



A Conversation with King Richard III and Queen Margaret

Four Years, Two Immortal Enemies



Benjamin Curns as Richard in *Richard III* at the Blackfriars Playhouse. Photo by Tommy Thompson, American Shakespeare Center.

By Eric Minton

In 2009, the American Shakespeare Center at the Blackfriars Playhouse in Staunton, Va., staged *Henry VI, Part One*, with Benjamin Curns playing Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. The following year, he reprised the role in *Henry VI, Part Two*, and after his character's death in III.2, Curns returned to the stage as another character destined to become the next Duke of Gloucester: Richard, the "crookbacked" third son of the Duke of York.

At the end of that play, he memorably killed the Duke of Somerset (Bob Jones) by impaling him with his sword and flipping him high overhead and to the ground. It was a shocking—



Sarah Fallon as the “she-wolf” Queen Margaret in *Henry VI, Part Three* (above), and as the desolute Queen Margaret in *Richard III* (right) in successive Actors’ Renaissance Seasons at the Blackfriars Playhouse. Photos by Tommy Thompson, American Shakespeare Center.



but, yes, exciting—portent of what was in store for Curns and his Richard. The next year, 2011, Richard would lead his elder brothers, Edward and George, and the House of York to temporary victory in *Henry VI, Part Three*, and in 2012 he became king—Shakespeare’s most notorious—in *Richard III*.

Curns’ two turns as Gloucesters have more in common than the dukedom: both Gloucesters have deep enmity with Queen Margaret, Henry VI’s wife. She was played in all four parts of the tetralogy by Sarah Fallon, who, as an actress, has made something of a career of disliking Gloucesters; in addition to Margaret, she has played Regan in *King Lear* who helps gouge out Gloucester’s eyes, and Leicester, a mortal enemy of the Duke of Gloucester, in *Look about You*, an anonymous play written in Elizabethan times. “We’re in this play [*Look about You*] that we didn’t even know before day one and I’m like, ‘Oh, right, I hate Gloucester. I’ve got that,’” Fallon says.

Such is their relationship—Richard with Margaret, Curns with Fallon—that Curns spit a mouthful of wine in Fallon’s face during their first scene together in *Richard III* to the shock of

both the audience and their fellow actors who didn’t know it was coming. “I think they’re a lot alike in a lot of ways,” Fallon says of Margaret and Richard. “They would probably not like to say that. Sarah and Ben don’t like to say that. They really are a lot alike. Margaret’s just at a different point in her journey than Richard is.”

“I will begrudgingly agree,” Curns says.

After accomplishing the rare feat of playing Margaret in three successive parts of *Henry VI* over three successive years, Fallon returned to play the part one more time in *Richard III*. Margaret is, quite simply, Shakespeare’s most remarkable character in volume alone if not in stature. These actors who have experienced Margaret firsthand feel Lady Macbeth has nothing on Henry VI’s queen as a formidable female. Margaret and Falstaff are the only characters to

appear in four plays (a version of Falstaff appears in *Henry VI, Part One*; he remains offstage in *Henry V*). But consider this irony: At the end of *Henry IV, Part Two*, Shakespeare promises to bring Falstaff back for *Henry V*, but doesn't; he makes no such promise for Margaret at the end of *Henry VI, Part Three*, but does bring her back, unhistorically, in *Richard III*. My pet theory is that Shakespeare felt compelled, for commercial reasons as much as artistic, to give Margaret at least a cameo appearance.

As a result, Margaret is not only the one character who appears in all four parts of the tetralogy, she is the only person who appears in *Part One* who has not died by the end of part four. "I feel very proud, and I think it's very fitting that Margaret is the only one to be in every single part of this tetralogy and still alive at the end of it," Fallon says. "And Richard should have been killed off in *Part Two*."

Of course, history has seen the role of Richard III eclipse Margaret's stature on the stage—perhaps as early as the original production when Richard Burbage played him. The line of great actors who have portrayed him since run through David Garrick, Edmund Kean, John Barrymore, Laurence Olivier, Antony Sher, and Ian McKellen. One week after I saw Curns' Richard III at the Blackfriars Playhouse I saw Kevin Spacey play the role at BAM in New York. However, Curns did something few if any of those other Richards have done—a feat, perhaps, shared only with the original, Burbage: he played the character in all three plays in which he appears, starting with *Henry VI, Part Two*, in separate, nonconflated productions over succeeding years using an original practice production process.

He thus brought to his portrayal in *Richard III* a deep understanding of the Shakespeare-created king who grew up as the runt of his family in a land torn by internecine warfare. "I think all of these parts are enhanced by having done it in the prequels," Curns says of not only Richard but also of such characters as Elizabeth, Hastings, Clarence, and, of course, Margaret who make key contributions to *Richard III*.

His Richard wasn't so much a villain as a product of the story as written by Shakespeare, and Curns' portrayal added poignant value to the actual title of the play: *The Tragedy of Richard III*, meaning he is the tragic hero not merely a villain. "My opinion on Richard is that once his father and brother are murdered and tortured there's like a mental snap that happens," Curns says of Richard's experience in *Henry VI, Part Three*. "And he just says, 'What I have been taught is not true. There is no chivalry, there's only brutality, take the gloves off, do whatever you have to do to get what you want, because there are no rules. Your father tried to follow the rules, look where it got him. Margaret isn't going to play by any kind of rules, so just go. Just go.'" Richard's attitude then adapts to his own family, too, Curns says. "In the end it's like, 'I don't care about your title, where is your real strength?'"

Curns also discovered a clear backstory provided by Shakespeare running through the two pre-*Richard III* plays that define Richard's drive. While his mother despises him, his father shows him unfettered love and devotion. From his first appearance, Richard seeks to bolster his father, starting with not only killing his father's chief enemy, Somerset, but in the butchery of the killing.

"Shakespeare is always smarter than you think," Curns says. "Even when you think that he's

smart, he's smarter than you think. Like, when we were doing *Henry VI Two*, I just thought it was cool that I got to be in a fight, that you got to see him fight. But having done *Part Three*, I was like oh, no, no, no, that's really significant who he sought out on the battlefield. I have this image of Richard just sort of looking around for the colors of Somerset saying, 'The only one I want to fight with is my father's worst enemy.'"

Richard does earn his father's love, but it's Richard's advice that ultimately leads to York's death, a fact Curns believes would eat at Richard. Furthermore, upon his father's death, Richard finds himself an outcast even in his own family: Edward and Clarence are the good-looking ones with the power, and Edward chooses Hastings as his tomcatting companion. All of that manifests in Richard's pathological drive for the crown, the seed of which is clearly planted in *Henry VI, Part Three*, and then revealed in his opening "winter of our discontent" soliloquy of *Richard III*. But Richard ultimately reveals his true self in his final soliloquy of the tetralogy, the speech that follows the ghosts visiting him on the eve of Bosworth, Curns says.

A "profoundly unhappy person," Curns calls him, Richard "has convinced himself that if he can be king he will be well liked and well loved by many people, and people will feel good about him, and by proxy he will finally feel good about himself." Shakespeare, though, shows the opposite to happen; it is upon achieving the crown that Richard's world begins to fall apart.



Benjamin Curns, top; Sarah Fallon.

The Blackfriars Playhouse is the only replica reconstruction of Shakespeare's indoor theater, the Blackfriars, and the company uses the conditions that Shakespeare's company would have worked in: universal lighting and the audience on all sides and on the stage (sitting on "gallant stools"). Furthermore, Curns, Fallon, and company staged these plays using the original Elizabethan theater process as part of the ASC's annual Actors' Renaissance Season ("Ren Season" for short), running from January through March. The 12 actors, using only cue scripts and with no director or designers, mount five plays with between 20 and 50 hours of rehearsal time for each production (the season's first plays get the least amount of time to mount, as was

the case with Richard III). The actors costume themselves from the theater's stock or their own closets, and they also must come up with their own props and prosthetics. An actress in the company, Allison Glenzer (she played Elizabeth in *Henry VI, Part Three* and *Richard III*) created Curns' "cursed" arm that he shows the council after he has consulted privately with Buckingham (played by René Thornton Jr.).

