DIRECTOR'S NOTES
Director Lezlie Wade introduces Monty Python's Spamalot
E04 Part One: Pre-Show

Antoni Cimolino
Hi, I'm Antoni Cimolino, the artistic director of the Stratford Festival and you're 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 on route, we thank you for listening in. We hope you enjoy.

Lezlie Wade
Hi, I'm Lezlie Wade, I'm the director of "Spamalot," here at the Stratford Festival in the 2023 season. And this is the pre-show. A lot of it had to do really honestly with a trip I had made to London, England the year before now. We started this in 2019, our first incarnation of conversations about this and then we we preempted by Covid.

So this was a trip that I had been in England in 2018 and I've never been to London, England before. I knew I was going to be doing "Spamalot." And so I was sort of kind of excited about the idea that I here was in London. And it was in you know, the Pythons or English and everything and, I happened to be at Westminster and I was walking through the cloisters at Westminster, and I thought, oh, my goodness, this looks like what the set should be like. And I know that traditionally the set for the show looks in a particular way, but I was really interested in kind of going away from that, departing from it. And so that was kind of the beginning of it. I thought, oh yeah, you know, it's, it's so iconic. It's old and it's iconic and it's, it's sort of steeped in this seriousness. And I thought, wow, that's the juxtaposition that I want for the show. Because, you know, even when you listen to the Pythons talk, they talk about how the show needs to be played completely seriously with ridiculous situations. And so that really was the beginning. And I, that conversation that I had with David Boechler about the set and then following that conversations about how I wanted The Lady of the Lake to be represented. Because she was one of the characters that wasn't in the movie, but that we could play with. And I wanted to give the women agency and I wanted them to be fun. And so consequently, they get to wear that really cool sort of fish armor that is, I think really sets them up beautifully.

So those are probably the two things that sort of started me thinking very much about how the direction I wanted to go with the show. You know for people who know "Monty Python," obviously, I mean we wanted to be respectful and you know you just can't really change some of the things people are coming to look for, if they're familiar with it. So the Knights of Ni, The French
Taunter. There are certain, you know, even the way Arthur looks, there are certain things that you, you know you'd be crazy to change because those are some of the things that people are coming to look for. And so in that respect, we were really honest with the material. But for people who don't know "Python," I mean, I guess the thing is, you know, it's, it's a comedy. It's still a comedy regardless of whether it's a style of comedy that you know or our style of comedy that you don't know, but really it's still extremely funny. And comedy is very, very root is really about serious situations that don't take themselves seriously. It's really about how to find a joke in rhythms and beats and all of that sort of stuff. And Pythons were brilliant at writing it and it's successful on the stage, people are laughing a lot at the show. And whether, you know you're a "Python" fan or not, it's, it's still funny. And then there were like some areas that like I was saying, the Lady of the Lake, there's a couple things that aren't in the movie, they're not in the "Holy Grail." So in those places, even if you are familiar with the movie, you're still gonna see some new interpretations of characters that weren't in the film, that we kind of like update or make comments on, or just so that there's something new even for those people that are familiar with the piece.

My beginnings of "Monty Python" started when I was quite young. My mother had passed away when I was 15, just almost 16, quite suddenly. And I was having a really hard time adjusting and my father kind of introduced me to "Python" as a way of giving me something to laugh at, to find something that would still be funny. And knowing that, you know, comedy is the best medicine, laughter is the best medicine, he thought, well, maybe I would appreciate this. And so my first introduction to "Python" was the "Parrot Sketch" which I just thought was hysterical. And so consequently that got me really interested in watching "Pythons." And I started to watch the, "The Cheese Shop," which is like a very famous one.

The, oh, some of the other ones, "The Bicycle Repairman." There's just, there's so many iconic, "The Argument," I really loved the, "The Argument Sketch." Which is where the person pays to go and have an argument and then every time somebody says, "This is an argument," he says, "No, it's not, it's just contradiction." And he goes, "No, it's not, yes it is." "No it's not, yes it is." Well, you're just arguing, now you're arguing. He goes, "Yes," in five minutes. Then he goes, "Okay, now you have to stop." And he's like, "I paid for five minutes, "that wasn't five minutes." And he is like, "Yes, it is. "No, it wasn't," yes.

I just thought it was so beautifully ridiculous and so funny and so smart too. It really appealed to me on an intellectual basis as well as on a comedy basis. And so what I did was I just started memorizing them. And I think I'm not unique in this regard, I think a lot of people love to memorize the "Python" sketches and then relay them. So I would be at school doing one of his sketches and then suddenly, you know, people would laugh. And I thought, wow, I mean, I'm funny. It was sort of like vicariously using the "Python" material to discover that I actually could be funny as well. And you know, I mean, there is sort of, there is a sort of proclivity towards slight prejudice about women being funny. And so, you know, if you're female and you're making people laugh even if it's through other people's material, that's a great cathartic experience. And for me, it sort of really set me on a path for life. I kind of have a reputation here at the festival for doing British comedies.
So I mean, and it probably starts from there. That's probably the very, very beginning, the very, the very roots of it for sure. Sometimes people ask me about the humor in the play what kind of humor it is, how the humor is used. You know, it seems to be an important question these days about comedy, but I think that humor is the capacity for expression or to perceive what's funny, is used at times as a means of coping with difficult or awkward situations and stressful events. And, and that regard, it's very necessary for us as a healthy society from, you know lighthearted forms to more absurd ones. Humor can play an instrumental role in forming social bonds. The comedy in "Spamalot," you know, at its core focuses on some things like obvious things like bunnies are cute, therefore let's make one a killer, to celebrating, say Jewish culture through a song about contributions to the creation of musical theater, which is an undeniable fact. And when something like that is juxtaposed beside a bunch of Christian knights, whose quest for the Holy Grail can only be realized by getting to Broadway and therefore, finding some Jewish people to help them get there, well then it's, it's comedic. Because in that particular instance, the Christians are faced with a particular dilemma.

The Pythons have the tendency of looking at everything from every angle in our belief systems and saying, "You know have you considered "or have you noticed how...? So I started, my first season, I mean this year was my eighth season at the Stratford Festival. My first season I was here as an assistant director on a production called "Fuente Ovejuna," which was not comedy, it was quite a tragedy actually. And I had that wonderful experience. I honestly never, I mean I always wanted to be at the Stratford Festival, I never dreamed I would be at the Stratford Festival. It was just one of those like it was just a dream come true for me to be here. And then I got invited to be in the Langham project.

So I was in the first year of The Michael Langham Workshop for Classical Direction. It was an incredible year actually, because I was there with a number of really great formidable directors, people like Ravi Jain and just some really amazing people. Thomas Morgan Jones, who's also here this season doing a show that he's written and directed. And so I was very, very lucky. It was a great group of people. And I thought, okay, well that was fantastic. And that year I was lucky enough to assist Des McAnuff on "As You Like It." And so that was a fantastic experience. Then I got asked back that year, the Langham project was two sit years. So I came back for the second year and I got asked to work with Des again on "Jesus Christ Superstar." And it was so funny because I remember I woke up one morning and I thought, oh, they're gonna take it to Broadway. And I didn't know, it wasn't in the ether or anything, I no hadn't heard anything, I just had this feeling. And so I was very lucky to work on that show because it did in fact go to the La Jolla Playhouse and to Broadway, and I was on that show.

Then I came back and I assisted Des on "Henry V" and then I assisted him on the "Christopher Plummer One Man Show A Word or Two." So I've had a very incredible time here at the festival and also got to meet and work with some incredible people like Paul Tazewell, who designed the costumes for Hamilton, and Michael Roth, who's does the underscoring in rap music for almost every show on Broadway. And so I was very, very, very, very, very fortunate. I had an incredible experience and then Des left and I thought, oh, well, you know, that was a great ride. I may never be ever go back that's, you know. And then this is a really weird story but I, you know, I was sort
of having a dark soul of the night one evening and thinking, you know, I probably would never
direct again or, you know, you have those moments. And the next morning there was a light on
my phone answering machine, and I thought, honestly I thought it was a creditor. Like and I
thought, I won't even, I'll just check it later on in the day. I won't, I won't check on it now. I'll
listen to it later and deal with it in the afternoon. Well, it turned out it was Antoni calling. And I
thought, oh, I wonder what Antoni wants? Maybe I took a book out of the library didn’t return it
or something. Like, it was so not in my, it was just not in my lexicon. I just couldn't imagine.

