ACTING SHAKESPEARE: A Roundtable Discussion with Artists from the Utah Shakespeare Festival's 2025 Production of *Antony and Cleopatra*

Stewart Shelley
USF Education Director

Featuring: Gabriel Elmore, Cassandra Bissell, Chauncey Thomas, Geoffrey Kent

Shelley: Good morning, everybody. Welcome. Hopefully this morning has been productive thus far. I heard applause in the other room, so I'm assuming things are going well. By way of introduction, my name is Stewart. I'm the education director with the Utah Shakespeare Festival, and I'm delighted to introduce you to the amazing friends, brilliant company members, and some of the best verse speakers in the nation, who you were able to see last evening in *Antony and Cleopatra*. I'm interested to hear your thoughts and your questions. We have Gabriel Elmore, Cassandra Bissell, Chauncey Thomas, and Geoffrey Kent who are joining us. All of them incredible. I'm going to let them introduce themselves, and tell you a little bit about where they're from. I also like to pose a question just to get brains kind of warmed up. What is it about *Antony and Cleopatra* that surprised you, delighted you, or caught you off guard in this show particularly?

Elmore: Hello, I'm Gabriel Elmore. I'm from Philadelphia. I do most of my acting there. This is, weirdly, my second consecutive

Journal of the Wooden O. Vol 25, 115-137

ISSN: 1539-5758

production of *Antony and Cleopatra*. It's very jarring to think that I've sat with this for seven months. I think the thing that surprised me most about the play was that Shakespeare has power plays, and he has love plays, and I think *Antony and Cleopatra* is the only example of both existing in the same framework. And I think that provides a lot of relief from the tragedy. In the staging and the exploration, it's very compelling and tragic and it's also kind of hilarious and touching at the same time. That was what surprised me.

Bissell: I am Cassandra Bissell, and I play Agrippa in *Antony and Cleopatra*. I'm based now in northern Wisconsin in a little village, Egg Harbor, in Door County. This is going to be similar to what you're saying, but I was surprised at how funny it is. I really did not expect that. And a lot of that is specific to our production, too, I think. I think it can be done much more seriously. But there's a lot of humor written in there, and I really do appreciate that. The mix of a political play with the larger world stage, which is ultimately domestic because it's about this romance, means there's room for humor.

Thomas: I'm Chauncey Thomas. I'm currently in New York, but I'm from central Illinois. I would say—I mean, I would echo both of these, but, personally, when I got my offer for this summer, I was like, "Oh, Banquo. Sweet. Okay. Duke Senior. Cool. Pompey. Who is Pompey?" And now it's my favorite character to play this summer, so it kind of shocked me how much fun I had, which I think also relates to how we are finding the comedy in the production. My director kind of let me run wild.

Kent: Pompey rules. Hi, I'm Geoffrey Kent. I played Antony in the show. I'm also the fight director for the season, so I staged the action for the season. I'm based out of Denver, Colorado. I adore this play. Often my favorite play is the play I'm working on, but this play has been my favorite play for five or six years, and I've been in search of a return to it. "My name is Geoffrey Kent. I have not done *Antony* for six years." I feel like I'm in Alcoholics Anonymous. The show will make you feel like you're a recovering addict.

I think the thing I love about this play is not only that they fight a war over love, which is very unique to a Shakespeare play but also that as a late Shakespeare play, it starts to deconstruct

what he likes to do, taking very linear, beautiful storytelling into a very episodic, cinematic play. *Antony* has sixty scenes transpiring over a decade. It's very different from a lot of plays. I think *Mac's* a good example, because it just kind of ramps, ramps, ramps, ramps to act five, whereas I always feel like *Antony's* like a rollercoaster with ups and downs. It's very manic, and a bit exhausting to do because if you have a scene go well, it doesn't really help you in the next scene, because the next scene is a year later. You're in a different place. You exit saying you're going to kill Cleopatra. You enter saying, "You think that cloud looks like a dragon?" That is why I like *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Shelley: Fantastic. Thank you all. [speaking to the audience] Let's hear your questions. Let's hear your thoughts. You have seen the production, you have been on campus, you've presented your papers, and dived into Shakespeare. Now, what would you like to know?

