

DIRECTOR'S NOTES**Director Sam White introduces *Wedding Band*****E08 Part One: Pre-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

My name is Sam White. She/her/they are my pronouns, and I am the director for "Wedding Band" at the Stratford Festival. The first creative bud that sparked "Wedding Band" for me was the opportunity to tell a story that I think so many people can connect with. Well, during the pandemic, of course, we were all conscious of what was happening in the world around us from everyone's health to the social implications of 2020, and I think that "Wedding Band" fits right in that mold because the story not only speaks to the plight of stolen people on stolen land, which was a big conversation after George Floyd died in 2020. But it also speaks about the influenza, the Spanish influenza of 1918, which was different than the Covid 19 virus but also very, very similar. And so it's a story that in some way shape or form everybody can relate to on a level that's pretty real, being that we're just finding our way out of pandemic times, I think, I guess, I hope, maybe, not really, but. And those conversations that were really heightened in 2020 are still happening not just in theaters but in organizations around the world from this continent to others, and so the first creative bud for me was being able to tell the truth. And that's great and exciting as a director.

What's really great about the Tom Patterson Theater is that the actors are right there in the center of the theater, and they see the audience and the audience sees them from 180 degrees. And it's a beautiful, intimate experience I think for audiences. That's why I love the Tom Patterson Theater. It's funny enough because "Wedding Band" was actually written for a proscenium, so a nice picture frame, you know and with the audience sort of witnessing the action on the stage. And Alice Childress was really specific actually in her playwright notes at the very top of the play about the way that she wanted the play presented. But I think the reason why she was so specific about wanting it to play in a proscenium is because she hadn't had the opportunity to see it on a

thrust. Because the thing that makes the thrust, specifically the TPT, so wonderful is that for size and scale, the sound of it, just everything about that particular space is perfect for "Wedding Band." You're in the backyard with these women, with Fanny, with Lula, with Mattie, and with Julia, and it's almost as if you're their neighbor if you're sitting in the audience. And so you feel more connected to the story than ever, I think more so than you would in a proscenium theater. And so I hope folks come and they realize by looking at the configuration of the stage but also by looking around and seeing each other, that none of us are alone, you know in life and in our stories as humanity. We all have each other. And sometimes I think with stories like "Wedding Band" where racism and misogyny are centered in the storytelling, sometimes folks wanna run away from it or it can make you feel isolated because something like guilt might come up in your system, in your nervous system, or perhaps depending on who you are in the audience, you know, you can feel quite triggered or traumatized by it.

But the joy, and I think the relief, of having it in the Tom Patterson Theater is that you recognize that we're all in this together. And that's important for "Wedding band." I think that's the beauty of theater and that's why we all needed to return to theater, is because we spent so much time in isolation and quarantine that we forgot that we weren't alone. And so the Tom Patterson is a reminder that we aren't in fact alone in this life. And you get to watch a beautiful story like "Wedding Band" while you're reminded that there are other folks who are with you in life and in the theater.

Yeah, it's been really exciting to see that so many theaters are now producing Alice Childress's work, from "Wine in the Wilderness" to "Wedding Band," of course and so many other plays that she's written. She was an actor as well so her plays, I think, were written for actors. She has a very specific and rhythmic way of telling stories. What's really exciting, I think, for theaters and for audiences is that Alice Childress has a really unique voice and it's a story told by a black woman, which is much different than say, in much respect, of course, to August Wilson, who was an incredible writer as well, but it's a much different voice. I don't know, there's something really incredible and unique about telling a story from a woman's perspective. You know, as far as being a sister and a mother and an entrepreneur and a landowner and a storyteller and a daughter, she has all of these different existences within her storytelling and I think that's what makes "Wedding Band" and stories like it so unique. And so it's really exciting to have a playwright like Alice Childress experience this resurgence because I think she's really highlighting the fact that womanhood and blackness are not monolithic. And so you get to see all of these different shades of humanity, the stories like "Wedding Band" and her other plays as well. I'm very biased, you know, obviously, I love "Wedding Band." It's her magna opus. It really is her masterpiece.

