

No quaint period piece

Clive Bradley reviews

Richard III (Dir: Richard Loncraine)

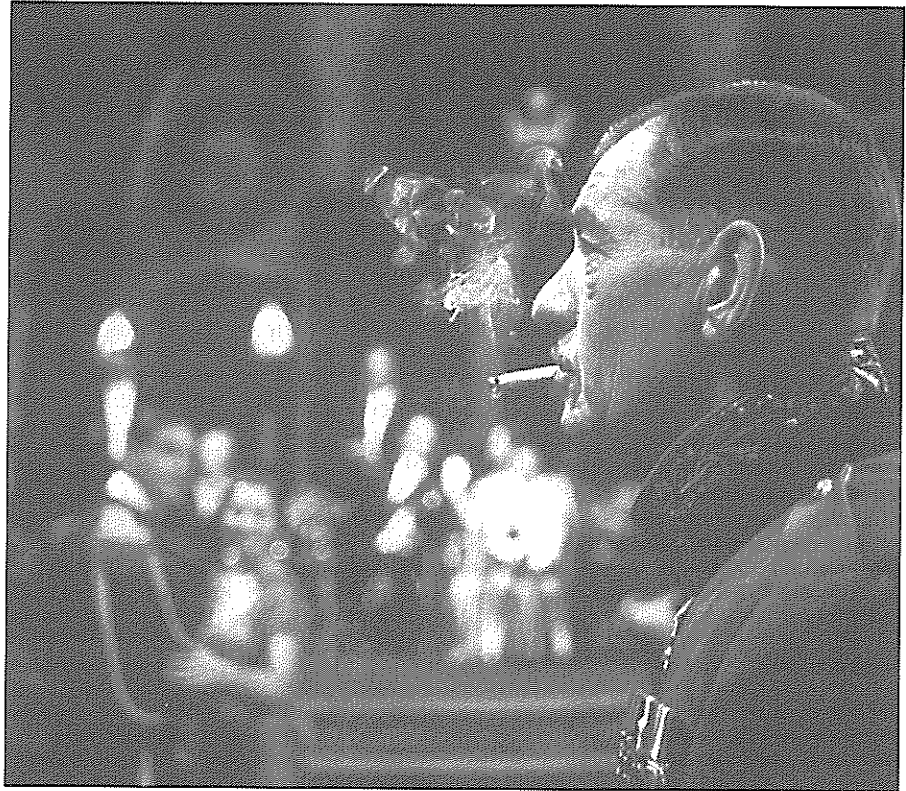
RICHARD Loncraine's *Richard III*, with Ian McKellen as the eponymous villain, is notably different from the most recent — if not all previous — efforts at this play. It does not try to play it straight. This is no quaint period piece. It transfers the play to a fictionalised fascist 'thirties Britain, telling a story of political intrigue with contemporary, or at least twentieth century, relevance. Further, the screenplay by Loncraine and McKellen, has honed Shakespeare down to a minimum so that it borders on being a political thriller.

It is without doubt an extremely imaginative adaptation. When the opening scene is interrupted by a tank bursting through the walls, you know it's not just any old tired 'modernisation' of Shakespeare which sticks to the text, but uses twentieth century costumes.

Making Shakespeare 'relevant' in this way has for years been common on the stage, and on television. However to my knowledge it has never been tried before on the big screen. Cinematic updates are usually only based on the original plays (eg *West Side Story*, based on *Romeo and Juliet* or Kurosawa's *Ran*, which is based on *King Lear*). Derek Jarman's version of Marlowe's *Eduard II* threw in incongruous contemporary elements — Annie Lennox singing Cole Porter, *Outrage!* demonstrators — to great effect.

This is altogether different — a fictional world without anachronisms and with no hint of surrealism. It avoids knowing winks to the audience and largely refrains from reminding us that it is an adaptation apart from some exceptional moments. (These are probably impossible to avoid — for instance when the film elects for knowing humour over the most famous lines. At one point Richard screams "My kingdom for a horse!" in an armoured truck and that doesn't quite work.)

In other words the film demands to be judged as a film and as a drama in its own right. It doesn't expect the audience to know the original. Indeed, part of the motivation for this kind of adaptation must be that it has to find a way to engage an audience likely to be suspicious of Shakespeare and unlikely to know the play. The audience may also be unused to the conventions of cinema, the most important of which is



Driven by a lust for power

that cinema is primarily more visual than theatre, it relies on the camera to tell its story and on powerful images more than words.