Audience member: Thank you for spending time with us today. I'm really interested in the sort of manic, frenetic energy that this play has because I think it brings out a lot of difficulties in performance. How do you go about conceptualizing a play that covers such a huge span of time and so many changes to characters, where a lot of Shakespeare's plays are much tighter? How do you develop that on stage, rather than in the longer episodic form that you might have in other media?

Kent: We can all share. We'll try to make sure all four of us don't answer every question. I use the *Asimov* a lot. The *Asimov Guide to Shakespeare* is really incredible because he takes every play and gives the historical references that Shakespeare is pulling from, and where he's at, and what the battle he's referencing really was. There are maps. I find it very useful because, as the actor, I need to have some sense of time, some sense of events—I mean, we have multiple children throughout this play that are barely mentioned. It's crazy. And then you have to let go of that. You have to just play the scene. Because Shakespeare didn't need his audience to know how much time has passed. He very rarely needs you to know where they are. And when you're not doing massive scene changes, and it would kill the momentum of the play to get out a different table to go, "Oh, that's the Athens table," you have to play the truth of the scene and trust that he knew that these scenes worked

together and brought the audience to the place he wanted them to bring. So I think a lot of it is sucking in a ton of knowledge and then letting go of everything that's not useful for the audience. You can't begin every scene with a footnote like, "By the way, two years have passed. We've had three children." Because ultimately Shakespeare didn't feel that was important for the scene to have legs.

The scene with Antony and Octavia at the end, his last scene with her, is about realizing that the woman he made a deal with to protect his reputation loves his enemy as much as she loves him. And that's just not cool for Antony's ego. Anyone want to add to the timeline or story real quick?

Elmore: I completely agree with what Geoffrey was saying about how Shakespeare deconstructs the linear nature of his plays in his later work, but that also does really lend to how much time doesn't matter. *Richard III*, I think, technically takes place over 23 years. But you're not bogged down by that information. Everything feels like it's attached to the unities, even though Shakespeare did not care about them. The thing that I think the actors really are forced to bring to it is pace. When you have all that knowledge, you think, "Okay, how do I convey that six years have passed and you and Octavia have been married for four and had two kids," and none of that matters, essentially. There's no way that an audience can glean it. So you really have to start every scene going from 0 to 100 because you're just picking up from scratch again and again and again. And I can't speak for anybody else, but by the second half, I'm exhausted emotionally because you just have to drop into, "Oh, yeah, Antony's dead. Great." How do I deal with that?

Audience member: A follow up question: it seems to me like this is just a really difficult play to do, no matter what. One of the most difficult plays to make into a convincing performance for audiences today, that's compelling and entertaining and so on. You guys did a great job last night, by the way. Thank you. I enjoyed it. But it's tough because, as a non-actor, it seems to me the exhaustion you're talking about is from trying to accommodate current audiences' tastes, and the conventions of theatre, which are based on psychological realism. Every scene, you have all these gaps and these jumps. So it isn't really a play that's written about identification in that kind of psychologically realistic or

Stanislavskian way where the characters are like real people. It's so artificial and emblematic all the time. It might zero in on an emotional moment, which is real, as if that were a real person, and then it becomes something emblematic and something artificial, and it's all about the artificiality at the same time. I think that's really difficult to turn into a performance that pleases audiences who have certain conventional expectations today. I almost think it would be easier to do a super weird, non-naturalistic production of Antony and Cleopatra. Do you think it's a really difficult play to perform for those reasons? Is what I'm saying making sense for you as actors having to put this on for audiences?

Bissell: I'm curious if you feel that *Antony and Cleopatra* exists in that realm more than other Shakespeare plays.

Audience member: There are no soliloquies, really, in this play. The major events take place offstage. Yeah, I think he was intentionally moving into new territory, getting away from certain conventions about tragedy and things that he had already done with tragedy, say with *Hamlet*. To me, it's the manic-ness that you talk about. When I read this play, in terms of the scaling out and in--it's not going to be naturalistic character psychology. And I feel like it's a struggle to try to do that with this play. Maybe it can be done, but I think that must make it very exhausting.

