

18. Richard III Performance question annotated

Act III, scene v

Q. How theatrical are the performances of Richard and Buckingham in this scene?

The courtyard of the Tower of London.

Enter RICHARD and BUCKINGHAM, wearing old and very rusty pieces of armour (as if hurriedly put on).

Unusual stage direction showing its importance and almost comic effect.

RICHARD Come, cousin, canst thou quake and change thy colour,
Murder thy breath in middle of a word,
And then again begin, and stop again,
As if thou wert distraught and mad with terror?

BUCKINGHAM Tut, I can counterfeit the deep tragedian!
Speak and look back, and pry on every side,
Tremble and start at wagging of a straw,
Intending deep suspicion. Ghastly looks
Are at my service, like enforced smiles –
And both are ready in their offices
At any time to grace my stratagems.
But what, is Catesby gone?

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This dialogue could be very amusing to watch with both characters acting out their meanings with hilarious results.

RICHARD He is – and see, he brings the mayor along.

Enter CATESBY, with the LORD MAYOR of London.

BUCKINGHAM Lord Mayor –

RICHARD Look to the drawbridge there!

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BUCKINGHAM Hark! A drum.

RICHARD Catesby, o'erlook the walls!

BUCKINGHAM Lord Mayor, the reason we have sent –

RICHARD Look back, defend thee! Here are enemies!

BUCKINGHAM God and our innocence defend and guard us!

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Enter LOVELL and RATCLIFFE, bringing the head of Hastings.

RICHARD Be patient. They are friends – Ratcliffe and Lovell.

LOVELL Here is the head of that ignoble traitor,
The dangerous and unsuspected Hastings.

The dramatic irony of this line is an example of how the characters balance between convincing the Mayor and amusing the audience.

Another opportunity for exaggerated performance. The double act could have a comic effect and endear the audience to the two leading characters.

RICHARD So dear I loved the man that I must weep.
 I took him for the plainest harmless creature
 That breathed upon the earth a Christian:
 Made him my book, wherein my soul recorded
 The history of all her secret thoughts.
 So smooth he daubed his vice with show of virtue
 That, his apparent open guilt omitted –
 I mean his conversation with Shore's wife –
 He lived from all attainder of suspects.

Opportunity for bawdy aside that could add further humour at Hastings' expense.

The audience are almost part of the action as they knowingly watch the Mayor being duped by such antics.

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BUCKINGHAM Well, well, he was the covert'st sheltered traitor
 That ever lived!
 Would you imagine, or almost believe –
 Were't not that by great preservation
 We live to tell it – that the subtle traitor
 This day had plotted, in the council-house,
 To murder me and my good Lord of Gloucester?

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MAYOR Had he done so?

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RICHARD What! Think you we are Turks or infidels?
 Or that we would, against the form of law,
 Proceed thus rashly in the villain's death,
 But that the extreme peril of the case,
 The peace of England, and our persons' safety,
 Enforced us to this execution?

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Using similar tactics to how he disposes of Hastings, Richard immediately goes on the defensive when questioned, adding tension to the dramatic part of the scene.

MAYOR Now fair befall you! He deserved his death!
 And your good Graces both have well proceeded
 To warn false traitors from the like attempts.

These lines provide plenty of opportunity for Buckingham and Richard to give celebratory gestures behind the backs of the others.