

Interview: Stage Director Gary Griffin on the Stratford Festival HD Movie ‘Antony and Cleopatra’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on May 20, 2015 - 9:17pm

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CHICAGO – The romance of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, has fascinated sensibilities for centuries. William Shakespeare, no slouch when it comes to cultural commentary, wrote his version of the pairing in “Antony and Cleopatra,” the latest in the Stratford (Ontario) Festival of High Definition cinema adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays. Chicagoan Gary Griffin directed the stage production, that was rendered to HD. The screenings of “Antony and Cleopatra” will take place on May 21st, 2015, in various movie theaters across the country, including Chicago.

Griffin is a professional theater veteran, originally from Rockford, Illinois, who cut his teeth in the Chicago theater scene. For the Stratford Festival – besides this version of “Antony and Cleopatra” – he has directed the musicals “42nd Street,” “Camelot,” “Evita” and “West Side Story.” Locally, he has worked with the the Lyric Opera of Chicago, among other area theatrical venues, and he has won eight Joseph Jefferson Awards for direction. He is the Associate Artistic Director of the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre.



‘Antony and Cleopatra,’ Screens in Movie Theaters on May 21st, 2015

Photo credit: Stratford Festival

The Stratford Festival is located in the province of Ontario in Canada, slightly south of Toronto, in the the town of Stratford. Under the umbrella Stratford Festival HD, the legendary theater organization aims to record every play by William Shakespeare in the next ten years – with full staging, live audiences, High Definition processing and enhanced sound design. “Antony and Cleopatra” is the third in the series, following “King Lear” and “King John.”

HollywoodChicago.com spoke to Gary Griffin via phone on the evening before the nationwide screening of “Antony and Cleopatra.”

HollywoodChicago.com: It is said that ‘Antony and Cleopatra’ is not easily categorized – its history is not consistent, and contains tragic, comic and romantic elements. Is there a category that you are comfortable with specifically, or did you break it into its various descriptive elements when you began the direction of the play?

Gary Griffin: One of the great things about the play is that it is hard to categorize. This is William Shakespeare at the height of his prodigious powers, and I find it largely to be a tragedy, if you view it classically. But I think the love story is wildly romantic, with people who have a lot of passion and think with their heart, and in turn are taken down by this romantic passion. So if you combine the two descriptions, it’s really a romantic tragedy.

Lots of productions try to cut back the historical elements of the play, but I think it’s important to view it through the politics of the world, and it weaves so beautifully through it. And even though you’re among the scenes of the territorial triumvirate, the subject remains Cleopatra. That’s what I found so amazing about directing it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Even though this version is fairly classic in form, what did you want to do to breathe new life into your staging?

Griffin: Well, one thing I’ll tell you that was scary was when I first started telling people I was going to direct this play, they would reply with some version of “that’s the hardest Shakespeare play there is,” or “I’ve never seen a successful production of it.” [laughs] That’s exactly what I didn’t want to hear.

What I tried to think about is to take everything regarding the play completely out of my head, and put the time and place in the beauty of its context. We wanted to do something culturally true for the staging, and I don’t think we’ve seen that before. We were lucky in the place we filmed it, because the Patterson Theatre [in Stratford] is very intimate, and there are so many personal and intimate scenes in the play. Being up close and personal to those characters really helped. I really wanted to discover what it might feel like to live in that world, and put the audience right in the middle of it.

HollywoodChicago.com: In general, and since you deal with Shakespeare through your work with the theater, what characterizes the modern staging of the Bard’s plays versus, for example, the staging during the mid twentieth century in Sir Lawrence Olivier’s style?

Griffin: I think now what directors are doing now is a lot of interpretations and mixing of worlds, because the language of the plays open it up to those adaptations. People have investigated the plays to help the audience connect better, and using ideas that enhance that connection. The mid twentieth century style was to strip the plays down, and get to the actor and language. The great thing about the Stratford Festival is that all of those styles has been done.

With our play, I felt a certain responsibility because it isn’t produced that often. This will be among one or two other recorded versions, and maybe the only one they’ll see in their lives. So I tried to encompass as much of the play as possible, and make it cinematic, as people have said in the past is inherent in the text. The filming of the play proved that cinematic aspect.

HollywoodChicago.com: We talked about the general atmosphere you wanted in your production. How does that process evolve when you get the play on its feet?

Griffin: I worked closely with my designer early on, to share with the actors the playing space they would be in. But we also talked a lot about the environment of the settings. In many instances, you’ll see small gestures to achieve the settings, and I wanted to connect the actors to that. It was about knowing in their minds where they were, even though physically we weren’t necessarily going to show it to the audience. So much of that in Shakespeare is revealed in the language. There were no big scene changes back then, so it had to be there.

HollywoodChicago.com: And I’ve noticed that the Stratford Festival HD productions have been traditionally costumed...

Griffin: The clothes were a huge part of it, we got the actors into their fittings very early in the process. They knew what they were wearing and what their fellow players were wearing, so that charges the atmosphere. We don’t dress like that. [laughs] The behavior becomes part of the costuming.

HollywoodChicago.com: What did the two principals, Yanna McIntosh and Geraint Wyn Davies, imbue into the title characters that gave you the most satisfaction as you directed them?

Griffin: They were amazing. When we planned the project, we picked it especially for Ger and Yanna – I knew Ger, and had watched Yanna for years. They are both exquisite actors, but they are also very fertile and fresh. They kept the proceedings from being musty or museum-like, in addition to making it immediate and alive. They are also both very smart and comfortable in those heightened roles. They can take the language and live it, and it didn’t feel like they were reaching at all. We were lucky to engage people of that caliber.

HollywoodChicago.com: Even educated people have a hard time approaching a Shakespeare production. What is the best advice you can give anyone, as an audience member, if they have never given a Shakespeare production a chance?

Griffin: I would say you need to relax, and accept for ten minutes it might be difficult to comprehend. But there is something interesting about Shakespeare, that after that 10 to 15 minute period, it starts to click in. Without even realizing it, you begin to understand more and more. So just relax, stay with it, and you’ll eventually feel comfortable in the world.



Gary Griffin, Stage Director of ‘Antony and Cleopatra’

Photo credit: Peter Bosty

HollywoodChicago.com: The ambition for the Stratford Festival is to eventually capture all of Shakespeare’s plays. Which of those do you think sometimes defies its nature as a stage play, and continues to confound the artists who want to produce it?

Griffin: As I said before, ‘Antony and Cleopatra.’ [laughs] The best of Shakespeare always seems to be the hardest, like ‘King Lear’ always seems slightly out of reach, and the thrill is to see the artists striving to reach for it. As we watch them, we learn more about the process of producing those shows. Lynn Redgrave said that “acting provides the fulfillment of never being fulfilled.” That can be applied also to various Shakespeare productions.

HollywoodChicago.com: How old were you when you first saw a produced Shakespeare play, and how did that exposure stay with you as you evolved into a theater professional?

Griffin: I know I first saw ‘Romeo and Juliet’ in Junior High, and I saw ‘Taming of the Shrew’ a few years later, but I as a college student I was scared of Shakespeare. I loved it, but as an undergrad they’re always telling us that we’re too young to perform it. But jumping in and trying it, while I was at the University of Wisconsin, was the way to get over it – just do it. It’s also amazingly easy to memorize, because of the meter and rhythm, it’s falls into place quickly.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve directed so many categories of stage plays – classical, comedy, drama and musicals. Which of these require the most attention to detail, and can quickly fall off the tracks if that attention to detail is not followed?

Griffin: Well, they all do, obviously. [laughs] God is in the details. But Shakespeare and musicals are similarly challenging – the energy in the room and the type of artists you gather for the work both feels the same. It’s a heightened reality in both, and they’re both very theatrical. They both need intense attention for the audience to believe the heightened sensibility, and they both have to sit on a solid foundation. If the audience is worrying about what makes sense, then they can’t surrender to what you’re trying to provide for them.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you think sets Chicago apart as a theater town, and what does it offer that no other city – in your travels – can match?

Griffin: The Chicago audience doesn’t enter the theater with much of an agenda, they are much more willing to take their time engaging in the work. In comparison, a New York audience member might come in, arms folded, with the attitude of ‘show me something!’ It’s a different kind of viewpoint. In Chicago, a play that slowly unfolds can work really well.

As far as a theater town, there is something within the DNA of the City of Chicago, and their history, that evolved an active theater scene. It’s a combination of many things, but as an artist you sense that Chicago is a place that theater is part of where you are, and that it is important. It’s embraced here, and you don’t feel you’re making a case for theater in the city, it’s just part of what it is. Chicago and theater are one.

HollywoodChicago.com: What line from ‘Antony and Cleopatra’ can best describe a part of your life philosophy, and how did its emphasis change because your love of that line?

Griffin: There is one part of the action where Cleopatra says to a messenger, “it is never good to bring bad news.” It’s a simple line, but it’s a feeling that occurs when the line is delivered, that in the snap of moment it could all be over. In the range of status in the play, from the lowly messenger to the Queen of Egypt, they affect each other – we affect each other. Don’t think that as the messenger you’re important, and

don't think as the Queen you are immune. That's what the line did for me, it connected the status across humanity.

Stratford Festival HD presents “Antony and Cleopatra” at the following theater locations in and around Chicago on Thursday, May 21st, 2015. CHICAGO: Showplace ICON, Regal City North. CHICAGOLAND SUBURBS: Cinemark Evanston, Niles 12, Chicago Heights, Lincolnshire 21, Addison 21 and Cinemark Woodridge. See local listings for theater location, show times and nationwide screenings. Featuring Geraint Wyn Davies, Yanna McIntosh. Ben Carlson and Tom McCamus. Written by William Shakespeare. Directed for the stage by Gary Griffin. Directed for HD by Barry Avrich. Not Rated.



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Source URL (retrieved on *Mar 28 2024 - 3:24pm*):
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