

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Forty-five years ago, actor August Schellenberg and director John Juliani shared a dream of doing Shakespeare's *King Lear* with an all First Nations/Aboriginal acting company. While the idea was received with a reasonable amount of enthusiasm, they were told that there were not the actors available to handle such an undertaking. While perhaps that may have been true in the late 60s, nothing could be further from the truth today. John Juliani passed away in 2003, and the dream risked never becoming a reality. So, you can imagine how truly honoured I was when Mr. Schellenberg asked if the National Arts Centre would take on this project this season. Our production of *King Lear* is dedicated to John Juliani's memory and is in no small way deeply indebted to him.

King Lear is one of the greatest plays to be written in the English language: it is big, profound and mysterious. It also takes on further meaning presented in an Aboriginal context on our National stage.

It perhaps goes without saying that the history of our country, and the enormous impact of First Peoples discovering the Europeans, provides us with a vital understanding of our contemporary world, and has enormous impact on the drama of *King Lear*.

First performed in 1606, *King Lear* imagines a history of ancient Britain through the last days of an aging king who categorically divides his kingdom into three and challenges his daughters' loyalties and fidelity in the act with the disputing Lords of Albany, Cornwall and France.

Throughout our preparation and rehearsal we were interested in exploring this division of lands in the context of 17th century Canada; a world in which English, French and First Nations people endured the struggle of first contact and survived the violent crucible out of which North American society would be constructed. Strikingly similar to the political setting of Shakespeare's play, our own history casts a new cultural light on the tragedy, while at the same time providing a unique theatrical lens through which we may consider our country and ourselves.

The classical past and the "new world" are rarely far apart in Shakespeare's history and dramaturgy. Shakespeare consistently wrote "doubly" about ancient worlds and contemporary societies. His lifespan coincides with early first contact. Matoaka (Pocahontas) met King James I and Queen Anne in London in 1617 and reportedly attended Shakespeare's *The Tempest* at the Globe.

What if *King Lear* were imagined by her? How would one royal person view a fiction of royalty and government in a culture she paradoxically defended – and subsequently made her a prisoner?

Interestingly, Shakesperean actor Edmund Kean famously read passages of *King Lear* to the Huron and was made an honorary Chief in 1826. However, the play is a poetic tragedy, not a historical drama – and so we have endeavoured to retain many classical elements, in theatrical collision with our understanding of First Nations perspectives. Our goal is not to further a history

of misrepresentation, but rather to bring a quality of inclusiveness to our history, and an often neglected cultural point of view to the performance of Shakespeare in Canada.

August Schellenberg was born in Montreal, Quebec to a Swiss father and an English-Mohawk mother. His work as an actor has literally taken him to almost every major stage in Canada and we are honoured to have him once again at the National Arts Centre. We are also honoured to have the enormous wealth of talent and experience of the ensemble gathered for this production. While so many of the Company are familiar to NAC audiences due to their enormous body of work, we also welcome and honour the members of the Four Nations Exchange, making their professional stage debut.

Working alongside Artistic Associate Paula Danckert and Aboriginal Community Liaison Suzanne Keptwo, the Four Nations Exchange has been a weekly workshop with members of the local Aboriginal/First Nations community, exploring theatre craft and practice, through Anishinaabeg traditional teachings. The fulfillment of this work is that we have the members of the Exchange participating in the production as members of the community and Lear's "followers".

The Four Nations Exchange refers to the Fourth Fire prophecy of the Anishinaabeg Peoples which foretells a time of peace and understanding. I am constantly amazed and excited by how the storytelling of *King Lear* and the teachings of the Prophecies inform one another and deepen my understanding of both.

I want to thank each and every member of the crew, staff and creative team on *King Lear*; they have all believed in and supported this dream, and that is powerful medicine.

As we have been rehearsing *King Lear*, I am reminded everyday, how many assumptions there are to colonialism – and am aware that theatre is a powerful place to welcome new and innovative ways of seeing. The cultural context of *Lear* has requested every habit, decision and assumption be re-examined – and that's always good – it makes one's artistic choices precise and pertinent. I am grateful for learning so much.

Every play is a proposition, a provocation, a challenge, and as Artistic Director I am proud to leave my post with a production as bold as when I arrived seven years ago. I hope that you in the audience will be stimulated and changed by what you witness – I look forward to sharing the unknown of it all.

Thanks Augie, for sharing this dream with us – and may I offer my deepest respect and thanks to the Algonquin people, who inspire us, and on whose land we present *King Lear*.

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Enjoy the show.

PETER HINTON

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR