**DIRECTOR’S NOTES**

**Director Lezlie Wade reflects on Monty Python's Spamalot**

**E04 Part Two: Post-Show**

**Antoni Cimolino**

Hi, I'm Antoni Cimolino, the artistic director of the Stratford Festival, and you are listening to "Director’s Notes." Enter the creative psyches of this season's directors with STRATFEST@HOME's latest original podcast. 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 plays 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've already seen the production, or you're currently en route, we thank you for listening in. We hope you enjoy.

**Lezlie Wade**

Hi, this is Lezlie Wade again. This is the post-show. Just a little warning, there might be some spoilers in here, so if you haven't seen the show yet, you might wanna wait and listen to this later. But thanks for joining us.

It's interesting when you have started a show that was, it was in 2019, and half the cast, or maybe like two thirds of the cast are the same people. And so with that comes the fact that you've been in touch with them. You know, Jesse and I, my choreographer, we were constantly talking to each other throughout the entire Covid years, so we continued to develop our relationship. And the same thing with some of the actors. And then you have new people also joining it. So there's a weird, it's sort of like being back in school, and you're moved from one grade to another grade, and half the class, like a lot of the class is with you, but then there's some new people that moved into town, and they're, and now you have to bring them into the room as well. And so, but I think that generally speaking, there was such a euphoric feeling of like happiness to be back in the room.

Everyone that was there was so excited to be a part of this show. And it's funny, because as I was walking into the Avon, I just got to the corner and I saw Eddie Glen, and when we saw each other, we just hugged each other so hard, because we were so excited about being back in the room together and getting to work on the show. And that really was like the beginning for me. That first day was a party. It just felt like a party. It felt like a party, or like a family reunion, really, this incredible reunion of spirit, and joy, and artistry, and yeah, I couldn't have been happier. And I have to say, I loved that room. I just loved that room, that room and everyone in it, everyone involved in the show is just amazing. I think that in any situation, regardless of whether it's Spamalot or any show, I mean, you always have to get everyone on board so that everyone is doing the same show. And I think particularly when it's a very specific style of show. I mean, I can say this about, you know, when I was doing Oscar Wilde, or when I'm doing Gilbert and Sullivan,
or whether I'm doing Monty Python, there's a specific style, and not everyone is familiar with that style. And so it's really helping the people that are not familiar with it to understand that it's imperative that they're familiar, they become familiar with the way that it works. It's usually, comedy and Shakespeare, musicals and Shakespeare are not very different. They have cadences, they have a certain vocabulary.

There are caesuras like in lyric, just like there is in... In Shakespeare, there's monologues, there's beats, there's rhythms, there's alliteration. Everything is used in the exact same way. And so just helping people to understand that, knowing that it's not difficult. It's demystifying it, I guess is the best way of saying it, for those people that aren't familiar with it is probably the challenge. But honestly, the room, they were very smart, very receptive, really keen company, and they got it. And the other actors, the ones who were very, very familiar with that kind of work, Aaron Krohn and Eddie Glen, just as an example, really helped the rest of the actors understand it too, just by example. They were just, they were perfect for the rest of the company.

Well, first of all, I couldn't be luckier to have Jen Rider-Shaw playing The Lady of the Lake. She's just incredible. She's a force to be reckoned with. Sometimes, I feel a little bit guilty about not giving actors more notes. Sometimes, the actors want notes. I hardly ever have to give Jen a note. She has, I mean, first of all, she's a true triple threat. There's very few people that are that good at what they do, but she can sing incredibly well. She had the vocal abilities of a star. She's just brilliant. She can dance incredibly well, and she's really funny, she has comic timing. She's fantastic in this show. And knowing that she was going to be doing The Lady of the Lake, and also knowing the rest of my women, Kyla, Ayrin, Carla, Evangelia, Amanda, I have an amazing group of women in that cast. I wanted to give them, I wanted to make sure that they had agency in the show. And traditionally speaking, sometimes British comedies don't give that to the women. And I wanted to make sure that they were all featured in some way. And I think they all are. They are really, they're really brilliant.

