

DIRECTOR'S NOTES**Director Sam White reflects on *Wedding Band*****E08 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.

Sam White

Hi, I am Sam White. She/her/hers are my pronouns. I am the director for "Wedding Band" here at the Stratford Festival. Thank you for seeing the play.

The first day for "Wedding Band," well, actually the first few weeks, and I tried to make sure that the process has been consistent from day one to day two to day three and so forth, was to be a caregiver for the cast so that they could create their best work. I consider my strength as a storyteller to be that I'm pretty good at building community. I have some weaknesses too. Now, we have strengths and weaknesses because we're human, but my strength is building community. And so I knew that the first day I wanted to be honest about the work and recognize that a lot of the artists were a little bit nervous about the content. And so I just told everybody plainly, you know, I don't create safe spaces.

If somebody wants a safe space, then I'm probably not the director for you because that sounds to me, in a rehearsal room, very boring. Having a safe space, that sounds like no risk will be taken and no creative challenges will be before us. And so I like to think of my rooms as healthy spaces, meaning it's okay to have a challenging day. It's okay to have a challenging moment and to communicate, to love, and to process our way through it. I think that's more effective, at least I've found that to be more effective in my room. So I was very honest about that with the actors and everybody involved in the creative process. And part of that ritual for us keeping the room healthy has been affirmations, daily affirmations with all of the actors, even our youth actors, breathing exercises, and other exercises to maintain our mental, emotional, and our physical health. Because when you are performing a play like "Wedding Band," your mind knows that it's a play and that you're pretending or you're using your imagination or you're reading a script. Your

body doesn't necessarily know that. Your nervous system doesn't know that. And your body can interpret the heavy language, the action that is happening, the fighting that is happening as being real. And that can cause, you know, actual health problems. And so I want it to be very conscious from day one about telling the truth about what the play is and what we might experience, but also being very strategic about the love in the room and making sure that everybody felt seen and heard and that we had each other's backs. So that's the process or what the process has been for "Wedding Band," or what it was for "Wedding Band."

Well, since you've seen the show, you know that there's a huge American flag that is covering the three homes in the backyard in Fanny's backyard. Fanny is the landowner. She owns three homes in her backyard, and you don't really get to see, well, you don't get to see them at all actually when you first walk into the theater 'cause this huge American flag is looming over us. And the reason why I wanted that there and thought it was so powerful is because there is this idea that the American dream is accessible for everybody. But within Alice Childress's text, she constantly refers to a gospel song that people sing now, even, which is "Jacob's Ladder." We are climbing Jacob's Ladder and it talks about the different rungs on a ladder that people are trying to climb to get to their greatest potential, to reach divinity. And depending on where you are in American society, whether it was 1918, like the women in our play, the people in our play, or now, that still is a very powerful thing to think about, your social status, your race, your gender can all impact what rung you end up on in or on Jacob's Ladder, right?

And so having this big American flag for folks to look at when they first walk into the Tom Patterson Theatre. And as the show begins, the flag lights up, and you can hear all of our cast singing. They're our actual cast members' voices. That isn't a choir or some hired folks outside of our cast, that's our actual cast, including the kids in the show, singing "Jacob's Ladder." And so it was great to start the show in that way, I thought, because first of all, music is so powerful and impactful. And having folks hear that song while looking at this huge, I mean, it's big, American flag hanging on the Tom Patterson Theatre, and then all of a sudden, the lights go dark and the flag goes away, and then the story begins. And you have this image of the American flag playing in your mind as you watch the story of, not just the women in the backyard, but also Herman's family. You encounter them, you also encounter the bellman. There's even a shrimp man that comes into the audience for a few seconds, and all of them are doing their very best to climb that ladder and to find their American dream. And so that's why we wanted to have that American flag there with that song playing. Hopefully, that song rings in your ears throughout the play and that image lives in your mind as you watch these stories. I teach, I'm an educator in addition to being a director. But the thing that I learned, especially doing this play is that, you know, sometimes people have a tendency to wanna coddle children or, you know, baby them. And the thing that I realized, remembered probably, 'cause I have some really amazing, smart nephews, is that children are more resilient, they're more aligned, they're more intellectual than we give them credit for. And so for maybe the first couple of weeks when I was directing the kids, they were a little babied by me, you know? 'Cause we have some really young ones in our show. Nine, I think is the youngest one. And then we have a couple of 12 year olds. I hope I'm getting their

ages right. But what I recognized through playing hopscotch with them, through talking with them, through reading the script with them, through rehearsing with them, talking to their parents, talking to their caregivers who have been very much a part of the process, thank you Amanda, I recognize that they know exactly what's going on at every moment. And it doesn't serve them to coddle them.