Richard III is not short of powerful images, especially of violent death. Long speeches (uncommon in film) have been divided between scenes, to liven up their visual setting. The only concession to Shakespearean tradition is that Richard occasionally speaks directly to us, to camera. That's a feature of some films — Spike Lee's, for example — but rare.

The result is a grisly tale of the corruption of power. Richard is driven by his lust for power to murder more and more of his family, until even his friends largely desert him. This is strong stuff but there is a glaring missing factor.

Richard is depicted as a kind of fascist dictator who only *calls* himself King. He was brought to power because of the victory of one side in a civil war, and has no clear hereditary claim to the throne. The power struggle therefore is between *factions of the ruling class*. One faction wins, and then disintegrates under the weight of its own moral corruption. The morality of the opposing faction seems pretty questionable, too. There is no sense whatsoever of an alternative, mass force, even one moved by demands for democracy.

Shakespeare is hardly to be blamed for this, of course, but this is the problem of modernising a sixteenth century playwright. If you take a story which can be interpreted universally, as an account of the corruption of power, it is very difficult to make it work in a setting which implies other, absent factors. If we are to believe that this is the Europe of the dictators in the 1930s and '40s, we are entitled to ask where the passions are of the people who fought those dictators, fascist or Stalinist. The armies of Richmond, who defeat Richard, are merely passive cannon-fodder for a new dictator. In history, the combined armies which defeated fascism, the people who made up those armies, were never just cannon-fodder.

The danger is to take a story which was universal and about power in general, a story which said something profound about the human condition, and reduce it to a mere tale of kings. That's the problem with this interpretation of *Richard III*.

It is a visually stunning film, dominated by a magnificent performance by Ian McKellen (and not-bad goes at it by Annette Bening and Robert Downey Jr., though he seems slightly uncomfortable with the language). It's gripping and completely watchable. But as a film 'sort of' about fascism it is a failure. ❏

Bringing it all back home

By Jimmy Roberts

IT was a seminal moment. In between songs, the band on stage are tuning up. The slow handclapping and boeing suddenly stop and the silence is shattered by a clear voice in the audience screaming out one word at the singer: "Judas!" "I don't believe you," replies the singer, "you're a liar." And then turning to the band he mutters angrily: "Play it fucking loud", and launches into a venomous version of the now classic "Like a Rolling Stone" to drown out the catcalls.

It is 30 years this month since this famous confrontation between Bob Dylan and disgruntled English fans, which has been immortalised on numerous bootleg albums. In the present political and musical atmosphere, it is difficult to understand why a crowd would react so violently to a performer, accustomed as we now are to designer changes in career and style in which artists can be repackaged and their 'product' successfully marketed for increased profits. This can be nowadays seen in everything from the cynical re-releasing of albums on 'new' formats to Manchester United changing their football strip for no other reason than pure profit. Back in 1966 though, the fact that Bob Dylan was performing his new songs with the electric backing of a rock 'n roll band was tantamount to treason.

Dylan had made his name with a series of folk protest songs, such as "The Times They Are A-Changin'", "Blowin' in the Wind" and "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall" which for the first time in pop history articulated a political consciousness to a mass audience. Dylan, of course, was drawing on a rich vein of protest within American culture which included both ardent Communists such as Pete Seeger, Paul Robeson and Woody Guthrie and the voice of the disempowered black poor which found expression in the work of blues singers like Robert Johnson and Leadbelly. Dylan's genius was in synthesising these traditions and updating them to the political situation in America in the 1960s. Dylan became "the voice of his generation" and his songs became the anthems of the emerging Civil Rights and anti-war movements.

In August 1963 Dylan performed in front of over a hundred thousand demonstrators at the Washington Civil Rights march led by Martin Luther King. This march was the event which the anti-semitic, sexist and homophobic Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan was copying with his recent "Million Man March."

Dylan's own political position at the time was complex. His hatred of racism, oppression and exploitation was clear but he was not prepared to offer simplistic solutions.