Anyway, lo and behold, Antoni wanted me to direct "H.M.S Pinafore." And so I came back to
direct to the show at the Avon and it was a great experience. I had a wonderful time on the show,
I loved working on it. I was very, very proud of the show. And then I got asked to come back and
direct "An Ideal Husband," which was also an incredible experience. I just adored that company
of actors and just delving into the material, and it was just fantastic and loved that set was, Doug
Paraschuk's set was just incredible. And then I got asked to do "Spamalot," and so I came to do
it. And we were like three weeks into rehearsal when Covid hit. And the weird thing was we
weren't even, I mean, we knew like there was Covid was sort of happening but because we
weren't in the festival, we were at the Avon you don't hear things the same way people hear
things at the festival theater. And so we were just laughing and singing, and spitting on each
other, and dancing and sweating, and blah, blah blah. And then all of a sudden, like the doors
were locked and the show was done, and we just were in shock. And so we waited, you know, all
this time to come back and do it. I'm glad, I'm very glad that we didn't come back last year, I'm
really glad it was this year because I think that it paid off to wait. I think it's just what people
need.

I think the comedy's exactly what people are looking for right now, especially this particular kind
of comedy. And so, yeah, so it's been an incredibly, incredibly rewarding experience. I've loved
every minute I've had at the Stratford Festival. I love working at this company. I love the people
that I work with. It's just, it's a dream come true. When you get the call and you get the contract,
it is, I never take it for granted, ever. I'm just so grateful for it.

Sometimes people will ask me about whether something like "Spamalot," you know still stands
the test of time, whether, you know when it was first created in 2005, are we now perceiving it
in a different way? And how does that affect the piece? And I guess I have a couple of answers
to that. One answer is that everything has to stand up to the test of time. I mean, quite honestly,
the reason that we reconceived Shakespeare is because the Shakespeare plays if performed in
exactly the same way they were done in the 1600s wouldn't be relevant today. And so, we're
constantly trying to put new lenses on things and make things that were written, you know
relevant to our particular time. I mean, I'm sure if you saw "A Children's Hour" now, it wouldn't
have the same effect on you as if you saw it the first time, you know when it was first presented.
And the same can be said of any play. Certainly with "Spamalot," it was first presented in 2005
and that was just after 9/11, or not very long after 9/11 when people were still kind of raw. And
I remember Eric Idle talking about this saying that, you know, definitely people were really hungry
for an opportunity to laugh. And I think, you know, it's the same now. I think this play still gives
people an opportunity, an outlet to laugh and, you know that's not something to be taken lightly.
I think in this particular instance, you know, it's a great cathartic opportunity for people to have a release that I can quite honestly think is incredibly therapeutic. You know, "Spamalot" is the perfect complimentary show to anything here this season. I would say, you know, you, you wanna come to the Stratford Festival to see at least two shows. I mean, ideally you see, you come and you spend a weekend and you see four, you know. But if you're going to see two shows, I would say "Spamalot" is the perfect complimentary show to any of the other shows this season. And I say that because it is probably the biggest, the funniest show, like it is, it is the show that's going to make you laugh. Whereas many of the other shows here will probably make you cry. There's a lot of really beautiful shows that will really stir you. And even, you know, I would say "Grand Magic" which is very funny too has a lot of very funny things in it but it's a different kind of humor, and it balances really beautifully with the humor of "Spamalot." So that would be my, if you're wondering how to compliment any other show, I would say that was the one that you should see.

Thank you very much for listening and make sure you tune back after the show for some spoilers.