What children appreciate is the truth, because when you don't tell them the truth, they can see right through it because their innocence is their greatest power, right? So if you are doing anything that doesn't align with truth, honesty, and being forthcoming with them, they can tell right away. And so I treated them like my colleague, you know, a younger colleague, but a colleague who's being directed like every other actor in the show. And I think when I did that, I think that's when the kids, the children in our play, flourished and thrived the most because they come to do a job. One of them asked me on the first day, "When are we getting paid?" And I said, "Well, that's kind of not in my, "that's not in my wheelhouse here." But it was hilarious and funny because they just say the truth, they want the truth, and they know this is a job. And so I'm treating them like my young colleague, I think was how I got the best results. And they knew that it was 1918. They knew that it was South Carolina. They knew that it was the United States. They knew that it was very, very, very difficult for Black people to exist in a world like that back then and now. And one of them, Ellie, who is incredible, I asked the kids, she's one of the kids who play Princess. Why do we do plays like this? And she said, "So that we can know "how to do better in the future." They have it, they're great, they're great. So I learned to tell children the truth all the time, and do not coddle young people. They wanna be nurtured, not coddled. And there's a big difference.

I think the biggest thing that I learned this season at the Stratford Festival is that it's okay to ask for help. I have my own theater company in Detroit, Shakespeare in Detroit. And so I'm so used to doing so many things alone. I'm used to having to really carry a lot, physically and otherwise. And I realized at the Stratford Festival, I don't have to do that. There are so many people here who wanna help and who did help from days when I might be nervous about the work or frustrated with something. Antoni was really available to me as a mentor, which was wonderful, especially because I was his assistant, right? And so being able to move forward with that relationship and know that that just wasn't something that was available in 2018, he's still available now to mentor me. That was helpful. And also our crew. You know, the crew does not get enough credit.

The crew members, Anthony and Art, Greg, Kevin, Doug, John, I know I'm forgetting some folks, but that's just because that's, my brain doesn't always work as perfectly as I would like it to. But the crew here are incredible. The folks that you don't see who are backstage in their work boots, making the flag fall and go away perfectly on the stage, those are the folks who are really the magicians. I'm the director and that's cool and wonderful and nice, but the folks who make it happen are some of the folks I just named. And so being able to ask for help and actually receive

it is something that I learned is possible at the Stratford Festival. And it's what makes this place, I think, so magical.

Oh, I have an Easter egg for anybody that listens to this, which is fun. And I don't think anybody probably, you would never know unless you know. So at the very, very end of the play, the play's actually over, during the bows, one of the things that we added during the previews, myself and Beau Dixon, there's track that plays while the actors are bowing. And that's me and Beau, that's us humming "Jacob's Ladder." So the voices that you hear during the bows, that's actually my voice, along with the composer's voice on the track. So that's a little Easter egg for anybody who has seen the show. I think it was James Baldwin said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, "but change cannot happen until everything is faced." So for me, that just means that there's so many things happening in our world, you know?

Canada was on fire for a couple of weeks, and our air quality was terrible here for a little bit. We're all just coming out of the pandemic, I guess, I hope, I suppose. And so many other things are happening in the world around us. So we might not be able to face everything, you know, but there are certain things that we can pick one or two things to make some impact, some real impact in the world. And by you seeing this play, you have made some impact in the world because you had the audacity to support the arts, first and foremost. And you also had the audacity to see a show that does not shy away from speaking the truth. And you saw that show with your neighbors. You were right next to them. You looked across, and they were right there at the Tom Patterson Theatre. So continuing to have the audacity to support art forms like theater specifically, especially, I'm very biased, of course, when it comes to theater, because we need stories like "Wedding Band" and other stories to continue to face some of the opposition in our world. You know, things that oppose us from being the greatest that we could be, like racism and misogyny and all of that.

And so I hope that you know what you did by supporting theater today and by seeing a show like "Wedding Band," you're doing the work by having sat in that seat that you sat in. So thank you. And I hope that resonates with you and you continue to do it and encourage others to do the same.