and ongoing cycle. In our interpretation, then, considerations of linear influence and diachronic patterns yielded to an emphasis on the cyclical and uncanny, though not the 'universal'. The original script of *Richard II* itself provided a master-trope for our staging, through its prominent stress on chiasmus, most richly deployed in Richard's declaration "Ay, no; no, ay, for I must nothing be" (4.1.201): we likewise would pursue contrasts, antitheses, and above all circular reflections, seen for instance in our mixed-period costuming, with Eteocles and York both in modern formal suits and ties, the Choruses in all-black skirts and tops (with a few coloured scarves and occasional military accessories), and Richard with medieval style robe, sceptre, and golden crown. Throughout, I was guided by the critical as well as creative understand-

³ Among various articles and commentaries that helped to guide my research and interpretation of *Seven Against Thebes*, I am especially indebted to Isabelle Torrance's study of the play (2007). I also gained and applied valuable insights provided by Taplin 1977, Easterling 1997, and Aloni et al. 2002.

⁴ All references to *Richard II* will be taken from this edition.

ing that our heterodoxical production would engage with several PaR approaches, methodologies and philosophical standpoints.⁵

Good fortune but also design helped us in the form of the new, eloquent, and theatrically viable translation of Aeschylus's *Septem* by Guido Avezzi, which deserved thorough, careful, and dynamic rendition through live speaking and movement. Fortunately again, the cast of university and secondary school actors was large enough to permit the use of a Chorus, to give full expression to Avezzi's outstanding translations of the play's powerful *stasima*, uttered by the young, fearful maidens of the besieged city of Thebes. Would our *Seven Against Thebes* Chorus, however, potentially and awkwardly clash with the script of *Richard II*, which has no Chorus whatsoever? I attempted to solve this problem by introducing a Chorus into Shakespeare's play, who would represent members of John of Gaunt's household, and who could also double as Welsh soldiers in the scene (2.4) in which the unnamed Welsh Captain bids adieu to both Salisbury and Richard's cause. The Captain ominously cites withered "bay trees", "meteors", a "bloody moon", and other ill-boding "signs" (2.4.8-15) that "forerun the death or fall of kings" (2.4.15), while Gaunt's monologues likewise delineate, in objectively descriptive terms, the decline, corruption, and "shameful" self-destruction of Richard's realm, foretelling a ruinous future. In other words, these speeches have an already vatic, choral energy that invites collective as well as individual utterance. The preponderance of women in our cast also worked to positive effect in this case, as Gaunt's retainers/Welsh soldiers became more closely linked via gender to the maidens of Thebes. The choice meant losing the compelling one-on-one 'showdown' between the aged dying Gaunt and the young insolent Richard, but we gained the impassioned resonance of voices of the usually subordinate and/or marginalized.⁶ Communal support and feminine variation thus complemented the sense of Gaunt as "a prophet new inspired" (2.1.31), his personal masculine status still communicated through his performance by a male actor, who became in the process a kind of authoritative Korymbos.

The dying Gaunt scene also enabled our hybrid to gain definition, or at least avoid inchoate scrambling. By eliminating all of Act One, with its focus on the extraneous (for our purposes) dispute between Mowbray and Bolingbroke, we foregrounded the play's urgent concern with the fate of its territorial setting, "this earth of majesty", "this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England, / This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings" (2.1.50-1). Later in the play, Richard returns from Ireland, to kneel and "salute" the "Dear earth" of his realm, declaring that "weeping, smiling, greet I thee, my earth, / And do thee favours with my royal hands" (3.2.10-11). The classic 'mother earth' personification, and the symbolic

⁵ Among the last-named are emphases on "doing" and "making art" as ways to explore and also open up debates on a range of social, political, and cultural phenomena. Important publications on Practice as Research include Barrett and Bolt 2010 and Freeman 2010

⁶ In this regard, it is worth noting our debt to and shared concerns with recent re-visitations of classical Greek tragic female characters, in particular Clytemnestra, accomplished by Avra Sidiropoulou (*Clytemnestra's Tears*, staged in New York in 2001 with Kristin Linklater), Elisabetta Pozzi (*Clytemnestra*, performed at Verona in 2016), and Ellen McLaughlin (staged reading of her version of the *Oresteia*, Verona 2017).