She has a lot of wonderful plays, I just mentioned another one of the plays, "Wine in the Wilderness," I'm a huge fan of, but "Wedding Band" is the sweet spot in her cannon. And I think a lot of people would agree, for sure. Well, I think the great thing about working at the Stratford Festival is that you really do have the human resources and their creative resources to tell a really

unique story. Even if someone has seen "Wedding Band" before, they've read the play, the Stratford Festival's production is its own unique production. From the brief prologue that we've sort of added to the play, not as far as language or anything like that, you have to come to see it to understand what I mean and to see what I'm talking about. It's more of a design and music choice that was inspired by the play. And the music by the way, by Beau Dixon, is one of the, I think, incredible highlights of this show. It's bluesy, it's gospel, it's so many things that really added to, I think the uniqueness and the beauty of this world that we specifically created here at the Stratford Festival. So even if you've seen the play, even if you've read it before, I think the energy and the DNA of this specific group of artists, this specific group of designers, makes the play rare and extraordinary.

On top of being in the Tom Patterson, and I really am not just saying it because I directed a play inside of the Tom Patterson Theater, it really is a unique venue. From the sound, the voices, and the way that they are amplified in the space just naturally, it's an incredible place to make art and so I hope people come and see it and enjoy it because it really is a rare treat for sure. My first experience with the Stratford Festival was in 2018. I was Antoni Cimolino, of course, the artistic director of the Stratford Festival, his assistant, for the incredible amazing production of "The Tempest" with Martha Henry. And I specifically wanted to work on that production because Martha Henry was born and raised in Detroit, as was I. And I found that quite inspirational because it made me believe, it makes me believe still that you can be from anywhere in the world and make a life in art across countries' boundaries and all of that. And so it was a treat and honor to be able to assist Antoni but work with Martha Henry as well, and to just be in a room with excellence, pure brilliance, every rehearsal. And so I found that quite inspiring, and it's been five years, a little over five years since then, and now I'm back directing a show on my own for the first time at the Stratford Festival.

And it's even more incredible because I feel like the legacy in some way, in some small way, of Detroit at the festival, maybe just in a tiny way, I could carry that on a little bit, and tell a story here this year at the festival, "Wedding Band," that is about a community that I'm very familiar with as someone from the States. As someone who grew up with a father who was from the Deep South and a grandmother who was from the Deep South, well, two grandmothers from the Deep south. And so it feels like a full circle moment being back at the Stratford Festival, and I'm grateful. It's quite extraordinary. I'm from Detroit and I'm directing at the Stratford Festival. That's wild to say that out loud. That's wild. So yeah, it's great. It's wonderful.

I think my personal connection to the show, if the show resonates with anyone, it's probably because first of all, the actors in the show are tremendous and wonderful, and I'm so lucky, I'm so honored to be able to work with all of them. From our principals to our understudies, everybody's great. From the nine-year-olds to the other year olds. I'm lucky. But I hope that my personal connection really informs the work because I know these women in the play. Even though they're fictional characters, they are very much like my grandmother, her name was Angel

Lee Jackson, who came from Alabama. The characters in our play, of course, are from South Carolina, but Alabama is still the Deep South. And she came and she started her own flower shop and began a life for herself in Detroit. And those decisions that she made obviously impacted me because here I am today, I wouldn't be here if it weren't for my grandmother. And so I feel like the stories in "Wedding Band" are stories that are personally connected to me and that I wanna honor and pay homage to because without women like Lula, Julia, Mattie, and Fannie, I wouldn't be here. And so it really is, it's an incredible full circle moment for me to be able to tell this story of "Wedding Band" at the Stratford Festival, and to be able to tell a story that's quite close to my heart.

So I'm very honored. I want people to know, anyone that's interested in coming to the show or planning to come to see the show, that I know that there's an audience disclaimer and the content seems very heavy based on the description that you might read for "Wedding Band," and of course, those things are real, those things are true. There's a lot of heavy language and language that can be quite triggering for folks. But I also just wanna add that it's also very entertaining. The show is quite funny. There's music, there's dance in the show. You'll laugh a little, you'll cry a little. You might be a little frustrated but all of these are things that come with being a human and so it really is a full faceted story. It's not just this really difficult hard story that you're gonna come and see and walk away and have sort of this really heavy burden that's on you. It's also, it includes gospel music, it's really a beautiful show and it has lots of range. So don't be afraid of "Wedding Band," it's really a human story.