In a key transitional song "My Back Pages" Dylan

rejected the role of spokesman that he had been cast in and suggested that political realities were not reducible to facile slogans. His songs criticised either by vicious polemic or in a more abstract and impressionistic way, influenced by the techniques of symbolism and surrealism. Dylan's rejection of the folk ballad form and his adoption of radical avant garde poetics in 1965-66 coincided with his change from an acoustic to an electric style of music, resulting in arguably his greatest albums, *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde*. It was this shift within Dylan's songs from traditional models to a complex, abstruse and radically original style which was resented by Dylan's so-called fans who thought that he had 'sold-out' his politics.



Bob Dylan, Isle of Wight Festival, 1969

"Dylan's work of this period was very influential on radicals from the Black Panthers to the left-wing terrorists, The Weathermen."

However, Dylan was several steps ahead of his audience. His work from this period is profoundly political and contains some of his most stinging critiques of capitalist exploitation, petit-bourgeois values and the psychological effects of alienation, in songs such as "Maggie's Farm", "Ballad of a Thin Man" and "Desolation Row." With considerable wit and linguistic verve Dylan depicted America as an absurd hell where institutionalised oppression and dominant power structures had chaotic and catastrophic effects which atomised society and destroyed the individual and personal

relationships. This was a major new language within the popular song, as Dylan's songs vividly delineated the fragmentation of the self within the context of a wider social and political crisis.

In 1938 the surrealist poet André Breton visited Trotsky and the painter Diego Rivera in Mexico. Their meeting is described in Maurice Nadeau's *History of Surrealism* and is extremely relevant to Dylan's own artistic credo at this time:

"Breton found in Trotsky an open and understanding mind, aware that art in order to keep a revolutionary character, must be independent of all forms of government... 'The struggle for artistic truth', in the sense of 'the artist's unshakable loyalty to the inner self' was the only valid watchword, Trotsky believed."

Many of Dylan's songs at this time portray the difficulties of the individual trying to grasp and sustain this inner belief when faced with the obscenity of an American society which sought to repress dissent. Ironically the bewildered response of Dylan's English fans to his innovations mirrored the response of the entrenched establishment to the rise of youth militancy and the emergence of the new left. Dylan's work of this period was to be very influential on numerous radicals from the Black Panthers to the left-wing terrorists, The Weathermen (named after a line in a Dylan song).

What path Dylan's work would have taken next is unclear, for he was forced to retire for eighteen months following a serious motorcycle accident in July 1966. Dylan re-emerged with a series of country-influenced albums which again bucked the

prevailing trend of psychedelia and lyrical and musical excess which had been influenced by Dylan in the first place. His next major work, *Blood on the Tracks* (1975), was a work of considerable maturity and insight in which Dylan caustically and painfully dissected broken relationships. Once again, the exploration of a personal crisis was depicted against a wider social backdrop which reflected the profound self-doubt, introspection and confusion of American society in the wake of the Water-

gate affair.

Dylan deconstructed classical linear narrative structures in these songs so that they became fragmented stories held together by linked images of pain, loss and anger. This allowed Dylan to dramatise the relationship between self and persona and the effects of emotional and social collapse. In writing himself, Dylan also seemed to be writing the history of his time. On succeeding albums, such as *Desire* and *Street Legal*, Dylan mixed polemical social com-

mentary, such as "Hurricane", which is a withering attack on the racism and prejudice of the American criminal justice system, with songs influenced by religious and mythological sources. Dylan reworked the mythological narrative structure of the quest as a metaphor of his own search for the inner self.

However, Dylan's own "struggle for artistic truth" culminated in his adoption of fundamentalist Christianity in 1979 and the release of three profoundly Christian albums. This was an enormous surprise and seemed sadly indicative of the growing support for fundamentalist Christianity under Ronald Reagan which has been seen most recently with the worrying success of the extreme right Christian Pat Buchanan within the Republican Presidential primaries.

Dylan's most interesting work had appeared when he had cast off the old dogmatic assumptions of the traditional left and followed his own artistic vision but in embracing fundamentalist Christianity he adopted the dogmatic certainties of the far-right, which are far more unpleasant and objectionable.

Typically, Dylan eventually rejected Christianity as an all-encompassing ideology, though religious imagery continues to be a feature of his work, as it always has been. In the eighties, his output was very inconsistent, with the highpoints being the post-Christian album, *Infidels* (1983) and *Oh Mercy* (1989). On *Infidels* Dylan re-examined his own religious identity and returned to an exploration of his own Jewish roots. *Oh Mercy* can be seen as a summation of many of the major themes and interests of Dylan's work featuring the unsettling psychological alienation of "Political World" and "What Good Am I?", the reinterpretation of American and religious mythology in "Man in the Long Black Coat" and the world-weary contemplation of "Shooting Star." The release of a boxed set of previously unreleased material, *The Bootleg Series*, in 1991 provided an excellent overview from the original acoustic protest songs to the dark turbulent visions of later material. Most recently, Dylan's career has come full circle with the release of a number of albums of traditional folk songs.