Because of the troupe size, actors double, triple, even quadruple roles, which is why Curns played both unrelated Gloucesters in *Henry VI, Part Two*. Similarly, in *Richard III*, in addition to Margaret, Sarah Fallon played Edward, the Prince of Wales, with Brandi Rhome as his brother, young Richard, Duke of York. The actors work together on blocking and interactions, but they generally come up with their own character interpretations. Fallon decided on her own to come on stage as a chubby Edward eating cherry Twizzlers; John Harrell playing Tyrell then decided that, after murdering the two young princes, he would make his first entry eating Edward's Twizzlers.

I sat down with both actors together for an interview that ended up being a roundtable discussion with four people: Fallon, Curns, Queen Margaret, and King Richard III.

Rhyme, meanwhile, had come up with young York's attitude toward his uncle Richard well before she and Curns first worked on the scene together; when young York

is supposed to hand a dagger back to Richard, Rhyme placed it on the ground and kicked it to him instead, forcing Curns to bend over, bad back and all, to retrieve it. "It was just, 'I'm going to do this,'" Curns says, "and I'm going, 'Don't you ever do anything other than that. I hate you more than anything for doing it, don't ever stop.' Brilliant."

As *Richard III* was nearing the end of its run, two journeys were coming to a close: Fallon's Margaret and Curns' Richard. I had interviewed Fallon during the run of *Henry VI, Part Three* in 2011. Her being cast to play Margaret in *Richard III* merited a follow-up interview. However, because I was so taken with the depth of Curns' portrayal of Richard (I would subsequently rank it as my number one Shakespeareance of 2012), I invited him to join in the interview, too. On the morning of March 26, 2012, when they had only a couple more performances of *Richard III* remaining, I sat down with both actors together in the lounge of the Stonewall Jackson Hotel in Staunton for an interview that ended up being a roundtable discussion with four people: Fallon, Curns, Queen Margaret, and King Richard III. My review of *Richard III*, which had already been posted on Shakespeareances.com, included this passage: "Such was [Margaret's] venom and effect on Richard that he resorted to spitting a mouthful of wine in her face, resulting in an audible audience gasp that was three plays over three years in the making." We start our interview with that.

*Eric Minton
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I had this in my review, but I'm going to go ahead and throw it out here: When you spewed the wine or whatever it was you had in your mouth at her as she's cursing at you, was that moment three years in the making?

[Both laugh almost sinisterly.]

BEN: No, I don't think so. In fact, the funny story about that moment is that—was it the dress rehearsal or preview?

SARAH: Opening night.

BEN: Opening night?

SARAH: It was opening night.

BEN: So we did the preview in front of an audience, and some time on the night of the preview, I said [to myself], "You know what you should do? You should just spit right in her face. You work with Sarah enough times that had you done it, she would have just gone with it, you know?" But, I was also sick that week, and I was like, "Noooo, don't spread that crap." But I called her the next morning, it was like 8:30 in the morning, and I said, "When you wake up call me, I have to talk to you." I saw her at the theater, and she said, "What's up?" And I said, "Here's what I want to do," and she's like, "I'm totally fine with it, you should have done it last night." And I said, "Yeah, I thought you might say that."

SARAH: What was great was we didn't tell anyone else in the scene, so everybody else is watching. So, for opening night, we knew what was coming: the two actors that were involved and taking care of one another knew what was coming. But everybody else on stage did not, and as Allison and René have both said, "our reaction has never been as good as it was that night," because they were like OOOOOHHHHH! They didn't know what was coming at all.

BEN: They all thought that Sarah didn't know either, and they were like, "That's pretty bold." But people seem to dig it.

SARAH: Yeah. It's a good moment. I was at first worried that the [audience] on the [gallant] stools were maybe getting a little bit of the water, but they seem to be OK, too.

BEN: What's funny is when we did *Henry VI Three*, I had the idea to spit water on her when she faints after Edward is killed, and King Edward says, "Use some means for her revival."

Instead they break her finger.

What we wound up doing was having Hastings break her finger, but I did have an idea, "Well, we could spit water on her face." I like the finger break better myself, but I'm glad we got the spit in finally.

SARAH: That's what [Chris] Johnston [playing Hastings] came up with.

BEN: What we wound up doing was having Hastings break her finger, but I did have an idea, "Well, we could spit water on her face." I like the finger break better myself, but I'm glad we got the spit in finally.

Is that because you two are actors who have worked together, or do you think that also comes out of the fact you've been Richard and Margaret for three years?

SARAH: I would say both.

BEN: Yeah, both. Both. And it's not only Richard and Margaret, it's both Gloucesters and Margaret. She and Humphrey of Gloucester from minute one—the moment Margaret is mentioned—are butting heads and that ultimately winds up with Humphrey getting murdered.

SARAH: We joke that one of my special skills as an actress is Gloucester-hating. I'm well-versed in Gloucester-hating.

BEN: Yeah. In the three parts of *Henry VI*, *Richard III*, *King Lear*, and *Look about You*, she hates Gloucester.

SARAH: It's true.

That's right, you played Regan [in *King Lear*]. And what was the other one?

SARAH: *Look about You*. The role is not big I play in that—

BEN: The Earl of Leicester.

SARAH: —Yeah, but Leicester hated Gloucester. And, yet again, we're in this play that we didn't even know before day one and I'm like, "Oh, right, I hate Gloucester. I've got that."

And you played Humphrey, and then you came back as Richard toward the end of the play.

BEN: Resurrected.

Sarah, we did our interview a year ago, any new impressions of Margaret?

SARAH: Well, the whole journey is bittersweet. It's been a real privilege to be able to play her through all of these parts, and I don't think many people get to do that. It's been lovely. I'm very, very pleased that I've gotten to do it with this cast, and Ben's doing a fantastic job as Richard.

What I'm realizing from people who maybe haven't seen the other parts is that it's easy to feel very sympathetic toward Margaret in this play. You only have two scenes in *Richard III*, they're great scenes, but she's really just telling you how it's going to be, that basically it's going to go

poorly for all of the others. So, I think it's easy to forget what she's been responsible for in the other plays. I'm sure that Ben feels that way, too.

It's interesting that she starts this play as a woman who's lost everything, and Richard starts this play as a man who's got everything to lose, and does. And Margaret says it's going to happen, all of you are going to go down and it's going to be with him. But it's so interesting, and I was just thinking about it last night, that in I.3, the only scene that we have together, she tells everybody how it's going to be, she curses him, and then Richard doesn't see her again for the rest of the play. I think that's really important because he's on his own journey. Everybody else in the play whom Margaret curses in that scene, it comes back around. They say, "Now Margaret's curse is come, now Margaret's curse is lighted on my head." But Richard doesn't. You don't say anything about Margaret at the end, do you?

BEN: No. He doesn't evoke her, but her curse comes true.

SARAH: Yes, but everybody else says that.

BEN: Sure.

SARAH: And Richard doesn't actually bring her up again. I think it's interesting because, I think they're a lot alike in a lot of ways. They would probably not like to say that. Sarah and Ben don't like to say that. They really are a lot alike. Margaret's just at a different point in her journey than Richard is. And I would love to say, "Oh yeah, Richard is willing to do things that Margaret is not willing to do," but that is just not true.

BEN: I will begrudgingly agree. I do think they are a lot alike. Sarah keeps using this word journey, and I think if you look at them going as far back as you could, not even as far back as Shakespeare goes, but as far back as you can imagine, she was the daughter of a king who doesn't have the best reputation with the rest of the continent and certainly not in England. Just being in that position and then being auctioned off as this prize, she's got all these men in her life treating her as a trophy and then finally she says, "Enough.

***You made me the
animal that I am.***

I am a woman and I have got my own feelings and my own desires, and you all are going to listen up or you're going to be sorry."

