

SHADOW KING

A Play About Richard III

By

Charles Edward Pogue

CAST OF CHARACTERS

RICHARD, Duke of Gloucester

FRANCIS LOVELL, adherent to Richard

OLD WOMAN, a peasant

EDWARD IV, King of England

HASTINGS, adherent to Edward

RICHARD NEVILLE, EARL OF WARWICK, the Kingmaker

HENRY VI, deposed king of England

DR. JOHN MORTON, Bishop of Ely

MARGARET, deposed queen of England

ANNE NEVILLE, daughter of Warwick

GEORGE, Duke of Clarence

ANTHONY WOODEVILLE, LORD RIVERS

ELIZABETH GREY, Queen of England

NED, son to Henry VI & Margaret

DUKE OF BUCKINGHAM

PRINCE OF WALES, Edward IV's son

LORD STANLEY

BRACKENBURY, Constable of the Tower

DR. STILLINGTON, Bishop of Bath and Wells

BESS, daughter of Edward IV

ENSEMBLE: Miscellaneous Soldiers, Heralds, Diplomats, Royalty, Churchfolk, Commonfolk

The action of the play takes place in England and Continental Europe from 1465 to 1485, during the War of the Roses.

NOTE ON DOUBLING: Fifteen or sixteen actors. I calculate the casting as ten or eleven men; five women. The variant in men is because a woman might also play the young boy parts, reducing the male actors by one and eliminating casting a child.

The play is designed as an ensemble piece which will require actors to perform both major and minor parts. Many primary characters appear only in the first act or early scenes of the second and can easily double the remaining characters that crop up in the second act. Only five roles...Richard, Lovell, Old Woman, Anne, and Elizabeth...carry through most of the play which makes it difficult to double those actors in other parts.

The structure of the play allows the smaller roles to be assumed by the actors without frantic costume changes or scene proximity with their other roles. None of this performance flexibility eases the task of the costumer designer who has twenty major characters to dress, as well as other smaller roles.

DESIGN & TRANSITIONS: I have attempted to minimize any suggestion of specific aspects of set or lighting design. And those I have suggested are just that -- suggestions. They can be readily ignored by both director and designers who no doubt may have better, more artistic ways of creating the desired theatrical effect needed. Ideally, scenes should flow as swiftly into others as possible, so that the pace of the narrative is not disrupted with any abundance of blackouts or burdensome scene changes. How this is achieved will depend on theatre space, direction, and design. I welcome better minds than mine to wrestle with such production challenges.

SHADOW KING

by

Charles Edward Pogue

ACT ONE

FROM DARKNESS comes a SHOUT.

RICHARD

Treason!

SPOT on AN ARMOURED KNIGHT, visor closed, astride a HORSE (stylized) in WAR HARNESS. A WHITE BOAR BANNER flies behind them. A GOLD CHAPLET encircles his helmet. He is RICHARD THE KING.

He swings a BATTLE-AXE in a slow lethal arc as SOLDIERS with PIKES emerge from the shadows.

Their attack shares Richard's deliberate, almost ritualistic movement. The pikes thrust forward. Richard sweeps them back with the broad stroke of his axe and, as the soldiers retreat, once more shouts.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

Treason!

A sustained cry. No wail of fear. A roar of wrathful fury. Again, the soldiers advance, pikes jabbing at Richard. Again, he whirls the axe. Again, bursting from his lips...

RICHARD (CONT'D)

Treason!

But this time, the pikes prevail, thrusting upward, imprisoning Richard in a criss-cross warren of lances. His arms flail out from his body, his head falls back, even as his last savage snarl of "treason" echoes as all goes BLACK.

A PEASANT HUT. FRANCIS LOVELL jerks up from a ROUGH-HEWN MAT.

LOVELL

Treason!

He is dressed in a dishevelled blouse, unlaced at the neck. His face is mud-caked and bloody. He has bolted up in a delirium, eyes wild with distraction. He clutches a tattered and soiled WHITE BOAR BANNER.

AN OLD WOMAN, in drab garb, kneels beside Lovell and gently pushes him back on the mat.

