

DIRECTOR'S NOTES
Director Jillian Keiley Introduces *Richard II*
E02 Part One: Pre-Show

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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, 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.

Jillian Keiley

Hi, I'm Jillian Keiley. I'm the director of *Richard II* at Stratford this year. I was working on this show for a long time now. It was pre pandemic. Myself and Antoni Cimolino were talking about doing the production of *Richard*, and I happened to be reading a book at the time called, "All the Rage" by the playwright, Brad Fraser. And Brad had written this book, it's an autobiography about his insane rise to fame in the 1970s and 80s.

Well, his rise to fame was in the 80s, and it was a really exciting time for him. And he kind of became the king of gay theater at the time, internationally. He was a huge star. And right as his star was ascending and burning up bright, aids came on the scene and suddenly he'd began losing a lot of his friends, and the people he was working with. So while his star was rising, his world was falling apart. And Brad, in the book, it's a great book. I highly recommend it. And if you're listening to this podcast, you might be an audio person. He does a great audio book version of "All the Rage." If you read the book, you'll see how he is a kind of abrasive guy. He's a really fun guy. He's gay and very out and very loud about it. And he's rude to people. He loves it, he loves the fun of that. And he says what he thinks all the time, and he believes it's his God given right to do so. And as I was reading this book, I was like, "He sounds like Richard." He sounds like Richard II. He's got the same amazing belief in himself. He's got the same amazing star power and we see his catastrophic, you know, what was coming towards him, which was an extreme conservatism. And for Brad, he had rushing towards him, you know, the terror of AIDS was coming at him at the same time. And I wondered if Stratford would be interested in doing an adaptation of *Richard II* by Brad himself, a great, great playwright. And he's still a playwright and film writer. He's extraordinary. He continues to be extraordinary. And I asked if Stratford would be interested in having Brad Fraser adapt this play. And historically, there's quite a bit of speculation not just from

one source that's kind of generally understood that there were a couple of gay kings in the past and Richard is one of them. And supposedly, he had this very long passionate love affair with an Earl who was his senior advisor, even though he, in the great chain of being, he was not above all the other guys, but he listened to this Earl more than anybody else and had a lot of private time with him. And there was a lot of speculation that they were in a homosexual relationship still to this day.

So it just seemed to make a lot of sense to pair those two up, Richard and Brad Fraser. So I asked Stratford if they would be interested in commissioning Brad to do such an adaptation, and they agreed. They thought it would be a wonderful setting. The big thing about that period, of course, was disco. It was a really important cultural touchstone at the time.

Disco meant life. Disco meant everything to people in that community at the time. Going out dancing was how you lived, you lived to dance. And so, once I got Brad Fraser on board, immediately I said, "Now I need a young, fantastic disco-loving choreographer, and a brilliant disco composer. And so, I brought on the next two who were Cameron Carver and Rhapsodius who is, in some circles, known as Andrew Craig as well. And Rhapsodius and Cameron just did extraordinary work bringing us to that period as well as the other designers, particularly, Bretta Gerecke who recreated Met Gala disco clothing for everybody. The sound design, of course, which is right from the period, and the set design as well. When you come into the the audience, one of the things that we decided to do was to play some pretty groovy disco tunes that were inspirational to Rhapsodius when he was creating the disco score. It's really about remembering, for those of you who remember disco, and even younger people who might remember, you know, Raves or even younger people who might remember EDM parties or something like that, there's times in your life when you're young and beautiful and having a great time, you're out on the dance floor and, you know, you're necking in the corner or you know, you get somebody's number or whatever it is, there's just this crazy energy, and this crazy elevation and elation, and this beautiful euphoria that comes with that kind of music and that kind of dance, and that kind of sweating all night, and the lights, it's just a fantasy, and you get to live in this fantasy. So we're trying to welcome audiences to remember that time, if they remember it, and to indulge in it a little bit because I think this is a great tragedy.

