**DRAMATURG’S NOTE**

[***Teenage Dick***](https://artsclub.com/shows/2022-2023/teenage-dick)

By Mike Lew

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In collaboration with Bard on the Beach Shakespeare Festival and Realwheels Theatre

Newmont Stage at the BMO Theatre Centre

**“REHEARSAL”** [includes spoilers]

As we approached this first day of working on *Teenage Dick*, for some reason I started to become fixated on the word “rehearse.” I think maybe because we are working on an adaptation—a play that re-tells a story. So “rehearse” feels to me like we are re-hearing, revisiting, doing something again. As Mike Lew plays fast and loose with a lot of narrative details from *Richard III,* he confronts, embraces, rejects, talks to, and dances with Shakespeare’s work. This complicated relationship with *Richard III* invites us—as we rehearse—to consider new ideas that we both carry forward in how we see the world and project backward in how we regard the source material.

In her book *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation,* M.J. Kidnie proposes that all works that can be described as “adaptations, versions, appropriations, etc.” as well as what we might call a “source material” are all legitimate iterations of the same ongoing “work.” Thus, for instance, I would suggest that the thirteenth-century Scandinavian story “Life of Amleth,” Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*, the three iterations of Disney’s *The Lion King,* and the TV series *Sons of Anarchy* are all valid manifestations of a particular open-ended “work.” This notion speaks to the complex cultural weight that the Shakespearean canon holds and the challenge of expectation that lies at the feet of any artist seeking to adapt Shakespeare. Regarded from this perspective, *Teenage Dick* is a valid iteration of a “work”—it dialogues with and, in some cases, argues with the legacy it inherits. In seeking to write a play that confronts contemporary issues and ideas, perhaps Mike Lew takes advice from our Richard’s favourite philosopher—Machiavelli, who said, “Follow the roads that have been trodden by the great and imitate those who have most excelled.” Mike Lew, however, tempers his admiration for Shakespeare’s narrative, and chooses instead to interrogate it, to “talk back to Shakespeare” (to use a popular phrase).

While *Teenage Dick’*s contribution to the “work” is placed in the contemporary, accessible, often funny, and familiar setting of a high school and it invites intertextual comparisons with decades of teenage comedy movies (like *Mean Girls*)—a rather fun genre of film—I would argue that it is more brutal and unforgiving than its source material, that it does not deliver us to a place of comfort and optimism at the end of the play, as *Richard III* does.

In terms of historical chronology, *Richard III* culminates a long series of history plays of England’s monarchs, a few of them collectively and popularly known as the Wars of the Roses. The influential mid-20th-century literary scholar E.M.W. Tillyard was a major proponent of the idea that these plays form a single narrative that points towards an inevitable conclusion: the rule of Queen Elizabeth and the Elizabethan era (he called this narrative trajectory the “Tudor Myth”). At the end of *Richard III*, the Earle of Richmond defeats the monstrous King Richard to become King Henry VII, the first Tudor king and the eventual grandfather of Queen Elizabeth. Shakespeare’s audience would have received this an absolute victory and a restoration of God’s plan. But what are we to make of that over 400 years later? At the end of *Richard III,* King Richard, the bunch-backed toad, the physically and morally twisted anomaly of the English monarchy has been defeated by our noble hero, Richmond, who will ascend to the throne with the promise of a new, prosperous era. The world can go back to the way it is supposed to be: which is (from our perspective) white, male, and able-bodied. But for Mike Lew and for us, that status quo deserves to be challenged. While the message at the end of Shakespeare’ play might be “Everything is going to be ok,” at the end of *Teenage Dick,* the negative space left by Richard prompts us to ask, “What now?” That, appropriately, might be *the* question we send the audience away with. Unlike *Richard III*, *Teenage Dick* does not give Richard a nemesis—there is no Richmond, no successor, no heir to the throne. Our play effectively has a protagonist but it does not have a hero. It cannot tell us that everything will be ok—rather it invites us wade through our own complicity to consider “As a society, what kind of work do we have to do? What kind of changes do we need to make?”

It is not novel to propose that an adaptation is informed by its source: our knowledge of *Richard III* and of Shakespeare helps us understand *Teenage Dick*; we import our knowledge of the source to fill in the gaps, to supplement and buttress our understanding of the adaptation. But wonderfully, it actually works in reverse, too. So that our understanding of an adaptation can help us inform our understanding of the source material. It is a process of comparison as our awareness oscillates back and forth between two plays whose words and sensibilities are separated by centuries. Thus, by exploring this contemporary play we can gain exciting new perspectives on *Richard III* and perhaps all of Shakespeare’s work. So, a play like *Teenage Dick* can be seen as an act of subversion that challenges ossified notions of the canon while, ironically, celebrating others. It’s just like high school: sometimes it’s awesome, sometimes it’s bullshit.

During Elizabeth’s reign in the late 16th century, when Shakespeare wrote *Richard III,* there was a growing and undeniable national unease around the question of succession. Elizabeth was unmarried, aging, and had not produced and heir nor named a successor. “Who would be God’s next chosen representative on earth?”—it was a question that haunted everyone’s mind. Yet Elizabeth made it an act of treason to even discuss the matter, thus denying the public any kind of outlet to deal with this deep concern. As a counterpoint to Tillyard’s teleological theory of the history plays as a narrative of optimism, a popular contemporary theory suggests that the purpose of the history plays (including *Richard III*) was to publicly discuss the very thing that no one was allowed to: who was in power, who was going to take power, how do nations and empires rise and fall. The plays were a way of *safely rehearsing a social anxiety*. Taking this idea, we might ask ourselves: with *Teenage Dick* and all its complex questions of ability and disability, power and weakness, good and evil, what is *our* social anxiety? What is difficult for us to talk about? What, effectively, as we looking to rehearse?

**Stephen Drover**

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