paradigm of England as a "sea-walled garden" – one now "full of weeds", "choked" and "disordered", "swarming with caterpillars" (3.4.43-7) – then attains complete embodiment and articulation in the crucial scene (3.4) set in the Duke of York's garden, featuring a politically-laden conversation among three actual Gardeners, and the awkward encounter between one of them, called "old Adam's likeness" (3.4.73) and the "Poor Queen" (3.4.102) Isabel.⁷ These richly dramatic and symbolic moments – themselves sometimes trimmed or even fully lopped off in other productions – became vital and indispensable ones for us, especially as they provided palpable connections with our selected scenes from *Seven Against Thebes*. "You can never bring in a wall" (Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 3.1.61), but we did bring in the fundamental basis of a garden, by filling the central circular area of our stage with fresh *terriccio*, i.e. actual soil/gardener's mulch. Along with a gold satin-covered 'armchair/throne', placed at downstage right, and seven plain black wooden pedestals (more on these later) lining the upstage border, this circle of earth was the dominant, continually visible component of our set. It served as the focal point for the Chorus of Theban Maidens, while recalling the earthen characteristics of the ancient Greek orchestra. Moreover, the text itself of the *Septem* fortuitously invokes Mother Earth as well. In his long opening exhortation to his Theban people, Eteocles implores them to help the city, its altars, and its religious worship, for the sake of the children and (in Avezzi's translation), "la madre terra, amatissima nutrice. Perché lei si è caricata ogni peso, quando muovevate i primi passi su questo benevolo suolo, e per sé vi ha cresciuti, perché da cittadini portaste lo scudo, e foste affidabili nel momento estremo, come oggi" (*Sept.* 16-20).⁸ Doomed by his father Oedipus' curse to die at the same moment with his brother-enemy Polynices, Eteocles ultimately will fall into the earth that he has fought so hard to defend, and to rule over: for as the Messenger confirms in his account of the two brothers' simultaneous mutual killing, "Possiederanno la terra che potranno avere nella tomba" (*Sept.* 818).⁹ Happy coincidence once more solidified and integrated the connecting verbal tissues of our two plays, and our central set component – itself about two meters in diameter – therefore served as the tangible, three-dimensional articulation of a chain of images and ideas.

Still, there remained the question of finding not only physical, verbal, and symbolic coordination, but also a dramatic framework for the interface of the two plays. In this respect, both the guiding agenda of Thespis Society and Shakespeare's own oeuvre came to the rescue: Thespis seeks to explore and publish find-

⁷ For enhanced understanding of this and many other aspects of *Richard II*, I gratefully acknowledge illuminating lectures by Susanne Wofford, the introductions and notes by Charles R. Forker and Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin to their respective Arden Third Series (2002) and Oxford World's Classics (2011) editions of the play, and numerous critical essays, including those by Thomas M. Greene (1995) and Stephen Orgel (2011: 7-35).

⁸ ἡ γὰρ νέους ἔρποντας εὐμενεί πένδω, / ἅπαντα πανδοκοῦσα παιδείας ὄτλον, / ἐθρέψατ' οἰκητήρας ἀσπιδηφόρους, / πιστοὶ γ' ὅπως γένοισθε πρὸς χρέος τόδε. All Greek references will be to Hutchinson 1987 ["Earth your Mother. / She reared you, on her kindly surface, crawling / babies, welcomed all the trouble of your nurture, / reared you to live in her, to carry a shield / in her defense, loyally, against such needs as this"]. All references in English translation will be to Greene and Lattimore 2013.

⁹ ἔξουσι δ' ἦν λάβωσιν ἐν ταφῇ χθόνα. ["They shall have what land suffices for a grave"].