OLD WOMAN

Easy, lad. Drink.

She forces GRUEL from a bowl into his mouth. Lovell resists.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

Yes, it tastes like piss-water, but it'll give you strength.

LOVELL

Treason...Treason against the king.

The Old Woman cleans his face with a wet rag.

OLD WOMAN

When a poor woman like myself takes in a person of quality like you, she'd appreciate a little more company and a lot better conversation. You've jabbered nothing but treason the last quarter hour...

She fingers a CHAIN-MAIL SHIRT lying beside her. It clanks against the SWORD and LEG-ARMOUR heaped there.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

...Well, from the look of you, I'd say you're the traitor now. You don't run from a battle unless you lost it.

She mops his brow, trying to ease his delirium.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

Convenient, isn't it? Treason, I mean. All the betrayer need do to become the betrayed is be victorious. Then all those screaming treason before lose their heads on the same accusation. Topsy-turvy thing, this treason...

(softly)

...He'd have been about your age. Your colouring too...

She gently tries to pry the banner from him. He lunges up and fiercely yanks it back

LOVELL

No!

His violent jerk tumbles the woman into the discarded armour. The clatter rouses Lovell from his daze. His eyes become alert, their fear calming as he absorbs his surroundings and sees the old woman awkwardly rise from the armour.

OLD WOMAN

Told you it'd give you strength.

LOVELL

Where am I? How did I get here?

OLD WOMAN

You're in a peasant's hut a little north of Leicester. You got here because I woke to a clatter of clanking in my garden just before dawn. Bit too noisy for the rabbits that usually plunder my patch, so I poked my head out to have a peek. Found you sprawled face down in my cabbages. Thought it better for both you and the cabbages if I hauled you inside. Better for the rabbits too. No easy task, mind you, for a woman of my years and my aches.

(picking up a leg guard)

Bit of a tussle, toting your dead weight done out in all this gear. I don't have the back of your war-horse. Not anymore...

(chuckles to herself)

Though it once weathered Old Tom's wicked riding right well.

Lovell's not listening. A memory jolts him from the last remnants of his daze.

LOVELL

The king! I must go to him!

He tries to rise. The Old woman gently restrains him.

OLD WOMAN

Which king, lad? There's a new rump in the royal seat now.

LOVELL

Yes...yes...Oh, Jesu! My poor Richard!

OLD WOMAN

Richard's minion, eh? I reckoned...

She fingers a corner of the banner. Lovell snatches it back.

LOVELL

Whose minion are you? You think the Tudor dog will reward you if you tell him I'm here?

OLD WOMAN

(laughs)

Must be a fellow of some note if you think you'll bring a price. Don't worry, lad, since Old Tom died, I'm no one's minion but my own. The glorified family quarrels of you nobles mean no more to me than a pile of dung in the road. I just step around it and go on my way.

LOVELL

Then you're a fool, old woman. No matter where you step now, the ground will be covered in shit. A traitor and usurper sits the throne of England and you say it doesn't matter?

He shifts uncomfortably. She props a grain sack under his back.

OLD WOMAN

Not to me. For years you fine lords have rumbled up and down the countryside, squabbling and slaughtering each other, jealously struggling to snatch another's power. And we common-folk casually look on, cautiously remain neutral, and calmly go about our business unconcerned. Why shouldn't we? Whatever cataclysms these regal brawls bestow on you nobility, our lot doesn't change, we carry on, unnoticed...

She pauses and turns from him, awkwardly, resuming with quiet emotion...

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

...and largely untouched...

(shakes off her dark thoughts and smiles)

...largely...Forgive me if I don't mourn your dead king, but I've lived through Henry six, Edward four, his son Edward, your Richard, and now this new one...another Henry, is it? Makes him seven, I guess...But never once through the whole pack of them has my ordinary day-to-day existence been anything but ordinary. Lancaster, York, whoever...What's it to me? My vegetables still grow, the rabbits still eat them, my roof still leaks, I still continue to lose my hair and my teeth without any interruption. Had it not been for finding you lumped atop my cabbages, this day under this King Henry would be no different than yesterday under King Richard...

