



presents



**Interview with New York Classical Theatre's
Artistic Director, Stephen Burdman**

*By Sid Ray, Professor of English and Women's
and Gender Studies at Pace University
and current Board member of NY Classical.*

As New Yorkers cautiously emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions and adjust to changing social and political realities, live theater returns to help us make sense of what we have endured. Shakespeare's *King Lear* was written and performed at a similarly fraught juncture in English history, during a plague outbreak with terrible loss of life amid political unrest. Responding to those traumatic circumstances, Shakespeare's *Lear* plumbs the depths of human suffering, exploring the acute physical and emotional pain at the intersection of political ambition and family dysfunction, as its characters desperately search for some form of transcendence. The concept of love, what it means and how to express it, lies at the heart of the play. *King Lear* demands that we "take upon's the mystery of things,/ As if we were God's spies," and leaves it to us to discern whether love is a destructive or redemptive force.

For its return to live outdoor performance, NY Classical revives *King Lear*—but with a twist. Artistic Director Stephen Burdman has incorporated Nahum Tate's 1681 revised and adapted happy ending to Shakespeare's otherwise fiercely tragic vision.

Stephen and I talked recently about adapting and staging *King Lear* for NY Classical's return to in-person events and to discuss the company's commitment to racial justice.

Stephen, why did you choose Shakespeare's *King Lear* this summer with Restoration theatre impresario Nahum Tate's 1681 revised ending?

The last time we did *King Lear* was in 2009 during the Great Recession, and the press asked why it seemed like we were the only company in the City doing tragedy. That season we had our single largest audience— 1,200 people at one performance. Catharsis, it turns out, is actually a human need.

Nahum Tate's version has always intrigued me—it's treacly and gaudy and has all sorts of horrible things that I would *not* want to put on stage, but it gives *King Lear* that added dimension of—spoiler alert!— Cordelia and Edgar as a couple. So I experimented with cutting Shakespeare and Tate together.

Tate's ending gives the story more balance. It is not so apocalyptic, and returns to the material that inspired Shakespeare: the earlier play *King Lear and his Three Daughters*, which has a "happy-ish" ending.

In my work, I strive to create a cohesive ending to every production, and Shakespeare doesn't always give that to us. Sometimes I have to adapt the text. Also, NY Classical audiences are excited to see something different. So this production is about 85% Shakespeare, 15% Tate.

In 1681, Nahum Tate was writing for actresses who were finally allowed to perform on the public stage in England. Audiences wanted more scenes between women and men because seeing them interact was such a new phenomenon.

Absolutely—sex sells. It was only in Britain where women weren't allowed to act. Over the past few seasons, NY Classical has produced readings of several Spanish plays where female characters are in charge of the action. Every time, the actresses say to me, "...A classical play where a woman has agency! How awesome!" In Shakespeare's time, boys played these women's roles—and now we get a chance to see more of Cordelia!

Tate removed the Fool from his adaptation, but you put "him" back in. You ingeniously have Cordelia *consciously* disguise herself as the Fool (rather than keeping them as separate characters) and in doing so, you give her this wonderful additional strength.

I make sure that the audience sees her change into the Fool. As you know, Edgar and Kent also assume a disguise during the play, so now you have three characters who do this! By using Tate's text, we also get to witness a mutual revelation between Edgar and Cordelia that locks in their love story and justifies the "happy" ending of the play.

I appreciate the extra irony you put in the scene where neither Lear nor Edgar has on much in the way of clothes and Cordelia is disguised as the Fool pretending she isn't seeing her father and boyfriend naked together.

We won't be quite that naked but naked enough. Having the same actor who plays Cordelia also play the Fool has been going on for more than 400 years. It makes practical sense, especially with the limited number of actors who were available to Shakespeare in the early 17th century. Lear also refers to the Fool as "boy," which is perfect for a female-presenting actor who is disguised as the Fool in our production.

Although he was Poet Laureate, Tate is nobody's favorite writer. Is there anything positive we can say about him?