I feel like Richard is the same in the fact that he's got two older brothers who are by all accounts better looking, better spoken, more well-revered throughout England, and he knows that, like Margaret, he's going to have to work really hard if he wants to get these things. And he's going to have to learn to not take no for an answer. They're both used to having people whose title dictates that they are surrounded by people who are more powerful than they are. But in the end it's like, "I don't care about your title, where is your real strength?" Henry VI doesn't seem to have that strength; Margaret has it.

SARAH: Yeah.

BEN: Edward and George don't seem to have it.

Do you think that Richard in any way respects Margaret?

BEN: No. [Sarah laughs]. In a word.

Next question.

SARAH: [As if insulted] Right.

BEN: I mean, Ben does.

SARAH: Yeah. Richard does not.

BEN: I think it's an amazing part. An amazing part. But Richard would give her no credit. First of all, she's French. Second of all, she's a woman. Third of all, she killed his little brother and his father, and tortured his father, and kept the crown out of his family that he so strongly believes they deserve. It must be torture for him to be like, "How can they argue that the crown doesn't belong in our family and yet it does belong on the head of a French woman? How is that possible? How is that possible?" So, no; no respect for Margaret, not from Richard.

SARAH: Fair enough. Margaret doesn't have any respect for Richard.

BEN: I was going to say...

SARAH: The feeling is mutual [laughs].

But the lines—I don't remember whose lines they were, they may have been Warwick's—where he's reporting the second St. Albans battle [in *Part Three*] and there's a respect in that they see Henry as a wuss, but if Margaret is leading, they've got trouble. There does seem to be a sort of fear, a sense that you [to Sarah] are a leader, you get your troops going. Clifford listens to you.

SARAH: Oh yeah. Yeah.

But, of course, they don't respect Clifford at all, either.

BEN: Well, Clifford killed Rutland. The young Clifford did, and my father killed his father. So, you know, if his father had been a better fighter, he'd still be alive. But at least when York kills Lord Clifford, those are two equals in the field, and Clifford dies valiantly in battle. Young Clifford murders a defenseless boy. That's the difference.

It always reminds me of that scene in *Batman* when the Joker is like, "You made me. You threw me in that tub, you deranged me." And I feel like Richard and Margaret would both say that about each other.

SARAH: Yeah.

BEN: You made me the animal that I am.

Sarah, was Margaret believing her curses, was she crazy, or was she trying to continue being the she-wolf? What was the purpose of her curses especially as her curses begin to come true?

SARAH: I do not think she's crazy, not in the mentally insane kind of way. I do think, like I said, she's lost everything and that much grief can definitely make a person a bit deranged. But I don't think she's insane in a clinical sense. I don't think she's lost her mind. I think she absolutely believes every single thing that she says. So, I think it's still more of the she-wolf that is there rather than a person who's just crazy and sort of wandering around and spouting crap that she hopes comes true. I think she really does have a bead on what is going on with this guy, with Richard. And I think she does foresee the downfall of everyone. She's lived it, already, and she's watched it happen, and the only joy she has left now is watching all of her enemies go through it. That's the only thing she has left. It is kind of strange that she's hanging around this castle waiting for her prophecies to come true, but she enjoys watching that downfall. She tells everybody about it, she warns them; they do not heed her warnings, and then they suffer.

BEN: And what's that line you have, too, like, Richard even says "Wert thou not banished on pain of death?"

SARAH: "I was, but I do find more pain in banishment than death can yield me here by my abode."

BEN: Yeah, so it's almost like, "Then [kill me], if you want it so bad. But I'm not leaving."

SARAH: Yeah.

And you guys don't kill her.

SARAH: No.

You'd just find another finger to break.

BEN: I tried last season, I tried. My brother forbid it.

We talked about how Margaret was so special a character that Shakespeare brought her back. There's no other reason to have her in *Richard III*.

SARAH: No.

And we felt her appearance in *Henry VI, Part Three*, is written in such a way that it's like the second-reel entrance, like "when's she coming, she's coming soon, here she comes!" and then she bursts onto the stage, and I can see the audience go "Yeah! There she is." She's like a cameo in *Richard III*; she just suddenly shows up.

BEN: Yeah.

SARAH: And a lot of people cut Margaret from *Richard III*. Ben cut this play that we've done, and I can see how it would be an easy cut, but it changes the whole story. It really does. And it changes the history, takes out a big part of the history, certainly between these two. But she's only in the two scenes, and you can cut what the other characters say about her and you can really streamline *Richard III*, but I think it's very important that she's there.

Especially if it's following upon the three *Henrys*.

SARAH: Oh yeah, yeah. I don't think we could get away with cutting her here at all.

[To Curns] Do you think Richard kind of comes into his own in *Part Three* and that's where Shakespeare decided to go further with him?

BEN: Um, well, yeah. Yeah. My opinion on Richard is that once his father and brother are murdered and tortured, there's like a mental snap that happens. And he just says, "What I have been taught is not true. There is no chivalry, there's only brutality; take the gloves off, do whatever you have to do to get what you want, because there are no rules. Your father tried to follow the rules, look where it got him. Margaret isn't going to play by any kind of rules, so just go. Just go."

And that extends to my own family as well. I think if Richard thought that Edward or Clarence were worthy of wearing the crown, he might actually support them. But not only is there that huge speech in *Henry VI Three* where he sort of tells the audience what his designs are, but [the play] is littered with stuff: he's got to convince his father to go to war, he's got to bust his brother out of jail, he's constantly doing all the grunt work for his family to get all this work done. Then in that scene before Margaret comes in [in *Richard III*], he tells Queen Elizabeth, "Before you were a queen or your husband was king, I was doing all the work. So take a moment to remember how you and every one in your family got to this house. It was built on my sweat and my blood and my father's blood. Don't ever forget how you got here," and then he follows up by saying, "and don't ever forget who I am and what I'm capable of."

***There is no chivalry,
there's only brutality;
take the gloves off,
do whatever you have
to do to get what you
want, because there are
no rules.***

SARAH: And Margaret says, "a murderous villain, so still thou art." [Laughter] I haven't forgotten you.

BEN: She does not forget.

In *Part Two*, you had that great departure after the wonderful killing of Somerset. When everybody's leaving the stage, you pause and you look at the audience, and here is Richard III—this is the first time we see Richard III. I felt from listening to you do your speeches in *Part Three* that you saw the throne as the only heaven on Earth. That's the only place you could be free, that you could be what you wanted to be without the deformities, being the third brother, anything that was holding you back, it was the throne that was the be-all, catch-all of this life.

BEN: Yeah. He turns the crown and the throne into this obsession. My feeling on Richard is that he's a profoundly unhappy person and that he has convinced himself that if he can be king he will be well liked and well loved by many people, and people will feel good about him, and by proxy he will finally feel good about himself.

You could have done it however you wanted, I was going to kill you anyway.

My opinion has always been that, along with all the money and influence and everything else that comes with it, if he could wear that crown, then people would like him. And it's not true. And I think from Act IV, Scene Two, the first time we see the crown on him, Shakespeare wastes no time in having everything start to fall apart. All his supporters, in his first scene as king, they all start questioning his orders,

and they never had before. They're all questioning his decisions, and he's like, "What? Why is everybody against me all of a sudden?" He becomes increasingly cut off, and he's finding that the throne hasn't gotten him any more friends, it's only made him lots more enemies—in the case of Richmond, armed enemies.

He kind of loses his touch with Elizabeth. He doesn't successfully woo Elizabeth.

BEN: No. But she's smart enough to make him think that he did.

SARAH: Well, she's taken a while to get to that point, too. But she's learned. She's at a point where she's lost her sons and she's lost her husband. I think at the beginning of that play she knows what Richard is capable of, or at least is fearful of it. And then it actually all comes true. So I do think she is at least afraid enough and has gotten smart enough.