Bissell: It's unlike any other Shakespeare that I've been a part of. I'm also playing Agrippa, so I don't have quite the same journey. I mean, it's funny what Chauncey was saying, since, because of my other loads in the season, *Antony and Cleopatra* did end up being the show I had the most fun with during the rehearsal process, in part because I didn't have the burden or responsibility or pressure of doing what these guys have to do. It's really fun to play Agrippa and have my little tiny part of the storyline that is not emotionally weighted per se. So I can't speak to the difficulty—

Elmore: I think for me personally, one of the things that makes the play so difficult is that Antony and Cleopatra and Caesar are all demigods, basically. The way that they conceive of themselves and were treated in that time period, they're the closest you can get to immortality. And I think that's reflected in their personalities, which can make them very tricky to play because some of the language—I'll just speak for my character. I don't want to speak for Geoffrey. But some of the language for Caesar is very much

like, "Oh yes, their story is tragic, and we're going to build this enormous crypt for them. And it's going to outweigh any funeral that's ever happened in history. And it's a very tragic story, but it is nothing equal to the glory that I experience by causing that tragedy." You know what I mean? There's such a self-aggrandizing outlook that I think all three of the main characters really struggle with. They are inevitably balanced by some of the other more realistic characters in the play, but I think that's one thing that lends to the difficulty of staging it and producing it. You need people who can ride the line of being simultaneously a person and a god. Where does that fall through, and where can you flip that on its head? I don't know if anyone else had thoughts on that.

Kent: That's a great answer.

Audience member: I appreciated that you called out the humor that you folks brought to the show as a particular choice for a tragedy which does end with a lot of death. I'm wondering if you could speak to that choice a little bit, especially you've just come off of a production of *Antony and Cleopatra*. So how did that silliness, frankly, in certain parts of the scene affect your relationship with the play? Particularly with Antony, for example. I would say this was a surprisingly whiny teenage Antony with a full on tantrum.

Kent: Way to catch it. That's what it was.

Audience member: Like, "Look at these asshole teenager royals," even though they're supposed to be these demigods, right? Which I thought was really interesting. If you could speak a little bit on how that affected your relationship with the text or throughout this process, I think a number of us found it to be a really interesting choice.

Kent: I can speak to that a little bit. Because I've always felt it, in all of Shakespeare's plays. When you're in a tragedy, it's really funny backstage because you're letting off steam, because there's so much death and destruction. And when you're in a comedy, everything's really quiet backstage because you're listening to see how the comedy is working with the audience. And then in a history, they're just hilarious. The histories are actually very funny to me. Comedy creates empathy, so I also am a big fan of finding humor in these characters. Because if I can get you to laugh, that means you start to care, and you, by caring, then can journey through the tragedy. I think Hamlet is hilarious, right? In Katy's

and my opinion as we worked with Carolyn on this production, they are essentially two overpowered teenagers that have never been really, fully in love in their entire lives until this moment. And that means they're experiencing all the things a kid feels when they're first madly in love. The doubts, the fears, the jealousies. When I start jumping up and down and throwing a temper tantrum, that's very deliberate, both to trigger the humor in the play, but also to show the ridiculousness of a fully grown man who has ruled a third of the world being really upset that his girlfriend let someone else kiss her hand. Yeah, he's upset that politically she's making a deal behind his back. And throughout her life she's had to politically maneuver through lots of things, but he's mostly just really mad that someone else kissed his girlfriend.

When you die in act four, in a five act play, you have to play the Mercutio rule. Mercutio's death speech is also very, very tragic and very, very funny. And I think Antony needs to bring humor to the death because I'm not the end of the play. There's another 25 minutes to go with Cleo, and if I chew a bunch of scenery out there and give a big dramatic death, I'm robbing her of that glory. So when we were in rehearsals, I was like, "Carolyn, you cut some lines here that I think are really funny, and I think we need that." And Carolyn is a huge fan of humor. So she said, "Well, what are they?" I'm like, "Not dead, not dead." She'd given only one and I said, "No, there's two. The two is funny." Three would be great. She also cut, "When did she send me?" There's a third one I can't even remember. But when you look at Antony's death, he's like, "I've heard my girlfriend's dead. I'm going to kill myself and run to her because it was my fault she killed herself. Kill me. Okay. You killed yourself instead. Okay. Crap. Okay, I'll kill myself. Oops, I failed. Hey, soldiers, kill me. You say no. You're going to take my sword to Caesar? Great." And then in comes Cleo's servant and says, "Hey, Cleo sent me to talk to you." And it's just this massive comic failure. And he dies, poorly, across two scenes. And I think Shakespeare wrote that. I don't think we're spinning it to be humorous. I believe Shakespeare wanted that death to be, not broadly comic, but to have comic underpinnings. It's an empathy tool. Comedy is always an empathy tool. I think ultimately we lean into the comedy because it helps make the complexity of the play palatable. Anybody else have comedy stuff?

