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## *Richard after Richard: Gender Fluid Monarch Cutting Cabbage on His/Her Own*

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*Richard after Richard*

**Director:** Iryna Volytska

**Translator/Adapter:** Borys Ten

**Venue:** “Vie” Theatre, Khortytsia Island,  
Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine

**Actor:** Lidia Danylchuk

**Light designer:** Yevhen Kopiov

**Duration of run:** 50 minutes

Premiered in 2007 and still ongoing (on tours to festivals)

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## 1. An encounter with reimagined Shakespeare in the flesh and on the screen

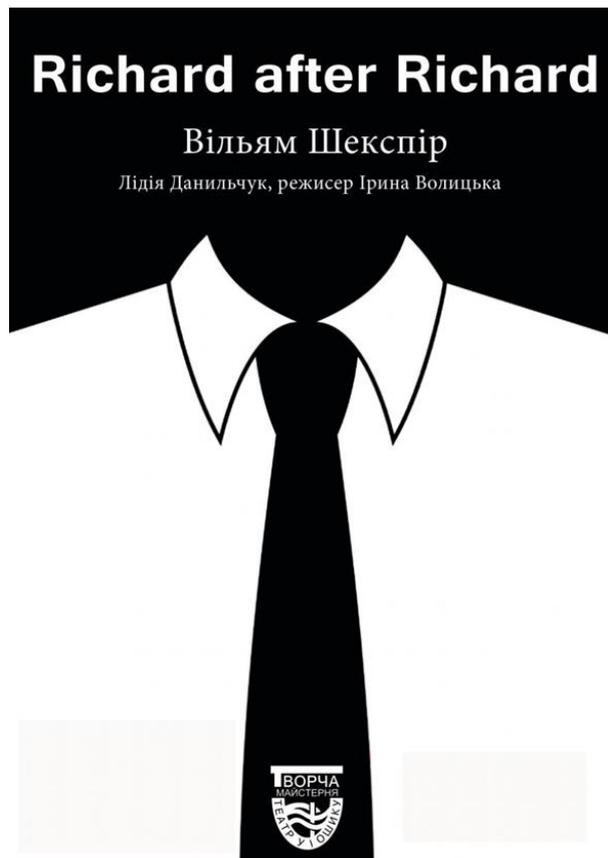
- 1 Eight years ago, on a warm September day I was about to see yet another version of Shakespeare’s *Richard III*.<sup>[1]</sup> However, there were some factors that made the performance special. Firstly, my Ph.D. thesis dedicated to this play was nearly complete and I was looking forward to adding a paragraph or two to the chapter dedicated to the stage history of *Richard III* in Ukraine. Secondly, the venue chosen for this production was my absolutely favourite place in the hometown—it was presented as a part of a festival hosted in the local theatre “Vie” situated on the Khortytsia Island—the largest river island in Europe, which is a beautiful nature reserve and the historical cradle of the Ukrainian Cossacks. Thirdly, it was a solo performance, and what is even more fascinating a one-woman show. Fourthly and finally, I was genuinely intrigued by the title *Richard after Richard* speculating on what modality of “post-” this may evoke. The experience of watching Lidia Danylchuk’s solo

performance directed by her long-time collaborator director Iryna Volytska was pretty unforgettable, the paragraphs of my thesis were truly inspired but it was only recently that I stumbled upon the professional video recording of the production on Vimeo ([URL](#)).<sup>[2]</sup> Rewatching this version now was as if seeing it for the first time. In the years following my first encounter with this performance, I managed to defend my thesis, see many more Ukrainian productions of Shakespeare and find work in a higher institution located on the Khortytsia Island. All of these factors affected my perception as well as the fact that the frontline of the war with Russia is now 40 kilometres from Zaporizhzhia. So, it is high time to write more than a couple of paragraphs about this remarkable production that despite its barebones approach to stage space, costumes and text manages to retain unprecedented depth and complexity, producing favourable reaction from the audience, including those viewers who are not familiar with Shakespeare's *Richard III*.

## 2. Postmortem postmodernism: disembodied identity and temporal displacement

- 2 In solo performance *Richard after Richard* the protagonist is seen in the dream-like world which may be interpreted as a nightmare or (judging from the name of this production) the king's postmortem existence. Being deprived of the body Richard becomes a post-gender creature: Lidia Danylchuk who plays the role has a distinct androgynous look and uses pitch variations to sound both deep with her strong chest voice while occasionally modulating to much higher and softer sound (further we will use the gender-neutral singular pronoun "they" to refer to the character). Nothing in postmortem Richard's appearance alludes to their kingly statues—they are not wearing a crown, instead we see the protagonist in a formal black suit and a black tie bearing no hint to the occupation

or social role of their owner (black jacket and tie appear on one of the posters of the production substituting for the typical crown which has become a certain staple of theatrical posters for *Richard III*).