Is it significant that that wooing scene comes right after you teaching her how to curse.

SARAH: Yeah, I think it is. What I also think is interesting is that she tries to walk away from that scene [with Richard]. The Duchess of York has this great speech about how horrible Richard was as a child and she walks off. And then Elizabeth says, "I say amen to her" and that's going to be it, and he goes, "Whoa whoa whoa, wait a minute."

BEN: Stay.

SARAH: And she says, "I have no more sons of the royal blood for you to slaughter," something like that, and that begins it. But she tries to walk away, and I do think it's very important it comes right after we've seen Margaret—and we see Margaret, but Richard hasn't. That's a scene with all of these women that have lost everything, and then Margaret walks away and she says, "Yeah, you'll figure it out."

So you kind of pass the baton on to her, and now she—

SARAH: Yeah, and she even says it. Margaret says it. In that scene she also lets it go. She lets her power go. She says, "Now thy proud neck bears half my burdened yoke from which even now I slip my weary neck and leave the burden of it all on thee." She says, it's your turn now. That's what she says to Queen Elizabeth, who's no longer queen at that point, but she says, "Now I'm done. Thou didst usurp my place, and dost thou now usurp the just proportion of

my sorrow." She stayed, she watched all of this happening, and she says "These English woes will make me smile in France." She passes off that baton, she says, "Here you go. You've been bearing half of the yoke, now you get it all."

BEN: It's great because Margaret says, "Don't ever forget those kids. If you want your curses to have power, that's where they're going to come from. Never forget that you had two wonderful children and that toad took them from you."

SARAH: "And imagine that they were fairer or sweeter than they were, and imagine that he is worse than he is, and that will teach you."

BEN: And Elizabeth listens, too.

SARAH: Yes she does.

BEN: Because in that wooing scene, she brings up the kids so many times that Richard even says—

In fact it's the first thing she says.

BEN: Yes. But she brings it up so many times that Richard says, "Enough." But it's exactly what Margaret told her to do. Never forget them. Always bring them up. Never let him forget what he did. The murder of those kids, in the dramatic structure of the play, and the attempted marriage with the young Elizabeth are things that even Richard's friends can't get behind.

SARAH: It's the first thing that gives Buckingham pause.

BEN: It's gone from political intrigue and maneuvering and cloak and dagger to, like, "That's monstrous you're talking about."

Even historically, however good a king the real Richard was, and there's records that he balanced the budget and he did a lot of good stuff, he's never gotten past the disappearance of the two princes.

SARAH: Yeah. Don't kill babies.

Even Twizzler-eating ones.

SARAH: Yeah, that's true. We don't make it very hard for Ben to want to kill us. [Laughter]

BEN: You could have done it however you wanted, I was going to kill you anyway. [Laughs]

I had never picked up this interrelationship between Margaret and Elizabeth, this triangle of those two scenes. Maybe I'm beating a dead horse, but how much does that come back to you guys going through the whole arc of the histories? Or do you think that scene would still come off as well without the previous plays?

SARAH: I think that scene is just really well written. If you're playing Elizabeth, that's a great

scene, really one of the best scenes that you get to do. There's so much word play and so much back and forth with this man. I think she's been pretty terrified of what he could do, has done, and then it's all gone.

But the Margaret scene, as you've pointed out, a lot of times is cut.

SARAH: I think that Elizabeth scene would still be powerful, but I think it's much more powerful if it comes straight on the heels of seeing what Margaret has told her. So, as part of the arc, I think it's always better if you have the history there.

If you're going to choose in Shakespeare's play whether to be common or French, choose common.

BEN: I think all of these parts are enhanced by having done it in the prequels, Elizabeth included, simply because King Edward becomes so enamored with her that he stops listening to everyone. He puts all of his chips in with her. And she comes into the castle and she brings her whole family with her. Her only ally in court is Edward. So, for her to have Edward die as early as Act Two, Scene Two, she's really alone. She had the most powerful man in the country on her side and on her family's side, but as soon

as he's gone everyone is united against her. I mean, Margaret even says, "You guys all hated each other until I got here. And then the only thing you have in common is that you all hate me more than you hate each other."

SARAH: But Elizabeth's story is not that much different from the Margaret story. She comes into court where no one wants her. It's really interesting that their beginnings in court are not that different. Except for the fact that Elizabeth is not foreign.

BEN: But she is common.

SARAH: She is common. But she's not French. So if you're going to choose in Shakespeare's play whether to be common or French, choose common.

BEN: Yeah, but we didn't have to give up giant chunks of our own real estate to have Elizabeth.

You're still pissed about that two years later, aren't you?

BEN: A little bit. [Sarah laughs] Anjou and Maine, my dad fought for those lands, those were supposed to be his. "Lets the paper fall," I think is the stage direction in *Henry VI, Two*. Humphry is reading the terms and he just lets the paper fall. "I really can't read anymore."

Did playing Humphrey bring anything to your Richard at all? Or did you just totally separate the characters?

BEN: [He lets loose a sly laugh.] No, my hatred of Margaret was very much influenced. [Sarah laughs.] And also, what I was saying before about there being no rules, Humphrey very much is trying to play by the rules. His nephew is the son of Henry V, his older brother, and he's

trying to make sure the kid is taken care of, even when his own wife is saying, “You should take the gloves off. You know these people all want to kill you. They’re all jealous of the power that you have and they don’t care about the rules like you do.” But Gloucester is like, “That’s what makes me better than them, because I do care about those rules and those rules are important, it’s what makes us something other than savage.” But I feel like, for him to wind up—oh god, it was one of my favorite things to do in the whole tetralogy, that scene where Henry VI says to Humphrey, “We’re placing you under arrest, but don’t worry, there’s going to be a trial,” and Humphrey essentially says, “Do you really think I’m going to live to see that trial? You know, watch your back, kid, because you’ve just sent the only friend you’ve got out of this world. Good luck.” And then he winds up dead in his bed.

So I feel like, to look into Richard, it’s just another example that it’s no use to play by the rules if no one else is playing by the rules. The only rule is to be more brutal than the next guy, to think quicker, to be nastier, to make that much better of a statement, let them know that you are not to be trifled with.

Did you increase your hump in Richard?

BEN: Did I increase my hump?

It seemed bigger in *Richard* than it did in *Part Three*.

BEN: Um, nope. I wear different clothes. In *Henry VI Three* I wore just the one coat, and in *Richard III*, I wore three different coats.

And you pulled the glove off and [the hand] is all black.

BEN: Yeah, with some pustules and some nasties. That’s Allison Glenzer.

SARAH: That’s Allison Glenzer. I think you’ve added some pustules since the last time he’s seen it.

BEN: Oh yeah, probably.

I only remember seeing black.

BEN: Yeah, we added some green and then some big red sores and stuff like that.

SARAH: Yeah, it’s great. It’s really disgusting.

So did you have to go through a lot of makeup for, what, one second? One minute?

BEN: Pretty much. [Laughter.] It’s all right, though. I feel like, you know, he clearly shows it to everybody. I’ve seen productions where he just holds up the gloved hand, and I could have done that. I think it would have been really fun to try to web the fingers together somehow.

SARAH: Oh yeah.

BEN: You know?

SARAH: Yeah.

BEN: But then I couldn't wear a glove, I'd need a special glove. But I love that scene where he pulls the hand out, especially because he goes to Buckingham and he says [about the plan to grab the power out of Hastings's hands], "It's not going to work, it's not going to work," and Buckingham says, "Withdraw with me." So they go off, and I really think that it's Buckingham's idea. I love to imagine what that conversation would be of Buckingham trying to tactfully tell Richard [Ben's voice alters here to sound much like Thornton], "what if, and I know you're very sensitive about these things and I apologize to bring it up" —

SARAH: And Renè would be really good with this. [Laughing]

BEN: He really would. He'd be like, "Um, I feel like we've got to talk about that hand. I think if you show them the hand and the hump and we say that the people behind this are Edward's widow and Hastings's lover, that casts him in a bad light, and we could get rid of him." Good enough for me. I don't mind showing it to people as long as we get rid of Hastings. As long as we get rid of Hastings, I'll do whatever it takes.

