

DIRECTOR'S NOTES**Director Antoni Cimolino introduces *Grand Magic*****E03 Part One: Pre-Show****Esther Jun**

Hi, I'm Esther Jun, the director of the Stratford Festival's Langham Directors' 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, I'm Antoni Cimolino, artistic director of the Stratford Festival, and the director of Eduardo De Filippo's "La grande magia" and welcome to "Director's Notes." I first saw this great play in 1990, and Giorgio Strehler, who was the artistic director of the Piccolo Teatro, he had a production that was touring the world, and it came to Toronto. And I was so struck by the beauty of the illusion, and the reality in it, and the joy, and the profound quality of it, and it really felt like Pirandello. And it was touring along with a production of "The Tempest." So there's a connection there between this play and "The Tempest," and it really stayed with me. It was a few years later that I directed my first Eduardo De Filippo production, one in which Richard Monette, then artistic director starred, "Filumena Marturano." But it began a love for De Filippo, and eventually, for this play that I would direct so many decades later. As a director watching this production, watching any production I've directed, it's a very kinetic experience.

I recently was in London, and I was seated beside the director of the production. As somebody involved in this theater, they tend to give me house seats. And I could tell that even though I'd never met this director, he was the director, because his body was twitching as each moment happened, and I've had that experience before, and sure enough, it happens to me. This particular play really leads to a lot of internal changes. For those of you who are about to see the production, it has a lot of twists and turns. You think it's one thing, and then before you know it, it's another. And so for me, as I go through that rollercoaster, it's amplified. The lows are really low, and the highs are really high, and I'm thrilled, and my heart's in my throat at each turn. De Filippo has this beautiful mixture of comedy and lightness that then touches upon a kind of absurdity which can be very evocative, very profound, and ultimately, sad. And that mixture of things that he's able to do leads to a very, very challenging environment for the actors and the director.

We're always trying to take the audience with us as we turn those corners, as we have the audience laughing, and then very quickly after that, something will happen which completely changes our perspective on everything. That very thing that one moment ago was comic suddenly becomes a bit tragic. And so enabling the audience to follow that, be part of it, is thrilling. It's like a luge run, but it's a luge run of the emotions in people's minds and hearts, as opposed to down an icy slope.

De Filippo grew up in the theater. He grew up in the theater of the 1920s and '30s. His dad was a great comic, and also a playwright, Eduardo Scarpetta. And he had a company of his own, and he was famous around the world. He was, however, not a very... How can one put this. He wasn't very faithful to his wife. He wasn't very responsible in his family affairs. He had many illegitimate children, and one of them was Eduardo De Filippo. Scarpetta married a woman whose last name was De Filippo, but he had an affair with her niece, a person who worked in the theater, and Eduardo was the product of that particular relationship. Very complex world to grow up in, in the theater, with brothers and sisters, some of which were recognized as legitimate, others not. A real sense of extended family, and also a bit of baggage for him throughout his work.

Shakespeare writes about the male warrior code. In some ways, what's there in all of the plays of De Filippo is the male social code. I guess that the scarring experiences of a father who didn't really pick up the pieces of what he had done, and the children who weren't recognized stayed with Eduardo. In many ways, he was the true, the very legitimate, in terms of his heart, and soul, and talent to his father's own interests and talent. And yet he was always marginalized. And so he explores that in a series of different plays.