Our Richard is not without fault as the original Richard II also had faults, big faults, but he was also a poet king, and he was a beautiful art loving, very funny, very smart young man. So we see the show is a kind of Greek tragedy in that way, that he starts off with a lot of power, and a lot of influence, and a lot of the euphoria of being in power. And with Richard, he really believed that God was connected to him, and he really believed that he was very special and God placed him on earth to execute his will. So all of Richard's instincts, he believed, were God speaking through him. So he lived in this euphoria of believing in himself. And I think, you know, we can all relate to that, I think. And then we see him tumble when some of the mistakes he makes come back and bite him. But they bite him pretty bad because he didn't doubt himself, not even for a second. And then he learns pretty fast what he can get away with, and what is God sent and what isn't. Because it started with me, I wasn't surprised by the adaptation or, you know, very often an adaptation or a new play will come to a director and then the director reads it and gets their

first take on it. But in fact, because it was the other way around, and I said, you know, "Would you like to direct Richard II?" "Yes, I would. But I'd like to direct this particular playwrights version of it." It kind of came at me from a different angle, so I wasn't surprised by what I read. I was very delighted by what I read.

Richard II is very rarely produced. It is an extremely complex story about politics. A lot of the politics that it's about are archaic we don't understand, you know? The average person, I think, doesn't understand the complexity of what goes on a court, or the difference between Dukes and Earls and, you know, what did anybody have to do with anything, references that the Shakespearean audience may have had a better grasp on than us. So making it relatable to a modern audience is really important to me. And Brad really knows how to find the meat of a play. And he really understands how to make a play, you know, in that Greek tragedy way about very universal human things. Lust, love, betrayal, being outwitted by somebody you thought you were smarter than, arguing with God. Arguing with God is a really essential part of this play, and it's funny because, you know, when people hear that it's a disco production, they think it's trivial, and they think it doesn't delve with deep topics. But in fact, it's very deep. It's actually very deep.

The veneer is glittery, but it's actually a very very deep and and very complex. And we had some very, very deep conversations in the rehearsal hall about the nature of God, the nature of man's relationship with God. Our belief in power, our belief in whether God does things for us because we pray to him, whether we believe that we are deserving or more deserving than somebody else of God's love. So in fact, it's interestingly very religious in a way or, at least, very interested in the conversation about what God has to do with whether or not we get to have everything we want or not. And whether the God that we have either invented or we've inherited is interested in us at all. I think it's a very interesting conversation. And in fact, it was the motor that drove the whole piece for me is Richard's true beliefs. That's why there's 16 angels on the stage. He really believes that these angels are there for him. He believes that God is his co-pilot and that the angels are there to help him out. And then we see that the angels change sides 'cause the angels aren't God.

All of that beauty and glamour, the power, it was attached to the crown. And when you give up the crown, all of your beauty and glamour goes away from you and all of your angels leave you. So we see that happen all the time. We see it happen with stockbrokers who run pyramid schemes and, you know, they think they're the king of the world and then suddenly they're in prison. You know, there are angels, if God chose you to be doing this, why is he betraying you now? "My God, my God. Why have you betrayed me?" We see it happen all the time. We see it happen in modern life. We see it with people who have fairytale weddings and then, you know, something happens and they're abandoned, and they don't even understand how their luck, their faith, their God could have left them. And Richard has to wonder, "Was I ever attended to by God at all? Was that my own imagining or it was that just power?" If you've seen the production before, probably you've seen a more subtle Richard, but I think you can connect. You know, our metaphor of being in the disco period was to tie into his poet king and his love of himself and his love of his friends, his desire to be fabulous. And I think that's in all productions. I've seen three. This is the first live production I've seen though, I've only ever seen productions on video of other older productions. And I think, I mean certainly, it's a new take and it's new aesthetic, and that

kind of thing for the play, but what it can draw out for you if you are a big Richard fan is hearing about what his experience is of being crowned and being again with God, of being with God and being emptied out, of being hollowed out. He talks a lot about the, you know, digging a grave with his tears. He speaks a lot about the earth, and how the earth is pasted and covers through his bones. He really understands himself as being immortal at the beginning and then he realizes his folly by the end.