And that's another part, too, Hastings is such a—I don't really know what to think of it but if you've been in *Henry VI Three* then you know that King Edward loves Hastings. And if you're playing Richard, then you're like, "Why do you love Hastings so much? What's wrong with me that you don't love your own brother as much as you love Hastings?" But Hastings isn't a mutant. Edward and Hastings can go out and chase girls together. You can't take Richard. Richard and Hastings are in a bunch of scenes together, and they fight Margaret and stuff on the same side, but [Richard] must harbor that resentment. "Why does the king favor you over me? He shouldn't. You're a bum."

"What's wrong with me that you don't love your own brother as much as you love Hastings?" But Hastings isn't a mutant. Edward and Hastings can go out and chase girls together. You can't take Richard.

You were the dramaturg for *Richard III*?

BEN: I don't know about a dramaturg; I cut the play. I did do some history stuff that I shared with people.

Did you have that role in *Part Three*?

BEN: I did cut *Part Three*, too.

How much forecasting, knowing what's coming, played into your Richard in the prequels?

BEN: Hmmm. Barely any in *Part Two*, because he has so little to do in *Part Two*. I've learned

much more about *Parts Two* and *Three* having played *Richard III* rather than vice versa.

Interesting. So you'd like to go back and do it again?

BEN: Absolutely.

SARAH: Yeah.

BEN: Absolutely.

SARAH: Yes, please.

BEN: I would do those plays whenever anybody wanted them.

SARAH: Oh yes.

You ought to go on the road with this thing. That would be cool.

BEN: That would be great. The only thing I regret is that I wish we could have done it in one Ren Season, do all four plays.

SARAH: Yeah.

BEN: We could never do it because the audience wants a variety, and I understand that, but I think as artists it would be nice.

But she brought up [in the previous year's interview] how every time she came back to it, she was a year older.

SARAH: Yes, but there's a part of me that would love to do it all back to back to back, even if it was just for a weekend, the "Tetralogy Weekend," *Henry VI* and *Richard III*. It doesn't make any financial sense, certainly, to do it, but it would be so much fun just to get to do it like that.

BEN: I think especially all that stuff from the trilogy that's discussed in *Richard III*, if it was fresh. That would be great.

But I didn't spend any time on the *Henry VI Two* or *Three* reading *Richard III*. I was just trying to figure out what's going on at this point. So, the best thing I can say is having done *Richard III*, I've learned more about what I would have wanted to do in those two parts, even in *Part Two*, as very little as Richard is in that.

SARAH: Have you ever been in *Richard III* before?

BEN: Yes.

SARAH: So you knew the general story.

BEN: Yeah. *Richard III* has always been one of my favorites. I played Clarence when I did it in New York, and I've always loved it. But having done *Richard III*, there's so much about what goes on in those other two plays that you're like, "oh, that wasn't by happenstance," you know what I mean?

SARAH: Yeah.

BEN: You know, Shakespeare is always smarter than you think. Even when you think that he's smart, he's smarter than you think. Like, when we were doing *Henry VI Two* I just thought it was cool that I got to be in a fight, that you got to see him fight. But having done *Part Three*, I was like oh, no, no, no, that's really significant who he sought out on the battlefield. I have this image of Richard just sort of looking around for the colors of Somerset saying, "The only one I want to fight with is my father's worst enemy." Because, he goes into the beginning of *Henry VI Three* not only having killed Somerset, his father's worst enemy, he goes to his father with the head of the guy, brings a trophy from his kill, and he shows it to his father —



Richard (Benjamin Curns) makes a lasting first impression in the American Shakespeare Center production of *Henry VI, Part Two*, when he kills Somerset (Ben Jones) with high-flinging violence. The two actors choreographed the stunt themselves. Photo by Tommy Thompson, American Shakespeare Center.

SARAH: Look, daddy.

BEN: — And he says, "Look what I did for you. I want you to know that I am worth your time and that I am a valuable asset to this family." And his father does say, "You deserve the best. You did, you swept that crumb under the rug for me. I'll never have to deal with that again."

SARAH: It's so important that we know that Richard is a valiant and able fighter as well, because he is deformed, but through all of his plays it's going to be really important that's he's actually very valuable on the battlefield. He's not to be trifled with just because he's a cripple. In fact, that makes him more vicious.

Your introduction as Richard was the way you killed Somerset. Were you thinking that this is going to be a big Richard moment when you actually did the killing of Somerset, or did you just want to make it as fantastic as you could?

BEN: No, that just came from the fact that it was me and Bob, and Bob was so much smaller than me. Bob was like, "There's got to be something we can do to take advantage of the difference between the two of us." But it was a happy accident that once we finished it, we did both know that, A), we did take advantage of the difference in our body types, but B), he also said, "You've done a great thing because you just said to everybody, 'Get used to this face and get used to what you just saw happen to this guy because I'm going to be doing it for the next two years.' There's a lot more bodies to be found on this pile." [Laughter]

It goes back to what I was saying about doing Richard now. Now, what I think is important about that moment is how it relates to his relationship with his father and how Richard needs that kill, he needs to show his father that.

What about in *Part Three*? Would you go back and do a different reading on something because of what you learned in *Richard III*?

BEN: Um, probably. Probably, um [long pause]. Certainly the scenes that Richard is in with Elizabeth. There aren't many, there's just two. But, I'm wondering now having done *Richard III* if he actually does think Elizabeth is that beautiful or if he's just like, "Why is my brother wasting time with this commoner? This is exactly the kind of behavior I would expect out of him." I don't know.

In that one scene, you and Clarence are off to the side—

BEN: Snickering. Making jokes at [Edward's] expense.

I think the biggest thing I would take into account is in that first scene with Margaret in *Richard III*, he brings up to her, "If anyone cursed you it was my father cursed you when you were torturing him." And [Richard] makes sure that everybody in the court knows that, in case you forgot, this is what she did. She didn't kill him valiantly on the battlefield. She hunted him down like a wounded animal with five of her friends and then they tortured him. They wiped the blood of his son on him to let him know they killed him.

And everybody joins in condemning Margaret.

BEN: Right. But what Richard leaves out is that the battle happens in large part because Richard convinced his father to fight that battle. He said, "We shouldn't wait. We should just go and fight this battle right now." Now, Margaret is closing in anyway, but York says, "I don't have the men to encounter a force like this." Richard tells his father, "We shouldn't be afraid. A woman is general. We've got this. Let's go do this." So, I feel like in *Richard III*, as he's laying out all these awful things that Margaret did to his father, and she did do them, I do think that Richard is walking around going [to himself], "You told your dad to go to battle that day even after he, having a smarter, more experienced, better tactical mind, told you this is not a battle we can win, you convinced him otherwise. And now his death is kind of on you. A little bit. A little bit."

SARAH: A little bit.

BEN: That would ruin a guy's mind, I think. That would ruin somebody's mind.

Especially Richard's.

SARAH: Yeah.

BEN: A guy who's already twisted in more ways than one.

SARAH: But who loved and respected his father.

BEN: That's my take on it. My take on it is that he adores his father and he wanted nothing more than his dad to adore him, and I think his dad did adore him. And much like when Edward dies and Elizabeth is all alone, when York dies there's no one who loves Richard. Certainly not his other parent.

SARAH: No.

That was going to be my next question. You say his father adored him, but his mother didn't like him much.

SARAH: No.

Just because of the hard childbirth or was he that wicked a kid?

SARAH: Yeah, there was hard childbirth, but then [the Duchess says], "your childhood was terrible, your puberty was terrible, as a grown man you're terrible." She doesn't like him at all. I don't think she's shown that boy love like a mother should.

