

# Vaudeville theme shakes up Shakespeare's 'Richard the Third'

*Cutthroat world of royals is ripe for comedic turns*

By Fiona Soltes  
FOR THE TENNESSEAN

Navada Shane Morgan may have hoped for some royal treatment, but he's bound for a song and dance instead.

As the title character in Nashville Shakespeare Festival's upcoming production of *Richard the Third* — a comedic tragedy about the rise and reign of a decidedly two-faced king — the veteran Kentucky actor will play his personal "role of a lifetime" with a vaudeville theme.

Yes, vaudeville — to the point that each of the play's actors has been encouraged to choose a muse. Sophie Tucker, Stan Laurel and Sarah Bernhardt have already made the list.

"It continues to surprise me the way the vaudevillian style complements the world of *Richard the Third*, in that vaudevillians often wear tragic stories themselves," says Morgan, who makes his Nashville debut in the piece. "There's a great deal of cutthroat competition, just as in the world of Richard. There is nothing subtle at all about the way in which the royals went about stealing audiences away from one another."

In addition to Morgan, those "royals" are part of a cast that includes actors Nan Gurley, John Silvestro, Tom Mason, David Wilkerson, Phil Perry, Jessejames Locorriere, R. Alex Murray, Benjamin Reed, Brenda Sparks, Wesley Paine, Claire Syler, Liz Young, Christy White, Nathan Lee, Markus McClain and Colin Merrick.

And each, says artistic director Denice



Alex Murray, left, as Catesby, Navada Shane Morgan as Richard and Nan Gurley as Queen Elizabeth in Nashville Shakespeare Festival's *Richard the Third*. JEFF FRAZIER / SUBMITTED

Hicks, have brought something to the table in a truly collaborative process.

"I have learned in my old age not to overly prepare for these things," says Hicks, who had the original vaudeville idea. "There will be a point that I start to step up and refine, polish and focus. But in the beginning, I want them to be as creative as they can be, so that they'll actually own it. Their choices are their own; they're not doing anything because I told them to."

Though *Richard the Third* is often considered a tragedy, its dry humor — seen, for example, as the king congratulates himself on his duplicitous behavior — makes the piece ripe for comedic turns and over-the-top theatricality. To add to the vaudeville feel, Hicks has added creative costuming by June Kingsbury and a pianist performing original yet "old-

timey" music in full view of the audience.

"Everything has to support the story first and foremost," Hicks says. "But the gimmicks and bits have been a lot of fun. We're finding the ghosts of Laurel and Hardy and Buster Keaton and other wonderful old stars."

As the youngest in a family of minstrel performers, Hicks says she has always been a fan of such artists and their routines, and was excited to find that the more she looked at the play, the more opportunities she discovered.

"There's something about the way people spoke then, the presentational quality of it all, that represents Shakespeare so well," she says. "Richard, he'll say, 'Watch this: I'm going to play the lover,' and then he comes back and says, 'That was good, wasn't it?' He cries to the other characters and they all believe him, and then imme-

## If you go

**What:** Nashville Shakespeare Festival presents *Richard the Third*

**Where:** Troutt Theater, 2100 Belmont Blvd.

**When:** Jan. 15-Feb. 1. Performances at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays and 2:30 p.m. Sundays. School matinees are at 10 a.m. Tuesdays-Fridays (contact [claire@nashvilleshakes.org](mailto:claire@nashvilleshakes.org) to book classes)

**Tickets:** \$20; \$16 for ages 60 and older; \$10 for students. Matinees are \$15, \$14 and \$8 respectively.

**Contact:** [www.nashvilleshakes.org](http://www.nashvilleshakes.org), [www.ticketsnashville](http://www.ticketsnashville) or 255-2273

diately he drops it, and comes to the audience to talk about it. And then there's Queen Elizabeth, the star, the diva who wants to be on the throne, which equated so well with the stage and the spotlight. And it all just grew from there, the comedy routines and the musical underscoring that would help tell the story and move it along."

*Richard the Third* marks the second annual winter production for Nashville Shakes, and it's one that lends itself completely to the intimacy of Belmont University's Troutt Theater rather than the outdoor summer park event, Hicks says. And that's not just because of the curtain.

"There are so many interior scenes, and not as many references to nature or the environment as there are in so many of Shakespeare's plays," she says. "We felt this was a show that would do better illuminated by theater lights, a place he could play very intimately with the audience. This is not King Lear, who rages at the sky."

Good thing, too, or he'd have to congratulate himself on it later.