

DIRECTOR'S NOTES
Director Antoni Cimolino reflects on Grand Magic
E03 Part Two: Post-Show

Esther Jun

Hi, I'm Esther Jun, the director of the Stratford Festival's Langham Director's Workshop, and you're listening to Director's Notes, an original STRATFEST@HOME podcast. Enter the creative psyches of this season's directors with the festival's first original podcast "Director's Notes". Explore the artistic vision and tireless work behind each production, through the eyes of the people who bring the festival's productions to life. This intimate look at our season's play are the perfect pre-show warmup and post-show reflection.

We wish to honor the ancestral guardians of this land and its waterways, the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Wendat, and the Attiwonderonk. Today, many Indigenous peoples continue to call this land home and act as its stewards and this responsibility extends to all peoples to share and care for this land, for generations to come. Whether you have already seen the production or you are currently en route, we thank you for listening in. We hope you enjoy.

Antoni Cimolino

Hi, it's me again. I'm still Antoni Cimolino the director of the Grand Magic. And at this point, I am going to assume that you've seen the performance. So if you've clicked on this section inadvertently, stop right now because big spoiler or alert, okay? Especially with this play, because it's not one you probably know and a lot of different things happen. And so you'll want to stop.

Now, if you're still with me I'm assuming you're in for part two. And now we'll talk a little bit about how it all came together. First of all, let me just say, it's weird, right? I mean, it is an unusual play, and that's, I think because De Filippo was really playing with us in terms of our evocation of what is real, what's in front of us. And so he's got three acts in this play. Each act is very different than the one before. Each act begins with one world and we find that very quickly it changes. Case in point, we begin in a beautiful seaside resort not far from Naples, probably on the Sorrento coasts or maybe in Capri, and we meet a group of people. It's interesting that he introduces three women at a card game. And you know, three women is a very common use of the past, the present, and the future.

As Freud would say, the three fates, it's there in Shakespeare's writing but we get their perspective on what's gonna happen. We get their view, and then we meet the married couple and then we find out about this magician. And we have people telling us they've seen him around Europe, and then we find out that they're not who they said they were. They are in fact, part of this con job that's happening with a group of performers, really. And the magic show is also not as advertised. It's happening not because we want entertainment because somebody in the hotel wants to sneak away in an illicit relationship, in an adulterous relationship. And then by the end, somehow the performers have to get out of it without being arrested because they've managed to upset and take part in something that at that time would've been illegal. I mean, it

was illegal to do what they did. They could have been arrested, and they managed to do this to probably the most important client at this hotel. So, I wanted to find a way to take us through those realities in a way that is better than real.

What do I mean by better than real? Well, as we were working on the play, the designers would say to me, well what do you want this to feel like? I would say, I want it to become like the memory that you have of a seaside resort. I want the colors to be infused in the lighting, much richer sunsets that actually even exist that the sound of the sea should be a little bit louder, a little bit richer, the sound of the gulls and the seabirds, the ships in the distance. And then at the end of each act, I'd like everything to disappear so that when the lights come up, there's nothing there of what we had seen before. You know, in a proscenium arch theater, of course this would happen with a curtain going up and down. We don't have that in a thrust stage. The performance is right in the middle of the audience. And therefore, I wanted to make sure that we completely erase the reality that you walk into the theater seeing by the end of the act the exception being the third act. And I'll talk about that in a little bit.

This translation, this adaptation of Grand Magic was begun by John Murrell, a great Canadian playwright and he had worked on Napoli Milionaria in the 2018 season with me. And that was a very, very wonderful process. I mean, he's a great writer. He believed very, very much in Grand Magic as well. He would spend some months in Italy every year. So he was a real fan of Italy. He loved the culture, and he loved this play. He was also, sadly, at that point suffering from very advanced cancer. And at one point he said to me, in the months after we had finished Napoli Milionaria, he said you know what? I am going to, as a project, just for myself begin a translation of Grand Magic. There's no commitment here. I don't want you to commission it. I don't want you to say you're gonna do it. I just want to do it for myself as I go through chemotherapy and I battle cancer. And sadly, John passed away. Just before he passed away, I received an envelope, and this would've been in the late months of 2019, just as we were settling into that winter before Covid hit and then Covid hit. And it was a very, very hard time for anyone in the theater for the entire world with what we were watching. And I received this envelope, I set it aside because I just did not have the heart to dig into that translation. I didn't know when we would get back to creating theater again. And this past fall of 2022 a project that I was about to do fell through. And I thought to myself, what does the world need right now? What is it that we need? And I thought about this play with its mixture of the pandemic separated all of us.