It's funny because Evangelia, she plays one of the Knights of Ni, and the Knights of Ni all wear masks. You can't see their faces, so unfortunately, you don't know who is who, but she's sort of the head Ni Knight next to Ayrin, who's running the show kind of, so to speak. And my husband said to me, he goes, "Who is playing that that night? Because that Ni is hilarious," and it's Evangelia. And she is, she's fantastic in that character. I think she's the precursor to the Minions. She's just, she's so brilliant in it. But yeah, I really wanted to delve into it, and I wanted to make sure that they were costumed in a different way. Other productions of Spamalot, sometimes the Lady of the Lake and the Laker Girls are a little bit more provocative. Their costumes are a little bit more provocative. And I thought, well, you know, they can still be sexy, but not, they don't have to be Venus on a half shell. They can wear armor, and it can still look sexy, and they can still be pretty, strong, and powerful. And I think we've accomplished that, and I think they do an amazing job.

But I do, I am extremely lucky, the women in this cast I think are amazing. All of them are amazing. I'm so, so proud of them. I think they do a fantastic job. I think making people cry isn't I think as hard as making them laugh. You can manipulate people in a drama, but you cannot manipulate
people to laugh. Laughter is spontaneous. So you either find it funny or you don't. If you don't find it funny, you aren't going to laugh. And so in that regard, it is a very, very difficult thing to do, and hats off to the company for consistently being able to find the laughter. I think the trick to comedy is to play it seriously. I mean, you have to take it seriously. The characters, the French taunter cannot play it for laughs, the French taunter has to seriously want to taunt and drive the English crazy. And Johnny Goad, who plays King Arthur, he has to take it seriously. He has to take everything seriously in that show. He has just an amazing job, because he, if he doesn't command the stage in a way that is dire and with high stakes, the the rest of the men aren't going to follow him, and the comedy is going to fall flat. So they're doing an amazing job of being able to run a comedy. It's funny, like talking about comedy is one of the most serious things you can talk about. It's really difficult to do. And it really is a question of like, one second too long is not funny, one second too short is not funny, it's just finding that moment.

Eric Idle came to see the show, and it was very, I thought it was funny that he spoke to Eddie Glen, and he said to him, "You have this one moment, you just need to like wait one second longer before you break, just one second longer." And Eddie said, that's the exact same note I had given him that day. And so it is just about finding it. You have to feel it, and you have to really listen to each other on stage, because if you jump a joke, it isn't going to be funny. But you have to really listen to each other, and you have to really answer honestly, and then find your moments. So there's a lot to it. I think on page, sometimes people think comedy is so easy, but comedy is really, really, really, really difficult to do. Very, very difficult to do.

Sometimes the audience, I mean, obviously, a full house is going to be a lot different than a half-size house, so you really wanna get bodies in there, because the more people that are in there, the more people laugh. People sometimes, an audience may find something extremely funny, but they don't want to be the ones that laugh because they feel conspicuous. So you do really wanna fill up the seats, because people will feel more comfortable laughing if there's more people in there. So that's definitely a factor for sure. I think the actors have discovered that the comedy...

Theater is reciprocal, so obviously, when an audience is laughing, you start to get information. I mean, it was great here, because I think I had 18 previews on this show, which is a lot of previews, but it's not for comedy. You really do need that many to start to feel your way through the piece. It's like a whole new ballgame when you get audiences in there, and you realize, "Oh, wow, we're not getting a laugh on that line. Why aren't we getting a laugh?" And sometimes, it could be because you're asking for the laugh, and you shouldn't be asking for the laugh, you just need to do the line. So that sort of thing was very informative. But I think that they are a very smart company, and they have had a lot of experience with comedy. So they do know when it's not quite right, and they do know when it is.

A few years ago, I had the great fortune of being able to work on a piece called "Love, Loss, and What I Wore." It was in Toronto, and I got to work with people like Andrea Martin, and Wendy Crewson, and Linda Kash, some amazing comedic legends. And I learned a lot watching them work, and watching them feel their way through. But even then, they would come up to me
sometimes and say, "I'm not getting a laugh. Why am I not getting a laugh today?" And it really is just a question of, maybe you're just thinking about it too much. Sometimes the laugh is just about throwing the line away. Maybe you're putting too much weight on it. Maybe you're emphasizing the wrong word. It may just be that the syllable is being emphasized. So all that stuff goes into, factors into comedy, and a lot of it has to, just casting it well is a huge part of it. One of the most unique, incredible experiences, really incredible experiences of working on this show was finding out that Eric Idle was going to be coming and seeing it. We had hoped all along that Eric would come, but we didn't know for sure if he would. And so then when he agreed that he was coming, we were all thrilled.