BEN: My take on it is always that she's married to Richard of York who tells her that he has a better claim to the throne than Henry does and that one day they're going to be the royal family. And then she's got this embarrassment, this runt of the litter that she would really just like to hide away. She doesn't want foreign dignitaries to see that he's a member of their family, because they're all going to ask her, "What's wrong with you that you gave birth to something like this?" That's my take on it, and all that frustration she takes out on him. But it's got to be counterbalanced by the fact that his father does not say those things. He does not say you were a bad kid or as an adult you have proven yourself to be—and Shakespeare can write those speeches if he wants, you know.

That's how you make a crazy person. He's got one parent telling him you're in the best family in this country. Your blood is royal and you are better—

SARAH: You are worthy.

BEN: —than everybody else. Better. Not higher, you're better. God wanted this family to be royal, and you're of that, despite your physical things. Don't ever forget that you're in the best family in England. Then his other parent is saying you're an embarrassment to this family and you don't belong in this family and you should be ashamed of yourself. Even the last thing she says is shame. "Shame serves thy life and doth thy death attend." You should be ashamed of yourself the way you've conducted yourself. He probably should, but... [Laughter]

But I feel like that must be so weird to be brought up with that dichotomy.

Somebody taught him to be the best warrior in that whole family.

BEN: I think that it was the one thing that he knew he could be good at, and that he didn't

have to be good looking in order to know how to do well. He knew that he could make a reputation that way. But, again, what does that do to somebody's mind? Like, "What is the best thing you're good at?" "F----- guys up. I could make a mess of your face."

Tony Soprano.

BEN and SARAH: Yeah.

BEN: That's why I thought it was really important in *Richard III*, and I might have been overanalyzing it, but he's got that line where he says "I'll entertain a score or two of tailors to study fashions to adorn my body." I start the play in the same military uniform that he wore in *Henry VI Three*. I always thought that was such a cool line where he was like, "This isn't going to work anymore.

The war is over, you look like you're clinging to your past. It's time to go forward, Richard, look like a politician, that's what you want to be." So he does. He puts a tie on and vest, some nonmilitary-type clothes. But then when everything goes all to hell, and they're like, "You're going to have to fight this guy Richmond," even after all the ghosts visit him he says, "I probably won't win tomorrow, but at least I'm back to doing something I'm good at. Because I'm a crap king."

I felt the same way when I played Macbeth here. He so thought that being king would be the bee's knees, and he's terrible at it. But when Malcolm and everybody start to invade, he's like, "At least I'm actually more comfortable with guys swinging axes at my head, I know how to deal with that. I've got counters for that. What I can't deal with is my own people saying, 'I'm not going to follow your orders or you should think about your morals, dude.'" [Laughter]

A lot of good psychology here. Do you do a lot of backstory when you do parts? Of course, Shakespeare has given you a backstory with this one.

BEN: I've done more on this one than I've ever done before.

SARAH: Why don't you tell him what you're reading?

BEN: [Pause] I've been reading a lot of things.

SARAH: Specifically?

BEN: Ahhhhhhh [Sarah laughs]. I have read Machiavelli, and I've read Sun Tzu. And I read about Stalin. And what Sarah is getting at is that I've done a lot of reading on different serial killers. I've read about a bunch of them. But it's been fun, especially when you've got FBI guys or criminal psychologists who are talking about the differences in them. And there's part of me that says, if you looked at Richard, especially a shirtless Richard, you'd be like, "This guy, he looks like trouble." But then you listen to him in the Anne scene and he's got his stuff together.

At least I'm actually more comfortable with guys swinging axes at my head, I know how to deal with that. I've got counters for that. What I can't deal with is my own people saying, "I'm not going to follow your orders or you should think about your morals, dude."

I love it. He even says, “My tongue could never learn sweet soothing words.” I’m like, “That’s all you ever learned. [Laughter.] Besides killing people what you’re really good at, your tongue is just as sharp as your sword.”

That’s true even in *Part Three*.

BEN and SARAH: Yeah.

BEN: But then there are other guys that you look at and the people are like, “As far as we can tell he was totally well liked, he was respected in the community. He used to have barbecues and people would come over. He looked like a likeable guy, a funny guy.” And Richard is funny, you know? He certainly jokes with the audience, but also to other people, as well. He seems to get people to laugh. You mentioned that bit with Clarence, you know. It’s like the last good time he and Clarence have together. I sort of think that’s interesting that here’s a guy who looks like a freak but he’s able to convince people, or at least a certain percentage of people for a certain percentage of the time, that he’s a decent guy.

He is not OK with women. The killing that he’s doing is not, you’re right, sexual, but he’s got issues with women.

Do you see him as a serial killer?

BEN: Well, no. Well. OK. [Laughter]. It’s different in the fact that I don’t think there’s a sexual component to his killings and therefore I don’t think he qualifies. Also, I think the speech—

SARAH: He is not OK with women. The killing that he’s doing is not, you’re right, sexual, but he’s got issues with women.

BEN: In the first soliloquy of the show he’s equating violence and sex through the whole speech. The whole thing, now the war is over, all the other men in this court have a new outlet to put their energies into—so to speak—

The lascivious lute.

BEN: —and I don’t. They won’t talk to me. Dogs bark at me. They think that I am uglier than they are. So, this is what I’ve got. This is what I’ll be good at. The other similarity goes to what we were talking about before with the throne and how it becomes an obsession to him. And there’s a fantasy attached to that obsession in that prior to getting on the throne he feels like all the killings are [pause]—

SARAH: Justified?

BEN: —somewhat justified because they’re leading to a sort of happiness or normalcy in his life. But when he gets there, like most serial killers, reality is never as good as the fantasy and therefore they have to kill again because it’s what they’re good at and it’s where they feel the most powerful. That’s what he has in common with all of them is this idea of wanting to be in control, wanting to exert his power. If that means violently, then that means violently.

Where he differs from them most significantly is in that speech after the ghosts visit him. Most of these [serial killers] will deny up until the end that they had anything to do with anything. Bundy denied it, Gacy denied it. They all said, “I didn’t do it, I didn’t do it, I was framed.” Richard wakes up from that nightmare and he tells the audience—his last chance to talk to the audience—he says, “I did all these things and I’m an awful person and what I want you to know before I die tomorrow is that my conscience really does prey on me.” And that’s exactly what Margaret, going back to how we started this conversation, Margaret says, “the worm of—

SARAH [joins in]: “conscience still begnaw thy soul.”

BEN: “That’s my curse for you.”

SARAH: Yep.

BEN: “Because I know what’s in there, your father gave it to you, you know what you’re doing is wrong.”

SARAH: “And no sleep close up that deadly eye of thine unless it be while some tormenting dream affrights thee with a howl of ugly devils.” Well, right before he dies—and obviously Radcliff knows that he’s murdered people—don’t you actually say the souls of all I killed or murdered?

BEN: Yes, but I must admit that’s a bit of my own creation.

SARAH: Ah-HAH!

BEN: Those last three lines to Radcliff are actually the last three lines of the speech.

SARAH: Oh, right. Right.

BEN: When I looked at Ralph’s cut [ASC cofounder and executive director Ralph Cohen], he had done that.

SARAH: Oh, I see. OK.

BEN: And when I read it, I said, “That reads really well.”

SARAH: Yeah, yeah.

BEN: And if Ralph could get away with it, I feel like I’ve got papal sort of approval. And I do like it and I admit that it’s not what Shakespeare wrote, but it always seemed stupid to me to end the speech by saying, “I thought that all the ghosts were here.” We know, we just watched it happen. I like Ralph’s idea; I thought it was more interesting.

But what I think is most interesting about that nightmare speech is that he admits that he has a conscience. He admits that he feels bad about what he has done to get where he is today, and

that he had hoped that it would lead to a different outcome. I think the most significant line in the speech, and maybe even in the play, is that he says, “There is no creature that loves me, and that ultimately is why I’ll die tomorrow because no one really wants me to live, and if I die no one is going to feel bad.”

There’s something in there about you love yourself.