We were glued on Zoom or social media and the divisions in society seemed to be amplified. We all believed in different things even when we were faced by something that was outside of politics or nationalism. It was something that should have united all of us, this bug that was killing people regardless of where you came from or, and yet we were divided. And I thought of this play. I opened that envelope. I took out this and with a note from John and it was like a gift from beyond the grave, from a very, very wonderful person, a caring person and a great artist. And it was phenomenal. My heart was very much in my throat. And with tears in my eyes, I knew I had to do this play. Now, if John had stayed with us, we would've worked through probably three or four drafts of the play. Translation is hard because it forces you to really study very, very, very, very carefully what a play is about and make decisions. Because if you have a text in its original

language, you may not totally understand it but the playwright's voice always gets heard just by because you're saying the words. So if there's a shortcoming in the actor, the director, the designer, the playwright's, words still are heard. And over time, what I've found is that people eventually discover the play and the playwright triumphs. Not so much in a translation. It's very easy to decide what something's about make that decision too quickly, put spin on the ball, make something not what was intended. And so we went through a very, very careful process.

We was Donato Santeramo, who was the head of languages at Queens University in Canada. And Donato is a brilliant man of the theater and also a professor, a translator and someone who has written many books on different theater personalities. And so we worked through the translation, we did it again, we went through it three times and then we gave it to the cast and we became very aware of how John had solved problems, beautiful little expressions that just solved things. Case in point, you know, when Gervasio says, well always on the same passport, he's challenged by Calagero. And he says, no, you don't understand. I had it and I didn't have it. The passport was in the pocket of my mind. That's from John that was not there. But it solved so many problems. Usually we wouldn't take those kind of liberties. When the actors got a hold of the translation they wanted to dig in. We spent the first 10 days of rehearsals rewriting trying to get closer to actually the elemental qualities. And by the way, really good writers, I'm talking about Shakespeare, Miller, De Filippo, they're rock solid. You always find that they're saying as few words as possible. And what they're saying has a strong sense of reality to it, truthfulness, honesty. And so the actors were like dogs with a bone. They wanted to make sure they got to what was really helped them in delivering the play. So that was a long and interesting process.

So why would a playwright want to present a world where a magician creates illusions? I mean, isn't that just for entertainment? What are we gonna gain from that? And yet, Shakespeare created just such a situation in *The Tempest* where a magician creates illusion in order to have people understand something that they wouldn't otherwise understand. So he, Prospero, his power has been taken away. He has been nearly killed, his daughter has been nearly killed as they come to this island. And therefore, not just in retaliation but in a desire to teach. He creates a shipwreck for the very people who did this to him. And the very people who nearly killed his daughter now are in a situation where the king of Naples believes his son has been killed and is dead from a shipwreck. And therefore, they begin to understand something, not something real, but something that they think is real. And it enables them to become more compassionate, wiser and yet not have the damage done. In some ways, that's what the theater's about. It's a bit of a jungle gym for our minds. We go into the theater, we see horrific things played out by real people in front of us, but it's all okay. No one actually dies. It's, we are okay. Everybody on stage will get up and go to their dressing rooms.

De Filippo translated *The Tempest* into Neapolitan dialect. He loved Shakespeare. And so this play is about someone who creates illusions that help people understand their own lives in a different way. And he wanted to explore that pet peeve of his that that he had about adultery, about a responsibility to future generations to each other. And so the play is about jealousy. The play is about this couple that has a dysfunctional relationship and it creates a situation through magic that enables them to see the world differently. Towards the end of the play Calagero who's

lost his wife, and he comes to realize something about his own behavior. But I was insufferable. I behaved so badly I had become uncaring, I'd become a husband. And that moment of learning is so profound. We think somehow that now when his wife reappears he will be in a different place. He will be in a place of understanding and behave differently. And sadly, De Filippo's not big on happy endings although he's comic along the way, he doesn't really go to the place of learning for this character. This character becomes trapped in a reality he prefers. In a fiction that he prefers to reality.