ings on the relations between ancient classical and early modern European theatrical traditions, relations that Shakespeare himself confronted and modulated. In *Hamlet*, the title character devises his plan to “catch the conscience of the king” (2.2.540) by staging the Italianate “Murder of Gonzago” (474) only after he has seen and heard the First Player deliver his old-fashioned ‘passion’/monologue of Aeneas to Dido, narrating the fall of Troy, and “hellish” (401) Pyrrhus’ slaughter of “old grandsire Priam” (402). In humble emulation, then, I decided that after hearing the news of Gaunt’s death and Richard’s seizing of his deceased uncle’s lands, the Duke of York would present the performance of a Greek tragedy to the rash young king, announcing it with the inserted line “faccio vedere a Sua Maestà la seguente scena, come uno specchio”. This scene, of course, was the opening one of *Seven Against Thebes*, and while its main players made their first entrance during our performance, the seven ‘statues’ of the gods (Zeus, Poseidon, Athena, Ares, Aphrodite, Apollo, and Artemis) to whom the maidens pray and bring offerings were played, in masked tableau vivant-style, by Gaunt, York, and five members of Gaunt’s household members/Chorus, standing on the seven pedestals lining the stage. Our Richard remained in his “throne”, seated next to the Queen, Bushy, and Aumerle, watching the Aeschylean drama unfold up to the Chorus’s shared cry, “Cosa possiamo attenderci da tutto questo?” (356: †τίν’† ἐκ τῶνδ’ εἰκάσαι †λόγος† πάρα; “From such things what shall one augur?”) at the end of the third strophe of their second *stasimon*. Notwithstanding the admonitory vision offered by the fearful, agitated Chorus of besieged Theban maidens – from their anguished entering shout of “Threumai!” (78: θρεῦμαι) to their vivid, harrowing imaginings of roving bands sacking the city while suckling babies get torn from their mothers’ breasts¹⁰ – our Richard stayed resolute, declaring in Italian, with a slight modification of the original script, “Pensate quello che volete, fatemi vedere quello che volete, noi prendiamo nelle nostre mani le sue argenterie, i suoi beni, i suoi denari e le sue terre” (*Richard II*, 2.1.209-10). Not for him my director’s advice to the Chorus members, encouraging them to read recent news accounts and look at photos of the 2015-17 violent military-civilian traumas and sieges of Aleppo, Syria, and Mosul, Iraq.

This first ‘play-within-the-play’, then, did not “catch the conscience of the king” (*Hamlet*, 2.2.540), making his Phaethon-like rush toward his own defeat and deposition even more reckless and irresponsible. In contrast, neither Richard nor Isabel stayed on-stage to watch our second selected scene from *Seven Against Thebes*, presented by the Gardener immediately after the Queen’s exit with curses directed at him, so that his additional line was spoken directly to the audience in the theatre: “Ma non abbiamo già sentito questo tipo di storia tragica? Non l’abbiamo già vista?”¹¹ Bound in by our own time constraint, we skipped over the descriptions of the shields of the six other attackers of Thebes, and resumed with the Messenger’s climactic report of the seventh, that of Polynices, followed by the determination

¹⁰ As Guido Avezzi notes (in his footnote to these lines, in his unpublished translation), with an apposite allusion to Goya’s famous prints, the Chorus’s words provide a “visualization of the disasters of war” (“visualizzazione dei *désastres de la guerre*”).

¹¹ Another rhetorical and performative link between the two plays is the prominence of cursing, related to divine will, a pattern incisively elucidated by Robert S. Miola (forthcoming).

of Eteocles to fight a decisive duel with him, "Re contro re, e fratello contro fratello, da nemico combatterò il nemico" (*Sept.* 674-5).¹² Surrounded by the Chorus, Eteocles then knelt in the soil-filled circle while being armed by the Messenger/Spy, until he rose, brandishing his spear in one hand, and with his other holding up his shield – adorned with a full-colour reproduction of Caravaggio's painting of Medusa's severed head – in full view of the audience. Following the exits of the young headstrong king and then of the anxious Chorus, aware of the foretold mortal tragedy about to transpire outside the city walls, the Gardener returned one more time to his task, though the 'fruit trees' (played by two of Gaunt's followers standing on pedestals and holding actual apples and apricots) had also exited. In the same earth that Eteocles had just trampled, and under green-tinted lighting, he "set a bank of rue, sour herb of grace" (*Richard II*, 3.4.105). Finally, with his royal mantle, crown, and sceptre handed over to his cousin Bolingbroke, the deposed (and wiser) Richard played the presenter of our third 'play-within-the-play' scene, lines 792 to 835 of *Seven Against Thebes*, in which a new Messenger tells the Chorus of the salvation of their city, but also of the two brothers' mutual killing of each other: "La città è salva, ma per la reciproca strage la pianura si è imbevuta del sangue dei congiunti" (*Sept.* 820-1).¹³ These words uncannily anticipate those of Bolingbroke/King Henry IV himself, in his speech that opens the next play of the second tetralogy, when he optimistically and erroneously predicts "no more the thirsty entrance of this soil / Shall daub her lips with her own children's blood" (*Henry IV, Part One*, 1.1.5-6). Our Bolingbroke, now watching the Aeschylean performance in the same exact attire Richard was wearing in the first scene, perhaps did take some note of what he beheld, including the Chorus's final grasping and holding up of handfuls of earth, as they faced him and cried in unison, "Long live the King!". This was the last gesture of regal ceremony – another shared aspect of the two plays – that we employed, recalling the brief 'dumb show procession' of Richard and his retinue with which we opened our performance, but deliberately contrasting with the solitary isolation suffered by the deposed king in Pomfret Castle. For this concluding scene, we placed the dimly lit Richard alone in the middle of the central earthen pit, where he had earlier played the "golden crown like a deep well" (*Richard II*, 4.1.184) routine with his cousin Bolingbroke. If things had come full circle, then they partook of the sense that Richard would soon be swallowed up by the same Mother Earth over which Eteocles contended with his brother, feeding it with their dying blood. During the concentrated rehearsal process, we therefore devoted special attention to Richard's *anagnorisis* of his impending return to dust and nothingness, articulated in his concluding insight that "whate'er I be, / Nor I nor any man that but man is / With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased / With being nothing" (5.5.38-41).

At this point in Shakespeare's original script, "*The music plays*" from an unseen source, and again good fortune allowed us to render this haunting climactic

¹² ἄρχοντί τ' ἄρχων καὶ κασιγνήτῳ κάσις, / ἔχθρὸς σὺν ἐχθρῷ στησίμοιαι. ["King against king, and brother against brother, foe against foe we'll fight"].

¹³ πόλις σέσωται, βασιλέων δ' ὁμοσπόροιν / πέπωκεν αἶμα γαῖ' ὑπ' ἀλλήλων φόνῳ. ["The city is safe, but through their mutual slaughter, / The ground has drunk the blood shed each by each"].

effect with a live performance. Thanks to the clarinet-playing talent of Alessandra Bonetti, Richard and the audience heard the strains of Chopin's "Nocturne, Op. 9, no. 2", which aptly and suggestively closed a series of pieces played by Ms Bonetti, at key moments of our production. These included Ennio Morricone's "Gabriel's Oboe", marking among other transition points the final choral effect of the play: Ms Bonetti's playing of a few bars of this piece preceded the speaking in unison of Gaunt's line "they breathe truth that breathe their words in pain" (*Richard II*, 2.1.8) repeated in Italian as "soffia verità chi soffia le parole con affanno". This idea of painfully breathing the truth was crucial for our interpretation, for the same line had been spoken as the opening one of the entire performance. The Chorus itself sometimes served as an off-stage instrument, for example echoing some of Richard's lines during the final monologue in the prison cell. Thus the musical 'soundscape' of the production, beyond the scripted words spoken by the characters, also vibrantly connected the two plays. Ms Bonetti's compellingly executed clarinet performances, which included Astor Piazzolla's "Oblivion" and part of Mozart's "Clarinet Concerto in A Major K. 622" (this latter as accompaniment of a brief balletic dance during the Gardener's Scene), provided thematic bridges as well as specific expressions of mood, and were supplemented by recorded versions of brief segments of Edward Elgar's "Enigma Variations" (the "Nimrod" passage, used at the very beginning and ending of our production), and Händel's "Overture" for the "Royal Fireworks Music", used for announcing the ceremonial entrances of King Richard. In choosing these particular pieces, I aimed to develop a contrast between the concentrated, introspective and private mood conveyed by the live solo clarinet playing, and the formal, ostentatious, and public associations transmitted by the full, recorded professional orchestras. Our carefully selected musical score, then, also made a significant difference in smoothing and clarifying the variegated 'tesserae' of our hybrid mosaic. Above all, music has the advantage of transcending particular linguistic and semantic limitations: without its use, our bilingual script would have posed even more difficulties of comprehension for both the actors and the audience. In keeping with our Practice-as-Research approach, the live clarinet also enabled us to experiment with a modern variation on the ancient Greek *aulos*, the wind instrument played at various points during performances of tragedies. By using it for the off-stage music scripted by Shakespeare to accompany the second half of Richard's final soliloquy, we thus devised another palpable link between our two plays and their distinct musical performance practices.