The first play I directed of De Filippo was one written just after the Second World War. It's called "Filumena Marturano," who is the lead character in this play. She's a woman who is very much of the working class in Naples. She has worked as a prostitute, and she has an affair with a man who is very wealthy, a real playboy. And that affair becomes longstanding. He takes her into his home. She runs his business affairs. She maintains every aspect of this man's success while he goes to the races and continues to live the life of seeing other women. And one day, she's had enough. She suddenly becomes sick. She falls to her bed, and she's dying. And the priest comes in, and when the priest comes in to give extreme unction, she says to her husband, or not to her husband, actually, to the man that she's been with, and as is unmarried in this deeply Catholic society, and she says, "Please marry me. The priest is here. I'm about to go to heaven or hell, and I want to go to heaven, and I want the sacrament of marriage." And the man, you know, says, "Fine, fine," and marries her. And right then, she gets out of the bed, and she says, "I'm all better now." And that's the start of the play. That's how that production begins. And as the first act unfolds, there's this incredible battle between the two of them. And he swears at her and says, "I'm gonna divorce you. You're not gonna get away with this. I've got very good lawyers." And she says, "You're not gonna do any of those things because I am the mother of your son." She's had a child with this man, and he never noticed. And she's kept that information. Well, it turns out she's had three children with this man, and he doesn't know any of them. The third act has him meeting those boys for the first time in his life. They're all in their twenties, and he's trying to decipher which one is his. And eventually, he acknowledges it doesn't matter. They're all his

children, whether he's the biological father or not. This play was written at the same time as there were so many kids on the street in post-war Naples. It was written at the same time as Arthur Miller was writing "All My Sons." And I guess it's a good plot, because it was then ripped off for a musical called "Mamma Mia!" Then Eduardo, who was much loved in Naples, was asked to write a play for the reopening of the San Carlo Opera House in 1944. Now, this was just after Naples had liberated, really, themselves from the Nazis. It's one of the few cities in Europe where the citizenry rose up. They, especially led by the young kids, drove the Nazis out with a combination of stolen guns, Molotov cocktails, the narrow streets, the fact that there were so many places to hide. They made it so that the Nazis decided it wasn't worth the trouble, and they left. Well, 1944, the Americans are now in Naples. Naples becomes, by far, the busiest port in Europe. The port of entry for all sorts of supplies, munitions, and they're rich. The play is called "Napoli Milionaria." This was the play that would start the post-war culture, and De Filippo was terrified about how it would be received. It's basically about the importance of community. The importance of putting people, each other, in front of gain, at a time when there was so much money to be made, and these people have been so poor, and so destitute, really for not just decades, centuries. And the play was very, very moving, but it was hard hitting. It was a criticism of much of what was in Naples. He said afterwards that when the curtain fell, there was absolute silence, and his heart was in his throat. It lasted for 12 full seconds of absolute silence, and then there was an enormous eruption of applause. And that changed De Filippo's life and career. To this day, that play is really resonant.

I was in Naples a few years ago, and I was leaving, the cab driver taking me to the airport. I said, "I'm going back to direct a play called 'Napoli Milionaria.'" He said, "You are? Oh," and he quoted the last lines of the play. And I don't think this cab driver was unusual. That's what that work means to that city. Post-war Naples and "La Grande Magia," "The Grand Magic." This is De Filippo's most Pirandellian work. He was mentored by Luigi Pirandello, the man who loved to examine reality and illusion. And this play looks at the fact that most of us believe what we want to believe. And I guess he was reflecting upon so many decades of rule by the fascist party. You know, the fascists came into power in not a legitimate way. They were basically put in power by the king, who wanted to find a solution, a strong man to protect them from communism after the First World War, after the Russian Revolution, after a series of bombings in Rome, that he felt that this party, which had not won anywhere near a majority, was a minority party, but they decided that would be the answer. And very quickly, Mussolini seized the opportunity to take hold of Parliament. And he did it in a way that set a template for other parties to this day. His goal was not simply to get political control, but to control the social life of the population. They started clubs called Dopolavoro, after work clubs, where people would have to go out, or would have the opportunity to go out and be among other people, and fascism was at the center of those. There were fascist vacations. You could go skiing with a group of other people, and the party line was constantly being addressed there. So while they did not have social media as we have them today, the idea of getting people together and manipulating, guiding their thoughts, controlling it, having an opportunity for informers to see if somebody's saying something that's against the party, it was all there. It was all started.

