

# Theatre: Kings of War at Barbican

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My kingdom for a sheep: Eelco Smits stars in a Dutch staging of *Kings of War* (JAN VERSWEYVELD)

★★★★☆

Never, in this brutally brilliant compression of Shakespeare, are we allowed to forget that politics and death are bloody bedfellows. Ivo van Hove's production for Toneelgroep Amsterdam, designed by Jan Versweyveld, presents us with a chilly, hi-tech theatre of war. At its rear is a maze of clinical white passageways — corridors of power busy with intrigue and violent betrayal, into which nosing cameras, their footage flickering on a video wall, permit us to peep. It is here, on a hospital gurney, that a dying Henry IV catches his son snatching his crown — the grimly comic beginning of a gripping interrogation of authority and responsibility.

Running at more than four and a half hours, and performed in Dutch with English surtitles, *Kings of War* charges through *Henry V*, *Henry VI (Parts One, Two and Three)* and *Richard III* with the velocity of a front-line TV news bulletin and the punch of a political thriller. It's also whole-heartedly theatrical. The text is hacked up and intercut with shards of abrupt, unvarnished modernity; private encounters become PR opportunities, paraded before the lenses of the world's media. This is Shakespeare for the 21st century, shorn of majesty, unlovely and horribly familiar.

To an accompaniment of electro, death metal, a brass quartet and a mournful countertenor, indelible images — live and recorded — accumulate like heaps of corpses: the slumped, despairing, tattooed English soldiers at Agincourt, and the over-confident enemy troops, boozing and whoring on the eve of their slaughter; the treaty-sealing kiss that Ramsey Nasr's Henry V plants on the French princess's lips, and her bitter, frozen face, in close-up, as she turns away; the murderous sliding of a syringe into a vein. The narrative, particularly in the central *Henry VI* section, is admirably lucid, with Eelco Smits a speccy, naively vulnerable king. And Hans Kesting's Richard III, with his strawberry marked face, twisted shoulders and obscenely tight trousers, is an ego-driven, bellicose thug, exuberantly grotesque and flesh-creeping credible.

It's an undeniably lengthy, demanding experience, and not every moment works — Kesting's crowing phone calls to Obama, Merkel and Putin, for example, feel like a slightly cheap joke. Sometimes you crave more poetry, and the staging is rarely emotionally moving. But it's realised with ingenuity, intelligence and verve: a hurtling history play for today.