In the polite world of English theatre Steven Berkoff has always been the bad boy, and, even at sixty eight, he is still a bit of a lad. We owe much to him - for the turbulent rough magic of *East*, for the curdled wit of his play *Decadence*, for the outrageousness of his *Salome* and the camp guignol he has brought to a posse of Hollywood baddies. But this time around, with his solo investigation into *Shakespeare’s Villains*, Steven Berkoff trades innovation for self-indulgence and instead of illuminating such scheming subjects as Iago and Macbeth, he mires them in flippancy and flappy pantomime.

There is much that is disarming about the show. With his choice of a discursive lecture format, Berkoff, dressed in signature black, inhabits the vast Festival Theatre stage with charm and admirable energy. It is splendid that he greets the audience with such familiarity and joky good-humour, reminiscing about previous Festival visits and, in the process, dispensing with the rigid, fourth-wall convention that most soloists inhabit for such an evening of recitation.

But his strategy, while amiably conspiratorial, is also disingenuous. It is fine for Berkoff, the inconoclast, to pour scorn on reviewers, even perhaps to mock scholars - although we wouldn’t have workable and lucid Shakespearean texts without them. But when he takes the piss from fellow actors it looks more than a little self-serving.

That he bemoans the fact that Shakespearean performances are hidebound by a reverence for the Great Ones - especially Olivier and Gielgud - is nonsense. No-one has emulated Olivier for forty years and Steven Berkoff knows it. Instead Shakespearean performance has been invigorated by dozens of new actors - all of whom have brought clarity and a refreshing lack of busy-ness to staging the Bard. Neither should we forget the robust state of Elizabethan play in Australia with the talents, among many, of Geoffrey Rush, John Bell, Richard Roxburgh and Cate Blanchette. So to have Berkoff patronising Ian McKellen’s outstanding Richard III or
parodying Al Pacino’s Richard for his grainy American accent, is piffling and surprisingly dated.

What mars Berkoff’s own interpretations is a lack of seriousness - not solemnity, not pedantry, but a willingness to consider the depth and complex malevolence in the characters. To dismiss Iago as a “mediocre” villain, for instance, is to fail to wonder why the character (with the most lines in any of Shakespeare’s plays) would move in so venomously close to his prey. Iago is a high wire act running the risk of challenge at any moment - and his malice may be banal, but it is not mediocre.

Then there are the Macbeths, reduced to a pair of Glaswegian social climbers as Berkoff mugs his way through their plan to take the throne. For him to take on the part of Lady Macbeth is interesting. But by pitching in falsetto and over-gesticulating her hair and ample bosom he plays her more like Ma Ubu, or a particularly unsubtle turn from Benny Hill. In doing so Berkoff squanders a perfect moment to display his actor’s gift - to play a woman, without affectation, and be completely convincing.

It seems each time he creates, with disarming preface, that moment of theatrical expectation when the lights dim and he goes into character, Steven Berkoff, in a blizzard of gesture and face-pulling, undermines the task. He bellows as Richard III, he makes stand-up comedy of Hamlet - milking the arras scene a good ten minutes too long - and, by giving the audience permission to snigger at the anti-Semitism, he sends interpretations of Shylock back a hundred years. As for Oberon, the potentially novel notion that he is a drug pusher intent on revenging Titania, is obliterated by a rendering that sounds like Edwardian melodrama performed underwater. Only Coriolanus, the arrogant tyrant, strikes through in what is Berkoff’s most deft and focused cameo of the night.

As this production reminds us, Shakespeare’s Villains are an intriguing lot and there is plenty more to discover about them. But Steven Berkoff’s investigation, for all his stage charisma and physical command, has produced only pantomime dames and ponderous stereotypes. There may be fun to be had with them, but not from their actions - and in making them such psychological lightweights, Berkoff lets us too easily forget the tragedies they cause.