I think De Filippo's hoping that everybody watching the play will take a different path. I've heard from people who've seen the production that they want to come back and see it again because something transforms in front of their eyes or they notice something just briefly that then is not the case. They have to go back and think, well I'm gonna watch this carefully and see what's happened here. I think it's because De Filippo likes to have a number of different things happening at the same time on the stage. For instance, that moment, that beautiful moment when Amelia is given flowers and she says and they're the pale pink carnations that she loves. And of course, in Italy, carnations are the flowers for the dead. So her having small, tiny, pale pink carnations are the kind of flowers that a young girl would have on her grave.

My mom, for instance, couldn't stand carnations because of the implication of graves. She receives these flowers, she says to the person who's not her mother, but has acted as her mother, she says, I love you, you know that? Then she hears, I love you too. And then at that exact moment the doorbell rings and the person ringing the door we've just heard about Roberto Magliano who is coming to kill potentially Otto. And so it could be death at the door before the act is over, that young girl is dead. And so the characters go scrambling. They're afraid because they feel like the shadow of death is there in that moment. And yet something so beautiful has happened and the young girl breaks down crying because she's been given these very flowers that mean so much to her. Those kind of things where you've got several things happening at the same time are very delicate, and they're a little bit hard to follow at first but when you come back, it's quite rich and evocative. And I wanted to start act one with that sense of beautiful place, which is a seaside resort.

Now, this seaside resort is filled with a lot of rich people who are checking each other out wondering who's got the big suite and who doesn't and who's staying for a month and who can't afford to stay very long. And everybody's presenting affront which may or may not be true. So right away, we are trying to judge what is real and what is not. And then by the end of the act, we are in a magic show where that box contains everything; truth, fiction and we can't open it, or at least Calogero can't open it.

Act two then is suddenly in this very, very poor environment, probably in the Spanish quarter in Naples, where people are very, very close to each other. So close that actually the telephone scene at the beginning of the act is really done outside of a window. But in a proscenium arch theater, you can have somebody at one side of the stage yelling out to somebody in what would've been probably a 12 foot gap to the next building. The streets are very, very narrow, as

I said. And so that scene is on a telephone in production and which is a bit of a liberty. They probably couldn't afford a phone but it was the only way to translate it to a thrust stage.

As the scene, as the act unfolds we then have Roberto Magliano show up. We go from the arrival of Calogero with the police officer. And a police officer is totally deferential to this upper middle class person. Yet the class system is so strong there. And by the end of that scene he views that man in very different eyes. Because in Italian culture and many cultures the idea of being a cuckold is not just embarrassing it's reprehensible. It's like a moral fault. It's like you did something wrong you brought this on your head. And that culture of making sure that your woman is kept under wraps is strong.

In Shakespeare's time, locks on homes would sometimes have a number that would turn so that every time someone turned that lock you'd know that somebody had done it. The number would go from six, six, seven to six, six, eight. And when a husband came home he could judge whether or not somebody had entered his home. That kind of world where women were not free is the world that this play is examining. By the end of the act something very different has happened. The idea of the audience being out there is now firmly rooted in Calogero's mind. He's now living in a fiction which is being supported by everything that is being said to him. And at the end of the act, he says, I hear the sea. The sea is out there. He begins to see through walls. He wants to believe this, his believing that saves him from being the most disgusting of things in this culture, a cuckold and therefore, the world dissolves. And we wanted to have it dissolve like a great tsunami of the ocean coming and lifting all the furniture up and carrying it away as he is then arm in arm with the person who has saved him from reality, the magician.

You know Geraint Wyn Davies said something very interesting to me late in the rehearsal process. He said, you know I thought this play was about this married couple but I began to realize that the couple that's really at the center of it is a growing love affair between these two polar opposites. The man who at the beginning of the play Calogero says, I only believe in facts. I just believe in reality. I have faith in absolutely no one. And this magician whose job it is to create illusions, to fool. And these two polar opposites by the end of the play have become the best of friends. They need each other. Otto needs the financial resources of this man and becomes invested in trying to help him. And Calogero, of course, becomes invested in the illusion that is so much better than reality. Thank you for listening to this edition of Director's Notes on Grand Magic. We hope that you not only enjoyed Grand Magic but enjoyed listening to the behind the scenes information contained in these notes. There are notes from many other productions and we hope that you see them all here at the Stratford Festival.

Esther Jun

Thanks so much for listening to this post-show episode of Director's Notes. Be sure to stay connected by subscribing as we'll be releasing new episodes weekly. Thank you and have a beautiful day.