Like any great artist, Dylan's career is extremely varied, encompassing a plethora of different musical and lyrical forms. In pursuing his own "artistic truth" Bob Dylan has had an incalculable influence on the development and form of pop music. Most importantly perhaps he has demonstrated that acute social commentary in a popular cultural form can have a significant impact on wider political struggles. This legacy can be seen everywhere from The Clash, Elvis Costello and Billy Bragg to the more political rap bands.

Music from folk songs and the blues to rap and reggae has always powerfully articulated the voice of the oppressed. It is essential that this tradition continues and is constantly revived in popular culture so that artists nowadays carry on the fight against poverty, injustice and bigotry. ■

Forgotten Sounds

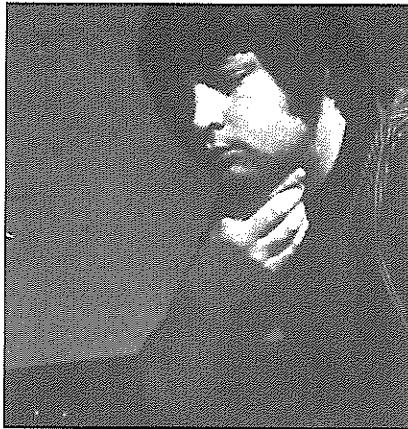
By Maurice Dunstan

THIS month is the thirtieth anniversary of the release of the album which is now widely acclaimed by pop music critics as the best album of all time. *Vox* writers voted it their all-time favourite, in a poll last year. *New Musical Express* have put it in their top two albums of all time consistently over the last 10 years. *Q* magazine made it their re-release of the year in 1990. Paul McCartney says it's the best album ever and has bought a copy for all his children. Yet when it was released *Pet Sounds* by The Beach Boys was met with public disinterest and it remains, to a large extent, a hidden treasure.

Its title does not trip off people's tongues like *Sgt. Pepper*, *Abbey Road* or *Blood on the Tracks*. Unlike *Never Mind The Bollocks* or *Sticky Fingers*, it isn't trendy to mention *Pet Sounds* in conversation.

Why does it remain relatively unknown? Firstly, because it doesn't fit in with either the marketing or the public image of The Beach Boys — sun, sea and surf aren't mentioned. Secondly, a music industry interested in lowest common denominator sales would rather re-package The Beach Boys' hits in "Best of" packages than attempt to market a more complex piece of work. (A "best of" album was released by Capitol Records less than a month after the initial release of *Pet Sounds*. They threw their weight behind marketing the "best of".)

It has also been passed over because Brian Wilson, the genius behind The Beach Boys whose project *Pet Sounds* was, collapsed into serious mental illness. He developed a huge drug problem. After losing the race with The Beatles (then in their *Sgt. Pepper* period) to produce an experimental album that would alter the conception of albums and pop music. He had met with opposition from within the band to his new directions for The Beach Boys — pri-



Brian Wilson

marily from Mike "Don't-fuck-with-the-formula" Love.

Without Brian's musical guidance The Beach Boys floundered. They became perennially unhip. The fact that Brian had been seen as one of the great creative artists in the late '60s was quickly forgotten.

Pet Sounds falls between the public perception of The Beach Boys and the potential of what the band may have become and thus it became something of an obscurity.

Pet Sounds, however, remains a masterpiece. Brian, at the time only twenty three, managed to combine songs of massive emotional strength with beguilingly beautiful and powerful melodies. Thirty years on it doesn't sound dated and is as fresh and moving as anything produced recently. This is a truly great album!

The thirtieth anniversary will see the release of a box set containing sessions and out-takes from the album plus the original mono version and a stereo version.

The anniversary will also hopefully see an increase in interest in the album and in The Beach Boys. It is high time it got the recognition it deserved. Meanwhile, Brian Wilson is in the best health he has been in for a while and, apparently, working on new material with a number of different artists. It may be that the world is about to remember Brian Wilson.