**Figure 1.** Poster of the performance.

**Crédits.** Advertising website *Афіша розваг Львова* (Lviv Entertainment Playbill).

- 3 The jacket has crimson lining that Richard shows to the audience right after his first act of violence. In the course of the production Danylchuk takes this jacket off with the character wearing only a white shirt and a loose tie looking more relaxed and accustomed to the role of a serial killer. As the protagonist starts to kill methodically and ruthlessly, they begin to use yellow kitchen gloves

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(Lidia Danylchuk draws the attention of the audience to the gloves by putting them on one after the other in a slow manner evoking associations with Michael Jackson's glove routine used when performing his hit song "*Billie Jean*" live). Latex dishwashing gloves in the ambience of the production lose their association with cleaning and housework and become a visual symbol of butchery aimed at clearing the path to the throne.



**Figure 2.** Richard III (Lidia Danylchuk) and the translator into sign language (Magdalena Gakh).

**Crédits.** Vimeo ([URL](#)).

- 4 Richard's life after death lies in the temporal zone outside the usual earthly time—on several occasions they repeat the question "Ay, what's o'clock?" in different languages (English, Ukrainian, Polish) and to no answer. The suspended round magnet with 12 knives attached to it is constantly hanging over the protagonist—it may be seen as the clock with no hands and as a depiction of a cruel nature of time that literally kills and to which Richard himself fell victim. The postmortem time flow in the production is recognizably post-modern in its non-linear nature with frequent overlapping scenes and multiple verbal repetitions. Danylchuk's Richard speaks different languages (namely Ukrainian, English, German, Russian and Belorussian) showing their disidentification from a singular national identity. Using the original text created in the late 16<sup>th</sup>

century back-to-back with modern-day translations also enables to blur the time distinctions. Thus, when freed from their bodily form Richard loses the identities anchoring them to a certain gender, nation, social strata, and time period.

### 3. Minimalist posthuman Richard: beyond nature and humanity

- 5 Incorporal *Richard after Richard* encapsulates the posthuman idea of being beyond dichotomies and linearity. On a greater scale the production depicts not only postmortem but also post-apocalyptic Richard—the inhumane human contributing to the distinction of the humanity, at once relishing and suffering from the fruits of their vicious deeds. The production employs minimalist stage design endowing each prop with multiple functions and several symbolic meanings which the audience may recognize. In the very centre of the stage one can see a little square folding table placed on the plastic mat that Richard pompously rolls out to some brisk recorded music. In the context of the performance these props become multifunctional. In the course of the production, this piece of furniture evokes different associations—at first it is used as a desk or a lectern (the latter association is strengthened with Richard's formal attire), then it becomes a drum (when the protagonist sings Shakespeare's lines and creates a galloping beat with the two knives and the table's surface), and eventually when the character starts to obsessively chop cabbages it turns into a kitchen table or if you develop the symbolic meaning of a cabbage head to its extreme—a surgical or even a butcher's table. It should be noted that preparing food in Ukraine is often thought to stereotypically belong to the traditional set of women's responsibilities. However, Danylchuk's Richard transgresses this convention as their cabbage chopping loses all the culinary undertones rather alluding to massacre than to cookery.



**Figure 3.** Richard III (Lidia Danylchuk) about to start the cabbage-cutting routine and sign-language translator (Magdalena Gakh).

**Crédits.** Vimeo ([URL](#)).

- 6 First time we see the protagonist in an embryo-like position embracing the black cloth covering round objects (later to be revealed as cabbage heads). After some choreographic moves that evoke associations with modern ballet dancing, Richard starts to fold the cloth turning it into a sack that they later try but fail to lift. Next, the actress starts moving in circles while dragging the sack and the audience hear the first phrase Richard utters: “A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse”. Later this phrase turns into a chant being reiterated in several languages. It is symbolic that the production starts with the most famous line of this Shakespearean character that appears in the penultimate scene of the final fifth act of the play. Walking in circles in ever-growing tempo accompanied by the iconic Richard’s line being pronounced each time louder create the tension that is relieved when the protagonist stops the gallopade and reveals the cabbages rolling free from the black sack they had been hidden within. Pointing at the vegetables Richard says: “Nature” later repeating this word in other languages with emphatic intonation. The pointing gesture and the tone of voice show that the protagonist is jealous to the nature creations (at this stage cabbage heads still look rather fresh). The protagonist then brutally deforms these objects, relishing the very act of chopping

cabbages (it is underscored by the brisk percussive soundtrack of African tribal nature and the red light that overflows the stage when the actress uses knives). Richard does not associate oneself with nature thus turning it into his adversary. Having chopped all the cabbages by the end of the production the character enters a vicious circle: the protagonist folds the mat full of cabbage chops, tries and fails to lift it, then starts to walk in circles reiterating the line “A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse” in various languages. The tension rises again but this time it is not relieved as the lights fade out and the darkness absorbs Richard as their first words in the production become their last.

- 7 Among the cabbage heads used in this version three were deliberately chosen and prepared to mark the specific characters of Shakespeare’s history. For instance, there is a cabbage with a stalk cut out that Lidia Danylchuk brilliantly uses in the wooing scene as a representation of Lady Anne. While saying the words from Act I Scene 2 Richard peels the leaves of the cabbage soon leaving nothing of it. Two more cabbage heads are little in size—they symbolize young princes. At first, Danylchuk gently caresses these vegetables whilst singing “Silent Night”. Soon the gaze of the actress becomes steely, and her manner of singing acquires metallic and aggressive undertones. The song goes on as the character cuts the two little cabbage heads frantically.