BEN and SARAH: Richard loves Richard.

BEN: It’s not enough. Then, later in the speech, he says that’s a lie, he doesn’t. He says, “I hate myself for hateful deeds committed by myself.”

That was such a great, great performance. How much did you put into nailing that speech?

BEN: What’s funny is that speech actually got shorter shrift than some of the other ones in terms of rehearsal because—

SARAH: It’s just you.

BEN: And I had worked into the rehearsal process while the band worked on music for preshow and interlude that I would give myself some time to work on speeches, and I would often ask René, our Buckingham, to come and watch them, give me some critiques or whatever. But he and I, we have such a good time doing that kind of work that we spent an hour and a half on “Now is the winter of our discontent,” and I had hoped to try and at least touch on that and “Was ever woman in this humor wooed?” By the time the next week rolled around and we had to start doing fight rehearsals and stuff, when that [last] speech rolled around, I don’t think I ever actually did that one for René. The advantage was we had done so much more of the play beforehand. For me, it was just draw on what you’ve been doing the past two hours.

It’s so rare, really, that any Shakespeare character, but particularly somebody like Richard or Margaret, admits his defeat. “All of my efforts have been for naught. You know, I got the crown but so what. I’m not any happier. Nobody likes me. I have even less friends than I did before I got the crown.”

Antony Sher complained about how Shakespeare has you start off with one of his most famous speeches, “Now is the winter of our discontent.” And, of course, that’s the one that everybody remembers. How do you weigh the two? Or can you weigh the two? Do you think the last one is really the gem in this?

BEN: Mmmmm. There’s so many jewels in that crown. But I think the last speech is significant because it’s his last chance to talk to the audience. He does the battle oration, but even the stage direction says he’s talking to his soldiers, not to the audience that he started talking to at the beginning of the play.

SARAH: In the second half, he talks so much less to the audience than he does in the first half, too.

We get the audience complicit in clapping for him and “Yeah, take the throne!” At the beginning they’re laughing at him and “Yeah, isn’t that great?!” and “No, I’ve never seen any woman woo’d like that.” And then by the end of it they’re just disgusted.

BEN: And there’s little snippets in there where he’s telling us he’s done some awful things. It’s like “the sons of Edward sleep in Abraham’s bosom,” and “Anne my wife has bid this world good night.” And what’s great with the lights on the audience is, you see the people turning on you. We did *Richard* yesterday afternoon, and I grab Elizabeth and I kiss her on the mouth and toss her out the door, and these three guys sitting on the stools go “Oh!” they shook their heads and looked down at the ground and wouldn’t even look at me anymore.

SARAH: And these were the same guys who had been “Yeah, Richard!” [she claps her hands]. We get the audience complicit in clapping for him and “Yeah, take the throne!” At the beginning they’re laughing at him and “Yeah, isn’t that great?!” and “No, I’ve never seen any woman woo’d like that.” And then by the end of it they’re just disgusted.

But they’re all complicit. They’re all complicit in it because they have enjoyed the ride just as much as the next guy.

BEN: So I think it’s significant that Shakespeare says, “Here’s the last thing that I want this character to tell you.” And the last thing he chooses to tell you is, “In case you thought I had no conscience I was lying to you when I said I didn’t have one, and I was lying to myself when I said I didn’t have one. And that’s the truth. And I’ve never lied to you. I lied to everybody else who walked on this stage, but I never lied to you. Only implicitly did I infer that I didn’t have a conscience, but I’m here to tell you before we leave here tonight, I do.”

And by explaining all this, you are explaining to me what I felt: This is the first time I saw this as a tragedy of Richard III.

BEN: Yeah.

You said where you felt that after doing Richard you could go back and re-do *Parts Two and Three*. But, turning that around, did the growth from those play a part in your exploration, your journey of Richard to use her term, in part four?

BEN: Certainly. Yeah, definitely. And certainly his relationship with the audience is affected by that. Because, after he kills Somerset he has a very brief thing that he says to the audience. And then in *Henry VI Three*, he has two big speeches, one after the wooing scene, one after he kills King Henry. And then in *Richard III*, that’s all he does. I often joke that the first 35 minutes of our production is such a sprint. The first three scenes of that play are just talking. There’s so much talking for me to do.

But what’s great is if people saw those last two plays, I think it’s really great to open the show with, “You all remember me. I told you I was going to be here. I told you what we were going to be doing here this year. And I’m glad you came here to see it. You must not have been too turned off. You wanted to see me kill all these people, didn’t you?” [Laughter]

We were talking earlier about the commercial aspects of doing all four of these plays—and I'm a romantic, I feel there'd be enough enthusiasm that you could do all four and put it out there, but then I don't run a theater. At the Blackfriars, you've got a unique crowd, you've got people who come back all the time. Did you somehow feel—we've talked about how the actors have felt going year to year to year to year—do you feel a good portion of the audience went on that journey—

SARAH: Yes.

—and have you gotten any sort of feedback on that?

SARAH: Yeah, we've had school groups and other people that come every year to the Ren Season. This journey has been for them as well. They've been waiting for this for three, four years, they've seen all of the parts or at least *Two*, *Three*, and now *Richard III*. So, there's a good percentage of our audience who have been with us on this journey as well.

BEN: When we do talkbacks for *Richard*, there's almost always one or two people who are like, "It's so good to see it concluded."

SARAH: Yeah.

[To Sarah] He just talked about all the sprinting he does in the beginning, and all the scenes. You get two. Do you wish Margaret had more in this, or do you think that was just right?

SARAH: It actually feels just right to me. There's a part of me that thinks, yeah, of course I would love for her to do more and say more, but the two scenes she's in are so amazing and so powerful. And I think more of her wouldn't be *Richard III*. It's not called *Margaret*, it's called *Richard III*, and she comes in—

It's not called Margaret in the first three either.

SARAH: It's not, even though maybe it should be. She certainly has more to do in those. She's making more of the decisions than Henry is.

But I think it's just right, and doing it now for the amount of time I've done it, it feels right. It's a big break, too. You show up in I.3, and you don't come back until IV.4. But she tells the audience when she comes back in IV.4, "What I've been up to is watching what I told you was going to happen in I.3, that's been happening." It feels right. It actually feels right.

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kill both of her lovers
before this run was
done.***

And being a part of this company, I get the chance to play other little roles. I get to play the prince and I get to play a gentleman and a citizen, so I get to see some of the other parts of it. This is not a heavy show for me. What I do is powerful and takes some vocal energy and effort and certainly some physical energy and effort, but I only have to do it for two scenes. I don't have to maintain like Ben does. Ben at the end of the show is shattered. I haven't done all that

much. It's nothing compared to some of the other things, like Dido. But there's a reason it's called *Richard III* and not *Margaret*.

And with your old arch enemy here sitting catty-corner to you, how do you feel being the only person from *Part One* to be standing—supposedly; we don't see her die—

SARAH: Oh no, she's going back to France.

The only one living at the end of part four.

SARAH: And historically she dies [pauses and laughs] not because she was murdered. He's rolling his eyes, that's great. [Sarah takes on a snob's tone] I feel very proud, and I think it's very fitting that Margaret is the only one to be in every single part of this tetralogy and still alive at the end of it. Makes perfect sense to me. And Richard should have been killed off in *Part Two*.

Care to comment, Richard?

BEN: Makes perfect sense in the sense that if these plays describe the most chaotic years of English history, then yes, she presided over them all. [Laughter] At least she's alone. At least I was able to kill both of her lovers before this run was done.

SARAH: That's true.

BEN: That's the other funny thing about doing this tetralogy is that Greg [Gregory Jon Phelps] and I have killed each other more times. [Laughter]

SARAH: It's true.

BEN: It's so funny. He plays Suffolk who hires murderers to have Gloucester killed. Ben changes his costume into Walter Whitmore and kills Suffolk on the boat. Ben changes into Richard Gloucester and comes back in *Henry VI Three*, kills Greg [playing Henry VI] in the Tower. Comes back in *Richard III*, Greg [playing Richmond] kills me at Bosworth. Good lord.

