UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

August 21, 2023

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Performance group Naked Shakes takes a royal thrill ride through Shakespeare's England, and lands on a prestigious stage in Italy

"Game of Thrones" has nothing on "The Death of Kings."

Indeed, a case could be made for the latter as the original royal epic. Tracing the arc of early English history, it's a super-charged smorgasbord of scandal, betrayal and vengeance focused on the rise and fall of some of history's most renowned and notorious monarchs and vivid characters — King Richard III, Queen Margaret, Prince Hal/King Henry V, Joan of Arc, Sir John Falstaff and King Henry IV, to name a few.

From the creative mind of UC Santa Barbara's Irwin Appel, by way of one William Shakespeare, the production condenses The Bard's eight history plays into one opus. The original "The Death of Kings" blended "Richard II," "Henry IV" (parts 1 and 2) "Henry V," "Henry VI" (parts 1, 2 and 3) and "Richard III" into two self-contained plays that could be seen in either order, with a total running time shy of six hours. Adapted and directed by Appel, it was produced in repertory in 2016 by UCSB's Naked Shakes performance group, within the Department of Theater and Dance, winning multiple awards locally and from Broadway World magazine for adaptation, direction, design and performance.

About a year later in Europe, Appel debuted an abridged version, “The Death of Kings: Seize the Crown,” adding narration and some new material to a single 90-minute production.

And now, for 2023, this: an evolution of “The Death of Kings,” with excerpts from both parts of the original and from “Seize the Crown.” Material has been revised, additional characters included, new choreography implemented and new music incorporated. It opens this week, playing for three nights (Aug. 22, 23 and 24) on campus at the Hatlen Theater before going on the road. Or, rather, into the skies. Naked Shakes has been invited to perform “The Death of Kings” at the Verona Shakespeare Fringe Festival in Verona, Italy, where it will be the closing act. The week-long festival is part of the prestigious European Shakespeare Festival network, and features cutting edge Shakespearean work from the countries of England, Sweden, Romania, Macedonia, Georgia and the United States.

A cast of 13 actors will take the stage, joined by a full chorus of storytellers and narrators, in a collaborative production that also features original musical compositions from special guest artist Jim Connolly, combat sequences from Sean O’Shea, costumes and choreography from Christina McCarthy, and lighting design from Vickie Scott.

“As a UC Santa Barbara professor, I believe so strongly in our students expanding their scope and experience out in the world,” said Appel, who founded Naked Shakes in 2006. “We have built a wonderful partnership with the Prague Shakespeare Company in Prague, Czech Republic, where earlier this summer, over 20 of our students traveled to study and perform Shakespeare in a month-long intensive. Now, many of those students will be going back to Europe with ‘The Death of Kings.’ I believe these students will cherish these experiences as they get older and for the rest of their lives. I was fortunate that my theater professor in college brought us to perform at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and to see theater at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland when I was a freshman and sophomore. Those experiences shaped who I am today as well as my values and worldview.”

Appel’s vision, and the mission of Naked Shakes, is one of bare-bones theatricality that centers the transformation of the actor and the space. Each play is presented clearly and directly so the audience inhabits the imaginative world of the play through Shakespeare’s language. The barren physical theater space is very important to the Naked Shakes concept; it takes on the identity of whatever locale

or particular poetic language is described, and yet continues to remind the audience they are in a theater.

“When Prospero in ‘The Tempest’ describes ‘the great Globe itself,’ he is not only referring to the entire Earth, but also the ‘Globe’ Theater — Shakespeare’s theater,” said Appel. “That duality is what Naked Shakes is all about.”

As for “The Death of Kings,” its themes “continue to be relevant,” noted Appel, “especially in our current political climate and election season.

“In developing The Death of Kings, I was not interested in creating museum piece Shakespeare, or even paying homage to British history. I am more interested in creating an allegory for our time,” he said. “Many people are unfamiliar with Shakespeare’s history plays and even a little intimidated by them, not realizing that they contain some of the greatest and most profound material he ever wrote. On a personal note, we also live in a golden age of episodic entertainment, and I am influenced as much by ‘Breaking Bad,’ ‘The Sopranos’ and ‘The Wire’ as I am by Shakespearean history.”

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edge of the Pacific Ocean.