And for anyone who doesn't know who Eric Idle is, Eric Idle is one of the original Pythons. He was one of the creators of the Monty Python's Flying Circus. He's the writer of Spamalot, along with skits from the other Pythons, but he definitely put it together, and wrote all the additional material, along with John Du Prez, who is the composer, who also came and saw the show too, which was also amazing. And then Eric also wrote some of the music, the famous "Bright Side of Life" song, Eric wrote that as well, lyrics and music. And you know, anyone, if you go on the Internet, and you just type him in, pages and pages and pages and pages and pages about Eric Idle. He's a phenomenal spirit, and really, incredibly funny.

He and the Pythons, they all met when they were very young. They were all Cambridge and Oxford graduates. They were sort of precursor to pretty much Saturday Night Live and all of the comedy that sort of came out of this sort of the style that they were working on, this sort of absurdist, funny comedy. But he's a legend, he's definitely a legend. One of his best friends was George Harrison. So when you meet him, you're like, "Oh my God, one degree of separation from a Beatle." And in fact, the Pythons have been called the Comedy Beatles. They are the same as the musical Beatles, they're like for comedy.

So we heard that Eric Idle was coming to see the show, and some of my cast members wanted to know when he was coming, some of my cast members didn't want to know when he was coming. I knew when he was coming. And it was very interesting watching the show with him. I had four tickets, so that was Eric Idle, and then two friends of Eric's and myself. And I thought, "Oh, I'll be sitting somewhere else. I won't sit anywhere near them," but I had a ticket right with them. So I, fortunately I had a little buffer. The friends of his were sitting between us. But it's weird when you sit, and you watch a show, and you are seeing it through someone else's eyes. It's impossible to not be thinking, every moment, "I wonder what Eric Idle is thinking as he's watching the show." And it was funny, because Dave Boechler, my designer, was sitting next to Eric Idle on the other side of the aisle. So he wasn't beside him in his seat, but he was on the other side of the aisle. And he could see where Eric thought things were funny, because he was sitting right beside him. I wasn't looking at Eric, I wasn't, but he could see it. And it was great, because at intermission, Eric leaned over and just said, "Great job. It's a great job." And then, you know, they ushered him out, and then Dave Boechler came over and said, "These are the things he's laughing at. These are the things he thinks is funny." But that is a very unusual, extremely unique opportunity, because it is not every day that you get to have not just a writer, but a Python in the room watching the show that you've directed, and then to get the affirmation afterwards of how much
he loved it. So it's certainly a night I will never forget in my entire life, and he was incredibly generous, and incredibly lovely with everybody. My gosh, afterwards, he gave his time to everyone, talked to everyone, had his picture taken with everyone. And he's 80, he's a very, very, very energetic 80 year old, but he's, it's like, this is a long night, and there's time zone differences, he flew in from California, there's all of that. But he was just, he was great, and it was an amazing experience for all of us, so that was fantastic.

Whenever I watch a show that I've directed, I have, many things kind of happen. I mean, when I'm in previews, I'm still very much attached to the show, and then after previews, and when the show opens, I find myself detaching, which is a little interesting. I'm always a little sad when the show opens, because the director generally leaves the show. But at the same time, on the positive side, I get to watch the show now and feel a little bit like, more like an audience. And I get to enjoy the show in a different way. I don't have the obligation that I have when I'm watching it in previews. And now, when I see the show, I usually see it with friends of mine or someone that I'm familiar with. And it's such a joy. I have never worked on a show where there's so many things I look forward to seeing in it. And there's so many moments, I know they're coming, my friends don't know they're coming, the audience doesn't know they're coming, but I know they're coming, and I just can't wait, because I know that the audience is gonna be so delighted by this moment, and I've never been let down yet. So that's the joy of watching it, especially this show.

I mean, I always have that experience on shows, but this one in particular just has so many moving parts. It just has a lot of moving parts. It's got a lot of costume changes, it has a lot of set changes, it has a lot of moving parts, video, Sean Nieuwenhuis's video is amazing, and all of that, and the lighting by Renee Brode, all of that just helps to just make it such an exceptional experience. And there just, honestly, there's more moments in it than I could even count that I look forward to. Some of it is just the way the lighting is, some of it is the costumes, it's just so many things. But I do really enjoy, and like I said, I've never been disappointed yet by the audience's reaction when I get to those moments that I love. If you liked the show, tell people that you liked the show, pass it on, or come back again. I actually know someone who's seen it five times.

Bring people or tell people about it, but spread the word, Spamalot is here. Thank you so much for listening. Thank you so much for seeing the show if you've seen it already. And yeah, enjoy the season. It's an amazing season.