

Shakespeare's war room in theatrical overdrive



Kings of War is another Adelaide Festival coup. Picture: Tony Lewis

It is four years since Toneelgroep Amsterdam amazed Adelaide Festival audiences with their dazzling Shakespearean triptych *Roman Tragedies*, a six-hour spectacle using live video feed to present *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* as breaking news. This year, *Kings of War*, an audacious mashup of the Wars of the Roses histories, is again a Festival coup and an unforgettable highlight.

Scenographer and lighting designer, Jan Versweyveld has created a War Room for the first two sections, *Henry V* and *Henry VI*. Unlike the hi-tech TV studios of *Roman Tragedies*, here is a retro mix of military maps, operations telephones and data screens. The set is spacious, ravishingly lit, and features a large video screen for close-ups and links to the action in anterooms, and the harrowing morgue-like corridors of torture and execution.

The music, composed by Eric Sleichem, is performed by countertenor, Steve Dugardin, and trombone quartet, BL!NDMAN. Along with the ominous use of metronomes in *Richard III*, it is key to the production's success.

Director Ivo van Hove presents three contrasting versions of kingship. Henry V (Ramsey Nasr) is the just king, mindful of the grief of war, honourable to his

enemies. Henry VI (Eelco Smits) is the reluctant monarch, dominated by powerful courtiers, abject in failure. After interval, when the production moves into theatrical overdrive, he is personally dispatched at the suffocating hands of the psychopath king, Richard III (Hans Kesting) who even mocks his corpse by putting his nerdy glasses back on upside down.

There are too many player highlights to include here, but the cast of fourteen is outstanding. Janni Goslinga is haunting as the prophesying Margareta, ferocious queen to the timorous Henry VI; Helene Devos is excellent in the macabre courting scene with the viperous Duke of York; and, insouciantly smoking a cigarette, Bart Slegers, as Edward, wordlessly wrests power from Henry VI as if it were a board room takeover.

Of the kings, Nasr, guided by the subdued rhetoric of the adaptation, captures the humanity of Henry V with less of the jingoism of many versions. As Henry VI, Smits, perhaps predestined by the text and direction, is haplessly one-dimensional until the final court scene.

The momentum fully develops in the second half with Hans Kesting's extraordinary Richard. Disfigured with a port-wine birthmark, he stares into a full-length mirror with fascinated disbelief, delivering all of Shakespeare's "Winter of discontent" soliloquy.

Kesting is tall and moves with slow, lethal stealth. No exaggerated hunchback and limping here. And no Richard ever called for a horse like this before. It is a brilliant performance in yet another exhilarating Van Hove production.

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