



THE QUEEN IS DEAD

The future of the royal family is a political potboiler imagined in *King Charles III*.

LOVE THEM OR HATE THEM, the British Royals are a fascinating institution steeped in history, ceremony and tabloid intrigue. In fact, the current family are just as popular as the brightest Hollywood stars. And while Helen Mirren wowed theatre audiences with her portrayal of Queen Elizabeth II in *The Audience*, another play has been taking the theatre world into a different territory or, as one should say, realm!

King Charles III says a lot in its title alone. Written by award-winning British playwright Mike Bartlett, this piece takes a great deal of poetic license as it imagines Prince Charles' ascent to the throne in the wake of his mother's death. It's a story that could be either really good or really bad, but this one has critics raving. Not only did it win the 2015 Olivier for Best New Play, the *New York Times* called it an "intellectually and emotionally gripping study".

The interesting thing about *King Charles III* is that it doesn't just delve into the royal family's reactions to the Queen's death, but rather the constitutional crisis that follows. As it happens, King Charles' first meeting with the Prime Minister ends badly over an intended bill restricting freedom of the press. Surprisingly, the new monarch does not agree with the Prime Minister and the controversial plotline is set.

As one expects, other royals make appearances, including Camilla, William, Kate and Harry. The character of Kate comes out as somewhat Machiavellian, while Harry causes his own controversy by dating a young Republican art student, Jess Edwards. Perhaps the most poignant moment is the appearance of a ghostly apparition in the form of Princess Diana. It would be easy to write all this off as being in poor taste, but this production is clever, thought provoking, educational and stimulating, and above all, has artistic merit.

The show premiered in London in April 2014 before moving to the West End and a UK tour. Its success took the original London cast to Broadway, while those with the UK tour are now headed to Sydney. It's unfortunate that Sydney won't experience the original Charles (Tim Pigott-Smith) but the touring cast is equally great, including Robert Powell in the lead. Penelope Beaumont plays Camilla, Jennifer Bryden is Kate, and both Ben Righton and Richard Glaves make for dashing princes William and Harry. Lucy Phelps plays Harry's love interest, and Tim Treloar is Prime Minister Tristram Evans. Original director Rupert Goold will be bringing his award-winning vision to the Australian stage.

Beyond the pomp and scandal of the House Of Windsor *King Charles III* brings the underlying themes of the human condition and modern society to the fore.

One of the many skillful aspects of *King Charles III* is the 'blank verse' and reference to Shakespeare – who himself found great substance in the politics of royal families. *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Richard II* are all brought to the forefront in modern settings that include Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abbey and even London's Boujis nightclub. It is somewhat poetic, that *King Charles III* can be a story as relevant today as any Medieval, biblical or Shakespearean drama. ★

MORE: King Charles III plays at Sydney's Roslyn Packer Theatre Mar 31 to April 30. Visit sydneytheatre.com.au