



## THE *Director's Notes*

Many years ago I was fortunate to have as my Honorary Patron (and mentor), Sir Nigel Hawthorne. Most remember him for his role as "Sir Humphrey Appleby" in *Yes, Minister*, but unless you were also an avid theatre-goer, you may not have known that he also played a lot of Shakespeare. It was while he was rehearsing the title role in *King Lear* for the RSC, that we briefly discussed the idea of Shakespeare for the screen and what might work for modern audiences. He was interested in how Shakespeare could be adapted for different times and cultures and was happy to share some thoughts with me at the time.

Nigel's approach to Shakespeare truly appealed to me. I loved his attention to detail and his way of seeing the world and his work within it – something he brought to all his roles. His notes on *Lear* and his conclusion that the character was suffering senile dementia were fascinating, and I think, right on point. While Shakespeare and his contemporaries may not have had a term for that illness, it makes total sense to me to explain both *Lear's* actions in the play and the reactions of those around him. He's not a tyrant, he's a once-loved king losing control – due to fighting a losing battle within himself that becomes externalized through his (out-of-control) actions. And I always respected Nigel's way of clarifying why he made the choices he did – with innate intelligence, honesty and total integrity.

That's one of the things I loved about Nigel, he "got" it and wasn't afraid to go against the grain of popular opinion on how a piece "should" be played. Shakespeare wrote about human beings, not caricatures. Whether you agreed with Nigel's interpretation or not, you were in no doubt that he was playing a man overwhelmed by the uncontrollable forces of nature – giving us a living, breathing portrait of a man used to being in total control, who was no more.

During our correspondence, I mentioned my idea of finding a way to bring Shakespeare to modern audiences in bite sized pieces and Nigel thought it fascinating, but also warned me about the difficulty of finding a home for such a venture. This was the days before the Internet became what it is and the idea of the medium of web television hadn't even been

thought of. And so the concept was put to one side, but not forgotten.

Sadly Nigel has since passed away and is not here to see that idea finally take form over a decade later and what the amazing team here in Melbourne have created. But wherever he is, I think he would be proud of us for finishing what we set out to do and remaining true to the original concept of bringing Shakespeare to modern audiences – without compromising the original work. From the start, I have kept what Nigel said all those years ago firmly in mind and I know he had a direct influence on my choices when making this. Keep grounded. Keep real. Play the person, not the part. Be true. Find the Real Person.

All good advice when directing (and playing) some of the most famous roles in English theatre.

Shakespeare is tricky – you either love him or hate him. And if you love him, you are either a staunch traditionalist or ... not. So, if audiences find us, there will be criticism, it comes with the territory. I just hope it's the kind that we can have an intelligent debate about – because THAT is one of the things we are aiming to achieve. If we can begin a conversation about Shakespeare where we all learn something, then we're winning. And not just for us, but for Shakespeare and all who have played his roles and staged his works down through the ages. Because if we're talking about him in the wider public in an intelligent way, then we're proving that he is indeed still relevant.

Ultimately, when doubt raises it's slightly deformed head to give me a quizzical look of unease, I simply nod in it's direction and send it this reassurance: "This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man."

Shakespeare, as it turns out, has some very good advice as well.

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