LOVELL

It will be different. Never the same. We have lost a great king.

OLD WOMAN

Perhaps...A good enough one, I suppose, for while he didn't make me a rich woman, he didn't make me a poorer one.

Lovell tries to rise, but, wincing in pain,
crumples to his knees.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

Here, here, none of that now. Rest. Whatever sort of man your king was, you've been through Hell for him, it seems.

LOVELL

(to himself)

"Loyaulte me lie"...

(realizes he only wears his shirt)

Where are my breeches?

The old woman tries to put him back to bed.

OLD WOMAN

What's left of them weren't fit wear for a gentleman. And got in the way of my cleaning that wound on your thigh. You won't help it any either walking on it.

Lovell struggles to a shaky stance anyway. His blouse covers his private areas.

LOVELL

If it stiffens up on me, I won't walk on it at all. And walk I must, woman. If I'm found here, your head will tumble off your shoulders as readily as mine.

OLD WOMAN

And who's going to find you here? You go limping across the countryside in bold daylight, they'll find you right enough. If you must forgo my shelter at least wait for the shelter of night. The shadows will slide in soon enough.

Lovell stumbles. She braces him.

LOVELL

Yes, the shadows...

OLD WOMAN

Here...

She steadies him; then fetches a LONG WOODEN STAFF from the corner.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

It was Old Tom's.

LOVELL

A quarter-staff with some heft. Was he any good with it?

OLD WOMAN

(laughs)

Old Tom? Lord -a-mercy. In a market-fair bout or tap-room brawl, he could hold his own, but no...

(wistful solemnity)

...he wasn't the fighter...

(smiles at Lovell)

...no warrior like you...

LOVELL

Just as well for him...Old Tom didn't have an extra pair of breeches, did he?

OLD WOMAN

(laughs)

None those skinny shanks could hold up. Hang on...

She rummages in a small trunk and takes out a PAIR OF MEN'S LEGGINGS, neatly folded. She smooths them with a caressing hand and proffers them to Lovell.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

These should do you.

Lovell shakes them out and approves. He sits back on the pallet to put them on. He stops when he sees the old woman watching him. Realizing the reason for his hesitance, she smiles and discreetly turns her back.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

You think I didn't get my fill when tending your leg?

Lovell ignores her and slides into the hose.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

Your shoes are by the mat...This Boswell...I hear there was much fighting..How did you escape?

LOVELL

Perverse luck. An arrow struck my horse in the neck and we rolled into a ravine. Horse tumbling atop me; ground slamming below me. My head banging inside my helmet like a bell on Sunday. My thigh tore open on my own mace dangling from my saddle as I was flung from it into a thicket of briar. I hung twisted in the thorns like a discarded doll. Dizzy. Half-conscious. Vomit souring my mouth. Its stink fouling my helmet. Dust clouded my visor. Dust from the battle. It was all I could see. Dust. And blood. Oozing into my eyes from the scraping my scalp took on the helmet. Vomit, blood, and dust. I managed to claw the helmet off. But then the dust blinded me. Stealing my breath as it slid over me and thickened. It stole the sky's breath too. Choking it till it shrieked. And it shrieked like frightened men. And terrified horses. Like metal tearing across metal and arrows ripping from bows. It kept shrieking until the darkening dust, like some swirling shroud from Hell, smothered it...and the kind shadows of senselessness swept me into a sweeter darkness. I woke with the sun stinging my eyes as it pierced the bramblewood that snared me. Mercifully the shrieking had stopped. Silence sang to me. Nothing broke it save the occasional cry of a bird. Or the whimper of a dying man. Then an obscene laugh shattered that stillness for good. I tore from the nettle and peered over the ravine edge to see what coarse merriment disrupted the morning peace. The victors had sent their servants looting among the enemy dead. With small hatchets, they broke open the visors of the fallen knights. When they found one yet living, they'd cleave his head.

OLD WOMAN

(spits)

Carrion-eaters. And they boast of their chivalry. How did they miss carving you up?