SARAH: The joys of repertoire theater and playing multiple roles.

BEN: We should really count how many times we've killed each other.

SARAH: History. We've got history.

[To Ben] How did you handle that day when we were here and we saw you do Benedick in *Much Ado* and Richard in the same day.

SARAH: That's happened more than once.

BEN: It's happened a couple of times. I don't know, you just do it.

Do you take a nap between shows?

BEN: No. It depends on which one comes first. If *Richard* comes first, it's actually not that bad. Because you have some dinner and then Benedick talks a lot but it's easy on the body, it's not that hard on the voice.

Except when you're doing the arbor scene.

BEN: Yeah, but that's just fun. And they do all the talking in that. I'm just crawling around. It's harder when it's *Much Ado* first, and then you've got to have dinner and be like, "Right, you're not even remotely done with your day. You have so much more play to do." I don't know. You just do it.

SARAH: It's our job. You find a way.

BEN: Our rehearsal room has the posters that we have in our lobby; once they take them down in the lobby they put them up in our rehearsal room. It's very weird to be rehearsing in there now because it's like you're in this chamber of ghosts—

SARAH: A time vault. Yeah, it's strange.

BEN: It's like, oh my god, it's 10 years of my life in here. I look at the summer/fall season from 2009 and I look at [James] Keegan on all of these posters. He's playing Falstaff in *Henry IV One* and *Merry Wives*, he's playing Titus, he's playing Leonato. He does not have an off night. Whatever double he did on that day, it couldn't have been easy. And I'm like, "You're younger than him, so stop complaining."

At the end of the day, [Lady Macbeth] wishes she were half as tough as Margaret. ...She's not tough. She goes crazy. She can't handle it. Margaret doesn't do any of that. Margaret dishes it out, takes it, throws it back.

SARAH: The thing about this season, too, the Ren Season is so much shorter than our summer/fall season, so you really get a small window to do these plays. And when you're getting to play Richard III or when you're getting to play Margaret, or Dido or whatever, you only have a handful of performances, not in comparison to other theaters, but certainly in comparison to what we do here. So, you really have to try and savor every single one, and even though you may be tired because you did another show that morning, it's one more chance to do it and to get it right

and to affect an audience and to relish the time with that role. It's limited.

Where do you place Margaret in your career?

SARAH: Oooh. Well, certainly getting to do her in all four parts, it's way up there if not number one. I mean, I don't know anybody else really who's gotten to do that in a professional theater. I really do think she's overlooked a lot. If you ask actresses who they want to play before they die, you're going to hear Cleopatra, you're going to hear Lady Macbeth. You're probably not going to hear Margaret, and it's just because I don't think people know these

plays, and I don't think they relish her the way that they should. But she's kind of this undiscovered heroine. It's wonderful.

Are you going to miss her?

SARAH: Oh yeah, yeah, very much. It's been an amazing journey and I will miss her. I will miss her, very much.

BEN: Lady Macbeth has the reputation that Margaret should have.

SARAH: Yes. Yes.

BEN: Lady Macbeth is like in three scenes of that play.

SARAH: And one play. She only gets the one. Margaret gets four.

BEN: She has like this iconic status, but at the end of the day, she wishes she were half as tough as Margaret. She has this reputation of being this cold-blooded tough girl, she's...

SARAH and BEN: *Not.*

BEN: She's not tough. She goes crazy. She can't handle it. Margaret doesn't do any of that. Margaret dishes it out, takes it, throws it back.

See, you do respect Margaret.

BEN and SARAH: Ben does.

SARAH: Don't get it confused. Richard does not, Ben does.

Double-edged question here: Richard is one of your favorite plays. Has playing it been everything you hoped it would? And second part of the question, has playing it as the fourth part of the tetralogy made it even sweeter?

BEN: It's been great. It's been great. I was very nervous. Having played it on the heels of the other two, I feel like the expectations were really high. I was nervous to do it without a director, a part this big. I was nervous to do it with as little as 10 days of rehearsal. But I was saved, I think in large part, because we came on the heels of the other plays the cast brought an energy to the production. I think everybody sort of wanted this production to be very good. It was nice to not have to be like, "Gee, I sure hope they are working hard on that scene in there and that it's not going to totally tank what I'm trying to do out here."

The other thing about not having a director is when you have as many lines as Richard has and when you cut the script, it's like you've got ideas about what you want to do. You don't want to come across as a tyrant, but for the most part people were just—

SARAH: Tell us what you want.

BEN: For the most part people are up for anything, so I thank them for that. Especially when it comes to stuff like, can we smash Hasting's head into the table? I know nowhere in the script does it say that we have to do that, but can we do that? Can we kick Hasting's head around like a soccer ball? I think we should do something fun with this head. All right. Or going to Jeremy [West, member of the troupe and fight captain] and going, "I want to fight four people here. I want to fight three people here. One is not enough, let's see what else we can do here." And people are like, "Let's try to make it happen."

SARAH: Yeah.

BEN: And my expectations were for them to say, "Why?" My expectations for them would be like, "What are you talking about?" But instead it's always met with, "OK. We'll be there. Just tell us exactly what you want us to do."

Did anybody bring any surprises to you?

BEN: Yes! My favorite one in terms of surprise is Brandi Rhome who plays young Richard of York and asks if she can have my dagger. This is our first day of rehearsing that scene. She says, "Can I have the dagger?" I give it to her, and I put my hand out for her to give it back to me, and she takes it and she puts it on the floor and kicks it over to me. And we hadn't discussed it, she just said, "This is what I'm going to do." I looked at that woman with real hate. [Laughter] I was impressed, I was really impressed. I did not expect that at all. "But you got one over on me, you little s--t. And I'm going to have to bend my crippled ass over and pick this up, aren't I? I hope you're pleased with yourself." And she was. Or at least Richard of York was.

SARAH: Oh yeah.

BEN: Oh God, it was great. It was great. It was just one of those moments. I love these things in rehearsals where there was no discussion involved, it was just, "I'm going to do this," and I'm going, "Don't you ever do anything other than that. I hate you more than anything for doing it, don't ever stop." Brilliant. Then when I reached over to get it I went, "Because you knew you wanted to jump on my back, didn't you?" And she was like, "Yeah, that's sort of the point." And I was like, "Oh, so you're thinking 10 steps ahead, young Richard!" One of the advantages of not having an actual little boy play the part, I guess. She's got an adult mind. And I feel like those princes are parts that you could just toss away, so I was happy that there's something that's less than forgettable. [Laughter] It's certainly memorable.

They were certainly the most memorable princes I think I've ever seen. I've never quite understood why Richard is mad at York, and they say his mother put [York] up to it. I've read the lines, I've seen it, and I never quite get what's going on there until I saw this one and I realized he's, he's—

BEN: He's a smart-ass.

Yeah.

BEN: The other thing is, in terms of backstory, I really think that because those princes are from Elizabeth I feel like they were raised with, "Your half brother is Gray, but your uncle is Rivers, not Richard." But Richard is like, "Oh no no no, I'm your uncle too. I'm your old Uncle Dick." That's why I love that scene. It's innocuous on paper but I think there's something really terrifying about it. Sarah walks in as the prince with this priest who's accompanied her expecting to see this huge group, and certainly her Uncle Rivers and Hastings, her dad's best friend, running right over. And, instead, she meets the uncle she was brought up to distrust and hate, standing there going, "Welcome to London, I'm here to take care of you."

SARAH: Ooooooh.

BEN: First thing she says is, "I wanted more uncles here to welcome me." "I bet you did. But they're dangerous and I had to take care of them for you." She goes, "Uh, oh, all right."

SARAH: Where's my mom?

BEN: It's all about, where are the people who actually care about me? What are you doing here? Is this the way it's going to be? Yes, it is the way it's going to be. Get used to it, kiddo.