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Kings of War, Barbican, London — ‘A rewarding marathon’

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One of the most brilliant, shocking scenes in Ivo van Hove's *Kings of War* comes towards the end. For four hours in this modern reworking of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, we've watched power won and lost, wars waged with and without conscience, leaders sinking or swimming, the lessons of history presented in sleek modern dress, but kept unspecified. Now Richard, played by the sinister Hans Kesting, picks up the red diplomatic phone that has been onstage throughout, and pretends to dial Barack Obama, Angela Merkel and Vladimir Putin.

It's funny, mischievous, childish — but it also deliberately plays with our suspension of disbelief: the teasing insertion of real leaders' names feels deeply troubling in this context. When he then snatches up a carpet for a royal cape, and cavorts around the stage in an increasingly macabre, twisted dance, it becomes hair-raising: what if, today, a psychopath like this did get into power — has got into power?

It is this sort of detailed, revealing precision that makes this marathon such a rewarding watch. Van Hove and his dramaturge Peter van Kraaij have filleted and modernised Shakespeare's original dramas, losing, naturally, a great deal (chiefly poetry, breadth and humour), but gaining too. Staged by Amsterdam's Toneelgroep in Dutch, with English surtitles, it combines epic sweep and incisive detail, hurtling forward with the velocity of a dark political thriller.

For *Henry V*, Jan Versweyveld's set depicts a modern war cabinet room, full of the high-tech gizmos that keep the conflict — which Ramsey Nasr's troubled, conscientious Henry convinces himself is just — remote. In *Henry VI* the ambiguities are different: collapsed to under an hour of first comic, then sharply tragic action, it presents us with a timid, unworldly leader (Eelco Smits in outsized glasses that emphasise his political shortsightedness) who shrinks from conflict and leaves the field open to those with more Machiavellian minds. And so to *Richard III* and to Kesting's hypnotic, petrifying Richard, who lumbers around the stage in an ill-fitting jacket — a joke figure, until everyone realises that he is not joking.

Throughout van Hove and his excellent cast use the space eloquently: front of stage is the public arena; backstage is a warren of white corridors from which ugly, secret acts — conspiracies, trysts, murders — are relayed on a giant screen. A red carpet lurks in one corner, a quartet of brass in another, ready to present for public consumption each successive leader in this brutal, chilling dissection of power.