LOVELL

Lazy, like most servants. Why wrestle a thicket when there were easier pickings on open ground. But then I didn't wait to be found. Shedding what armour my wounds and weakness would allow me...

OLD WOMAN

Good thing that. If there had been any more on you, you'd still be in my cabbages.

(holds up a piece of mail)

Don't know how you got here in all this.

Lovell, dressed, grins and lifts himself to his feet with the quarter staff, picking up the tattered White Boar banner as well.

LOVELL

Not easily...

He looks at the banner in his hand...as he continues his story, he lets it slip from his fingers. It is caught...

...by a SOLDIER who has entered.

LOVELL (CONT'D)

...I followed the ravine down to a marsh and headed north toward Leicester...hobbling, hiding all the way...

The SOLDIER is one of a TRIO who lead a HORSE (stylized) ONSTAGE. A WEEPING BOY...A HERALD...sits astride the horse, hands tied. Behind him, thrown over the horse's rump, is the BODY OF A NAKED MAN, a ROPE about his neck. Lovell, reliving his story as he tells it, moves into the scene.

LOVELL (CONT'D)

...By late afternoon, I had reached the west bridge of the Soar. I was about to cross when...

The Soldiers burst out in LAUGHTER. Lovell conceals himself, watching the men as they jeeringly flap the banner in the face of the weeping boy.

SOLDIER #1

Still blubbing, boy?

LOVELL

I recognized the rider...

SOLDIER #1
(tosses banner at him)

Wipe your tears on this!

LOVELL

...a young herald of Richard's, just a boy...

The boy pulls the banner from his face.

SOLDIER#2

Or just wipe your dead king's arse with it.

The Soldiers laugh.

LOVELL

I knew Richard was dead. I had seen him go down.

SOLDIER#3

You know where it is, boy. Probably had your nose up it enough...Swab that Yorkist stench out once and for all.

LOVELL

Only numbing shock kept me from crying out at what I saw next.

Soldier #3 tugs on the rope around the corpse's neck, jerking up the head of the dead man. IT IS RICHARD. Lovell reels in his hiding place.

SOLDIER#3

(to the corpse)

I smell it. You must've shat yourself when the pikes had at you.

LOVELL

Milord Richard...

SOLDIER #3 jerks the rope so Richard's head bobs up and down.

SOLDIER#3

Look, he's nodding yes.

The soldiers laugh. The Herald angrily flings the tattered banner at Soldier #3.

HERALD

Liar! Welsh scum! He died a king!

LOVELL

A king! The boy was right. He died a king..

HERALD

The only bowels quaking were your master Tudor's...

LOVELL

...bravely...

HERALD

...when milord Richard almost cut him down...

LOVELL

...nobly...a king...

Soldier #2 snares the boy's shoulder in his pike and jerks him forward in the saddle, so that they're face-to-face.

SOLDIER#2

Almost isn't, boy! So learn to lick a new arse if you want to live.

The soldiers EXIT with their prisoner and their grim trophy. The banner lies where it fell. Lovell retrieves it.

LOVELL

As they crossed the bridge, the horse came too near the wall and the king's face, already bruised and cut, crushed against the stone...

He sinks to the floor.

LOVELL (CONT'D)

My hand touched the spot as I braced myself there to retrieve this tattered emblem of my liege's once-glory.

He holds out his hand to the Old Woman.

LOVELL (CONT'D)

His blood...O my Richard! My poor king! Even in death the indignities do not stop.

The Old Woman gently takes the banner from him and wipes the stain from his hand with it.

OLD WOMAN

I think this man was more than a mere king to you.

LOVELL

I loved not only the king but the man. He was my great friend...

Lovell pulls himself to his feet with the quarter-staff.

LOVELL (CONT'D)

I was ever and always at his side. We grew up together at his Uncle Warwick's castle in Middleham, trained there together as knights, longing for the time when we too might fight to secure the crown for his brother Edward as they had at Towton; Warwick and Hastings and no one more valiantly than Edward himself...

TOWTON. THE ROAR OF BATTLE as Edward appears.