

"Richard III" sets new standard of excellence for local theatre

Theatre Talk

By FRED LIPPINCOTT

Kent Thompson has set a new standard of excellence in Montgomery Shakespeare productions with "Richard III," which opened a few weeks ago at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival to run in repertory through the summer. Every detail seemed perfect, and I can't imagine a better show; even Ian McKellan at Britain's Royal National Theatre was not this persuasive. The play has juicy roles for almost every member of the company, and Ray Chambers, in the title role, has the major part he has long deserved. No phoney dialects, no heavy wigs, no trendy dis-

placement of time or place — this is a traditional show, with Beth Novak's opulent but low-key costumes making each character distinctive. Although he speaks his lines brilliantly, Mr. Chambers is clearly American, and even the British actors agree to meet the Yanks somewhere in the mid-Atlantic when they speak their lines.

America has traditionally taken "Richard III" to heart — tyrants have always been box office — and there's enough murder and mayhem here to satisfy the most bloodthirsty. In the 19th century, the play toured endlessly all over the country in a melodramatic version. Here, a man's head is brought on stage in a bag. The King dumps it on the floor. The audience gasps. The play is a continuation from the three parts of Shakespeare's "Henry VI" and has some of the same characters, like King Edward IV and Richard himself.

A local English department head, on leaving, shouted to the world, "I hate this set!" but I couldn't disagree more. Charles Caldwell has provided a sturdy, grey block platform, but he gives the effect of scaffolding with peeled log supports painted day-glo pink (which takes on different colors under Marcia Madeira's lights). The effect is to lighten the heavy set. Two movable playing areas slide in and out, making for lightening scene changes — for the play seems virtually uncut. The floor is paved with flat grave markers, as in an English cathedral. A tattered banner, left over from previous wars, is replaced with one showing a red or a white rose, depending who's in power. Other flags (along with distinctive soft armor) make clear the opposing forces on Bosworth Field.

The central figure is Mr. Chambers, who is in almost every scene. Despite his humpback and twisted leg, he's a likable fellow, but we soon learn he can't be trusted. In his lust for power, he kills wives, children, councilors (Sam Gregory is superb as an over-confident Buckingham), and he sets out to kill the pretender who will be Henry VII (swashbuckling Brian Kurlander, in his white suit that contrasts with Richard's black). Just before the end, a dumb show in a dream recapitulates Richard's crimes, in case we'd forgotten them. Mr. Chambers declaims or speaks aside with snarly irony, and he even makes believable "A horse! My kingdom for a horse!" as he finds himself with no way to get around the battlefield. The fight scene in slow motion is also superb, probably more of

the good work of the movement coach Colleen Kelley.

This is a surprisingly strong play for women. Kathleen McCall is more convincing as the fated Lady Anne than I've seen her. Perhaps her forte is drama, not comedy. Greta Lambert in a whimple and Jill Tanner underscore the pathos of the royal mothers. And Sonja Lanzener steals the show as the dowager queen mother, making clear how venomous the bloodshed has become. It's one of the finest supporting roles in all Shakespeare, and her immaculate, clear, but American speech, compliments that of Mr. Chambers. Watch for her model portrayal.

Other minor players of note are Henson Keys as Edward IV, a character study in little, and Sam Wellington, who was the young lover in the last play, here showing unexpected strength as the perfidious Catesby. Let's hope he stays in the company. In a welcome change, children are played by adults, at least in speaking roles, so they are not so distracting.

I caught the show on Friday, after the opening, and the cast was in top form after a whole week of Schoolfest. Usually the house is poor early in the run, but someone had the bright marketing idea to bus in older students in the evening, so there was a sold-out house. Students are somewhat more spontaneous than polite adults, and Mr. Chambers obviously enjoyed playing to them. This fine production is especially suitable for mature young people.