So we still see the same Richard who is in love with himself, and we see him realize that the self that he was in love with was a simulacrum, it wasn't the real person. He never met the real person until he loses everything. You know, one of my favorite parts of the show is the end when he's in the jail cell, and he's trying to put together what will make man happy, what makes man happy. And it's a very famous speech. It's one of two very famous speeches. "The Death of Kings" being the other one. "Let us sit upon the ground and talk about the death of kings." And this one is about how men can be happy with nothing until he is nothing. And we see this person who, he's got drugs, he's got alcohol, he's got dancing, he's got dancing girls, he's got all those things. And he's got, you know, this kind of put on personality that he thinks is, you know, that's half performance. You know, his personality is half performance, and he's never left to himself, so he never gets to know himself. And we see him, through the play, learn how to know himself. And then he knows this chasing after happiness, this chasing after the worldly things is, it's all been a fallacy. He realizes that, you know, "I've been chasing all of this my whole life believing that this was where I could find my God." And at the end, he sits in his little cage and he says, "Yeah, I can't be happy. We can't be happy. It doesn't matter if I'm a king or a popper, I still feel the same," you know? "Down deep inside," and the the difference is, you know, we get to see his growth as a person and his growth as a spirit too. He's much more godly, interestingly. He's much more like God or he's much more has God's ear, or a kind of God who understands humanity's ear in that last moment, much more than he has it at the beginning.

The show is built on metaphors that are drawn from the 1970s and 80s period, that period between Stonewall, you know, and gay liberation through to the oncoming of the AIDS crisis in the 80s. And so, there's metaphors throughout the play. There's little Easter eggs in there for people. Like, we have a Crisco bottle, which was, Crisco was a big thing for gay clubs back in the day. There was a place called Crisco Disco, this is real. It was just down the street from Studio 54, and it was an explicitly a gay bar at the time, and it was called the Crisco Disco. And very often, it was emulated across around the world that, you know, sometimes gay bars would have a tub or bottle of Crisco on the thing, and that would mean something. So there's little Easter eggs like that that you'll see. But also, there's metaphors, you know?

Shakespeare himself had this beautiful metaphor about, you know, from the conservative side which is, "Why should we take care of our little gardens inside of a fence when the Garden of England is being left to ruin, swarming with luxurious caterpillars who," you know? So all of this beautiful imagery that Shakespeare has. And we have some beautiful luxurious angels who are holding fruit and being the trees for us. So the show is pretty rife with metaphor. We don't set up realistic spaces. All of the spaces are metaphorical spaces for the most part. And we've begun to open the show with a welcome from, I'm not sure if we're gonna continue to do it but I think we will. Right now, we're opening the show with a little welcome from one of our cast members

who comes out and just asks the audience to just let the metaphors wash over you. Because I think, where we have had some audience members question a project is when they're trying to put literal imagery or literal space onto our metaphors. And we're really asking you to just like watch it like a music video or some kind of, I don't know, painting like an impressionist painting or something. It's really about letting the metaphors wash over you, hearing the language, experiencing the dance, grooving into the music, it's like my hope with it, aesthetically anyway, was that, you know, I'm a little too young to have really done disco at a proper grownup bar. Though we used to have little disco parties when we were kids, it was very important to us.

Donna Summer was very important in the early 70s for me. But I do remember, you know, a little later going to, you know, Raves and that kind of thing. The lights and the people swirling around, and the beauty and everybody was so good looking and everybody was having a drink, and everybody was having a good time. And it just lifted you out of reality a little bit. It didn't put you exactly in a space, you know? "What time is it?" "I don't know. It's party time" You know? And so we really built the whole aesthetic of the show around those swirling lights and ambiguity places, and we really want you to have good time. So that's how it's built. So I really hope you will. Thanks for listening. Enjoy the show. Turn off the phones and pop back in for the post-show chat, I have a few things to tell you that has some spoilers in it too.

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.