Well... I would never produce the whole Tate *Lear*. When I substitute words in my performance scripts, I always work from Shakespeare's lexicon (the words he used in his other plays and poems). But Tate didn't. Tate wrote a new play, an adaptation of *King Lear*. And that gave me a freer hand. So I found myself cutting Shakespeare back into Tate. Tate's play was billed as Shakespeare's *Lear*, but that was just wrong. For our production, we're saying it's William Shakespeare's *King Lear* with Nahum Tate's happy ending.

I take our adaptation process in a much more strict sense than Tate did. I'm always thinking about the audience first, and about the story the actors are telling. The story of *King Lear* was told many times before Shakespeare took a stab at it—Shakespeare's version is just my favorite of the telling.

Was Tate wrong? No. Would we produce him today? No. To quote a fan of ours, what is Shakespeare without his language?

Indeed, the trick for Shakespeare was to capture the extremes of human emotions through a language that is inadequate to the task. Do you have a favorite line from Shakespeare's *King Lear*?

We were going to end the adaptation with pure Tate, but I had to close it with Shakespeare. The last line of Shakespeare's *Lear* is, "The oldest hath borne most; we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long." It's my favorite line in all of Shakespeare, and I didn't have the heart to cut it. My perspective has certainly changed over the years. There was a time when I was the youngest artist in rehearsals, so these lines have provided a life-long lesson: listen and learn from your elders. Mid-career now, I'd like to think that I'm still learning. There are still elders to teach me. One of the themes of *King Lear* is you're never too old to learn, but that line at the end is also about being open, and about being humble in the face of wisdom.

Along the lines of life-long learning, let's discuss the diverse cast of this production and NY Classical's commitment to IDEA: Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access.

Our goal is to have a cast and crew for each show that mirrors the demographics of a NYC subway car in midtown during rush hour. I think we've done that with our amazing cast for *King Lear*. It's not enough to have good intentions—to begin to achieve racial justice there *must* be active intervention that creates deep changes in structure and policy. After the reckoning that came after the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and so many others, we will never again cast a play without a historically underrepresented person in the room making artistic decisions. We hired a Casting Liaison, Marcus D. Harvey, whose influence has been profound.

Again, there's so much more for us to do and learn on micro and macro levels. We are thinking more carefully and critically about classical scripts. For example, to be more conscious of racial trauma, we switch out specific words that carry a racist connotation to avoid retraumatizing Black actors in the show and the audience members hearing it. And we've made all of the marriages in the play interracial to normalize unions that, not very long ago, were forbidden by racist laws.

NY Classical has a Literary Director now, too. Matt [Chapman, Assistant Professor of Theatre Studies at SUNY New Paltz and author of *Antiblack Racism in Early Modern Drama: The Other Other*] is now one of the creatives leading the company. This summer, he is producing a new play by Beth Piatote. Beth is an Indigenous author who has adapted Sophocles's *Antigone* to reflect on the repatriation of tribal history from museums and the brutal legacy of colonialism.

We're performing a dramatic reading of it on Governor's Island on June 27. He has really expanded things here and it's only his first season!

That point neatly circles back to your favorite line from *King Lear* about learning, adjusting, and being humble and respectful in the face of those who can teach us about racial justice and doing the anti-racist work.

Yes: to be inclusive and equitable, we need to listen and see the bigger picture and keep the realities of racial oppression at the forefront of decision-making. To do that we have to be more deliberate. Sure, I have personal experiences with being a Jew in the world and facing anti-Semitism. It can be difficult, but it's not the same—the histories of oppression have unfolded very differently. I'm learning to lead and make art with that in mind. Progress is exciting! Ultimately, I don't want to stop growing as an artist and I want New York Classical Theatre to be part of the much-needed change.

What you're saying is, and in light of the questions *King Lear* poses, it is up to us to ensure that love is *redemptive* and not destructive and to do the work to make that happen.

Exactly. Come see *King Lear* in the NYC Parks this summer, starting June 24! Make your reservations today!