I found over the years that Italy, in many ways, sort of sets the stage for developments in Western Europe in terms of social issues like this. For instance, I was so struck by the reality television in the 1970s. It was so boorish and ridiculous in Italy as a kid. Berlusconi was the person who really started all this. And sure enough, 20 years later, that kind of reality television was on American networks, and has taken root to this day. So the same sort of idea of how do we create an environment where the line between reality and fiction gets blurred? And that's what the party was trying to do.

After the war, when all of those boasts, all of those claims were proven to be horrifically absurd, when Italy was not as well prepared to enter the Second World War as they were the First, when people had lost their children, when starvation was there throughout, they realized just how much they had been lied to. And now they approached a really critical vote, whether to be a monarchy or a republic in the era after the Second World War. And I think in that environment, De Filippo was really thinking about how do we get fooled? How do we have our minds warped into a mindset where we think things which are patently untrue are true? And he began to examine what we would today call confirmation bias.

So in other words, you'll get news. We all get news. And the news that contradicts everything we believe in is really hard to take. We kind of want to believe, "Well, I'm not getting the full story," or, "Really? I want to dig into that more." But then, because it kind of rubs us the wrong way, we're just as likely to turn it off, or believe the source is not right. Whereas anything that tells us we're right, we love, and we believe it much more readily. Because after all, we were right. This confirmation bias is very, very dangerous, because today, it's not like we have, you know, Lyndon Johnson saying, "If I've lost Walter Cronkite, I've lost America," when Walter Cronkite became critical of the Vietnam War. We're not in that situation today. There are so many different news sources. Very few of them take the trouble of really, really curating, and making sure what they're saying is in fact true. As a matter of fact, someone like Elon Musk bristles at that idea. "Who am I to decide what's true and what's not?" Therefore, everything is given an equal footing. Well, in this environment, we're in a very dangerous situation, where we can basically find a source that'll tell us whatever we think, whatever our biases are, our prejudices, we were right. And that echo chamber is leading to polarization in our society. And when you add to that artificial intelligence, and the opportunities that are there to create a kind of simulated reality. Just yesterday, Apple put out their augmented reality headset.

We've had virtual reality headsets for a number of years now. The augmented is especially interesting, 'cause it can take what you are seeing and layer something on top of it, which is, in some ways, pernicious, and in other ways, entertaining. In any case, De Filippo was writing about the fact that we can get drawn into a world which may not be the world that's actually out there. As a matter of fact, in some ways, he was saying the following. He was saying, "Look, life, in a way, is a game. And it's a game that's really hard to play unless you kind of buy into the illusions that you see around you." I am a much loved father. I'm good at raising my children. My children love me, and I'm very good at my job. And those illusions aren't always supported by every detail of our lives. As a dad, I know not every day kind of proved I was a great dad. But I still continue to want to believe that. Otherwise, if we don't believe that, how do we get through our lives? So

then we need something called faith. Faith is that thing that gets us through and helps us to continue to believe in something, even though there's no way of proving that we're right. Maybe we go one step further. Faith is that thing that enables us to continue to believe in something, even though every article of a fact around us is telling us we're wrong. He wrote a play that was years and years before simulated reality, years before we really began to understand confirmation bias. However, at the time that he wrote the play, Schrodinger's cat would've existed. This, of course, well, we know is a phenomenon where there's a box, and in it is a cat who could be killed by the release of a radioactive isotope, or it could be alive. And we don't know at any one moment whether that has happened or not. But since quantum physics says, and believe me, I really don't understand this, but since quantum physics says that at the same time, two different things can happen. It can be released and it cannot be released, in shadow movements, one to the other. The cat is simultaneously alive and dead. That really takes our mind and warps it. We're not really equipped to understand that. But De Filippo wanted to write about that. And in this play, there is a box, and what's in it, nobody knows. All right, to say anything more would be to ruin the performance for you. So I'm now going to zip it, and I'm gonna be thinking of you as you're in the theater enjoying "The Grand Magic."

Esther Jun

Thank you for listening to this pre-show episode of Director's Notes. Be sure to tune into the post-show for a deeper insight into the production with the director.