## 4. The many layers of a cabbage: cultural symbolism

- 8 Cabbage was chosen as the central object of the production and throughout the performance it unravels its rich symbolic potential. Cabbage in this version blurs the nature—culture divide being a natural object profoundly grounded in the Ukrainian customs and traditions. In Ukraine this vegetable is highly regarded as the indispensable ingredient of the two signature dishes of the local cuisine—namely, *borscht* (vegetable soup including beets, cabbage,

carrots, onions, potatoes and tomatoes) and *holubtsi* (stuffed cabbage leaves). This gives the production its distinct local flair while still making it understandable for representatives of other cultures who may not decode the Ukrainian cultural connotations but will readily grasp the general symbolic meaning. The production also discovers the darker overtones of cabbage symbolism. For instance, the Ukrainians regard this vegetable as a symbol of birth and healing (according to the well-known legend new-born babies are found in cabbage; cabbage leaves are used for treating different traumas in traditional Ukrainian medicine) but in *Richard after Richard* its opposite meaning is highlighted—cutting cabbage is the act of killing and cabbage heads may well be seen as decapitated human heads. The spectators sit close enough to the stage to feel the smell of the cabbage; cabbage juice and even pieces of freshly chopped vegetables fly to the first rows involving more than just visual sense of the audience members and making the act of chopping even more reminiscent of a perverted execution. The actress demolishes organic objects with man-made tools thus creating some dramatic posthuman tension—Richard may be regarded both as a superhuman executioner who decides the fates of his sullen victims and a madman chopping vegetables when talking in iambic pentameter in different languages. When observed from the post-humanist perspective Richard's frantic chopping may be loosely seen as a visual metaphor of present-day humanity's attitude to nature or as a reflection on Ukraine's neglecting some burning environmental issues rising due to lust for profit (irresponsible industrial overproduction, extensively growing crops that reduce soil quality) comparable to Richard's lust for power. Cabbage is also a jargon word for money and wealth—Richard is corrupt, he literally steals the precious lives of his victims, he strives for the immense power and influence but ends up miserably wriggling in the huge pile of cabbage chops which is a far cry from the pile of gold but may well be seen as such in the protagonist's insane mind.

## 5. The eternal return: Richard III in the cycle of evil and transformation

- 9 Lidia Danylchuk is not playing a male character in this production. Her Richard is a creature with many post-characteristics: post-historical, post-Shakespearean, post-gender, post-modern. So, very true to the title of the production this is the ultimate post-Richard: like the chopped cabbage can be traced to a cabbage head, so this character is based on snippets of Shakespeare's text and its translation<sup>[3]</sup> as well as on elements of classic productions remodelled and reshaped for the solo performance; the director and actress take these elements and combine them in an artistic mix that appeals even to those who know little about the original. In this version, senses and messages are greatly reinforced through repetition of sentences and circumstances, reiteration paired with semi-choreographic movement, music themes and changes of light. On the other hand, one can treat the title as a sentence with ellipsis at the end alluding to the perennial nature of evil that Richard brings and the never-ending cycle of torment that the character is doomed for. The geometric dominant of this production is sphere and circle. The circular sun (with knives that remind of its rays) is hanging over the protagonist, Richard often goes in circles and the shape of cabbage heads is spherical. The composition of the show is recursive: words and phrases are often repeated, the same act of symbolic murder through chopping cabbage happens again and again, the first and the final scenes of the production are almost identical. Richard is trapped and there is no way out of this vicious circle: as lights fade out the exhausted character falls into oblivion. But Richard will wake up again with sharp knives and a sack full of cabbages, wearing a black suit and a tie for another 50 minutes of stage time whenever you buy a ticket to Lidia Danylchuk's performance or hit the play button to watch the video version.

## Notes

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[1] I originally saw the production on September 28, 2019.

[2] Also available on YouTube: [URL](#).

[3] The production employs the Ukrainian translation of the play produced by the famous Ukrainian poet and translator Borys Ten in 1952.

## Quelques mots à propos de :

### Bohdan Korneliuk

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Bohdan Korneliuk is Associate Professor of English and German, Dean of the Faculty of Art and Design in Khortytsia National Academy (Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine). He got his Ph.D. in English Literature in 2016 defending the thesis on the topic “The Artistic World of the History *Richard III* by William Shakespeare and its Intermedial Versions in the Light of the Intentionality Theory”. His research interests embrace theory of literature, Shakespeare Studies, phenomenology, and philosophy of literature. He is a co-editor of online project Shakescribe.UA aimed at popularization of Shakespeare in Ukraine. He extensively publishes in the leading literature and culture studies journals in Ukraine and abroad. He is also engaged in popular lecturing (together with Daria Moskvitina, Head of the Department of Foreign Languages in Zaporizhzhia State Medical and Pharmaceutical University) on various aspects of the world literature.