Together with Ms Bonetti's renditions, we were crucially supported by the technical expertise of Luca Cominacini, the sound and lighting technician/operator at the Teatro Laboratorio. Mr Cominacini's creative and logistical assistance, especially during two final rehearsals, was also invaluable for providing coherent shape to our production. Our collaboration included the discovery of unexpected yet dramatically appropriate shadings and colours for specific lighting effects – for example, a lurid and disturbing reddish tinge focused on Eteocles during his opening harangue – and the overcoming of problems such as illuminating Richard's 'majestic eagle-like' apparition on the parapet of Flint Castle (3.3). We managed to spotlight, with increased wattage, an alcove-space located nearly two meters above the main stage, thus obtaining a fairly convincing sense of the king's

final moment of splendour before his self-described mythically tragic descent into the "base court", where his enemies await him: "Down, down I come like glistering Phaeton" (3.3.177). The spotlighting thus helped to diminish the awkwardness of this moment, as did a deliberately humorous, almost self-parodic execution of Richard's grandiloquent lines and semi-somersaulting tumble. Like the live clarinet music, these and other special lighting effects became vital to our interpretation, but only because they were achieved through organic on-the-spot experimentation, variation, and adjustment: I would never presume to claim that I had plotted out these specific stagings with preliminary conceptual rigour. Once again I recalled Brecht's wise observation that in theatre practice, "the proof of the pudding is simply in the eating" (1974: 119) and Peter Brook's advice to directors that they never follow an exactly written plan, because above all theatre "aesthetics are practical" (1972: 111), dependent on constantly changing, evolving factors of time, space, and relationship.

In conclusion, I need first to recognize the numerous flaws of the production, most of them caused by my own deficiencies *vis à vis* the poetic and dramaturgical brilliance of Aeschylus and Shakespeare. There were myriad gaps, missed opportunities, and clumsy choices that I would wish to adjust in an *encore* staging: for example, I would commission consistently Greek-style masks for the 'statues' of the gods, and I would use not only woodwind but also live percussion music. At the same time, and more importantly, I need to acknowledge and give boundless thanks to dozens of remarkably diligent people, whose talents and generosity made our preparation and production of "*Riccardo II in-contra I Sette contro Tebe*" a fully worthwhile as well as truly unique experience. I have been emphasising the frequent good fortune that blessed our project, but unfortunately one of the individuals who made it possible, and with whom I most wished to share our work, is no longer with us. Soon after we had started preliminary meetings and conversations, our dear friend and highly esteemed Shakespearean mentor, and the outstanding Italian translator of *Richard II* (2014) Alessandro Serpieri passed away. There is no way to replace his loss, but he has given us an immensely rich legacy, and it was an honour to dedicate our final performances of the play to him. Serpieri's deft and thoroughly playable translation enabled our bilingual version to function smoothly, especially in the agile interpretation of Richard by Elena Pellone. At times incorporating eloquently translated Italian lines into her skillful, sensitive, and compelling speaking of the original Shakespearean passages, Ms Pellone achieved an original and dynamic performance of the part. Fiona Shaw's celebrated mid-1990s Richard, with Deborah Warner's direction, provided a notable and useful precedent for our cross-gendered casting, but Ms Pellone pursued her own distinctive course, time and again finding unexpected nuances of thought and emotion. She convincingly portrayed both the acute, quick-witted intelligence and the touching, vulnerable humanity of the king who learns to become nothing. Ms Pellone's professional experience and dedication, combined with her affability and positive energies, helped to inspire her non-professional fellow actors to perform exceptionally well. A genuine and highly admirable team spirit developed among the cast members, evident not only in Richard's and Bolingbroke's complex, sharply focused interaction, but in the strong, attentive and committed performances of

the rest of the ensemble. Through their conscientious and good-natured participation, these actors accomplished an inevitably rough but also satisfying rendition of our authentically ‘laboratory’ script, after less than two weeks of group rehearsal. We were also constructively and genially assisted by my professional acting and directing colleague Roberto Andrioli, who led an extremely useful early rehearsal on movement, gesture, and physical acting.

Last but not far, far from least I need to give my heartfelt thanks and most sincere, admiring acknowledgment both to my colleagues in Thespis Society, and to our hosts at the Teatro Scientifico - Teatro Laboratorio di Verona, Giovanna Caserta and Isabella Caserta. The generous and indefatigable collaboration of the latter, and the patient, congenial, and brilliant guidance of the former – namely Guido Avezzi, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Lisanna Calvi, with support also from Nicola Pasqualicchio and Gherardo Ugolini – sustained us through our project. *Grazie mille a tutti, allora!* I feel blessed to have countless memories to treasure of our production. On this note, I will always recall the magical moment when the entire cast, led and cheered on by Isabella Caserta, laid the circle of moist earth on the stage, crying “Viva la terra in palcoscenico!”

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