Audience member: That was awesome. How do you balance that demigod figure with the comedy? Because there is so much of that teenage angst. It's part of his character. How do you bring in the powerful conqueror?

Kent: I don't. I think it's in the play, so I don't have to play it necessarily. When I first played Antony, I was really caught up in the political manifestations of the play and how he was deft at that. In this production, I was not as engaged in that because some of that's a given. I think of it more as someone who really wants to be with his girlfriend and be completely absorbed in that and lost to the world. He's like, "I still want to be really important. I still want to be known and be famous. I want to be famous, and I want to be happy; show me a way to do that," which you can't. He eventually has to choose between being famous and being with his girlfriend. In the first half of the play, Cleo and Antony never think they should have stayed at the top. And then we're separated for the whole first half, and then when we get back together, all I do is freak out that I made a terrible decision. Antony is just like, "You knew how much I loved you. How could you do this to me? I love you so hard." Katy and I always have a little decompression after the show together, and she told me last night that, "I really think I realized that that's where Cleo realizes, 'Oh, crap, I have a lot of power over this guy. And I did not realize what power I had. Now what do we do? Because now he's just going to do whatever I want, and that's not going to serve any of us." I don't know if I'm answering that demigod question.

Thomas: One thing I can say is that if there's a god or a ruler, whether I'm playing it or I'm not, I don't think it's that particular actor's job to project any kind of sense of superiority. That's everybody else's job. It's the way we react to you. In act two, I'm Caesar's servant. And then it's like, "This is the dude. That's the man. I'm going to make sure we all know that's the man." So I hope I'm taking care of that instead of Gabriel having to.

Audience member: I want to add that I see Pompey, at least in your performance, as part of the demigod status. When I see this play, and when I think about what's coming, I see Pompey in retreat. But based on your performance and that wonderful tension and the camaraderie, my response as the audience was like, "Yeah, Pompey!"

I'm not supposed to know what's happening. But I felt that was a moment in the play that worked against what Daniel [another audience member] talked about: the weirdness, the structure, the fact that you're restarting. And to me, that felt like a wonderful moment. If I hadn't known the play, I would have thought that you were going to continue on and be a very important person until the end of the story.

I think another great thing about this production, in part because of the comedy, is that it reset the play for me. I wasn't just thinking about the play on the page or comparing it to the production that we did here ten years ago. When I talked about it, I remembered the actor who played Enobarbus, and that was it. Michael Bahr said it was more of a pageant. Whereas this was bringing energy, human emotion, even if it isn't the very complex character study and psychological drama of *Macbeth*, which you were all wonderful in. Anyway, that's all I wanted to say, Chauncey.

Thomas: When Pompey says "The people love me," if the audience doesn't respond, we're like, "We're doomed."

Audience member: I'm assuming that's been your experience.

Thomas: Yeah. In the first preview, I didn't know that was going to happen, and it happened.

Bissell: And so now all of us backstage, we listen, and we're like, "Are they going for Pompey?"

Thomas: I want to give our director, Carolyn, credit for this because when I come into a play as a supporting character, I'm interested in the play and the story that we are telling as a whole, but what the leads are doing, and what kind of obstacle I need to be for them was one of my big questions. And Carolyn was just like, "I see you as a biker gang, and I need you to be tough. And I need you to be a proper foil for them." That's the reason for his choices.

Kent: He also has a ton of charisma. He's Antony-adjacent in that sense. Right? There's that opening scene with Canidius where Walter [the actor playing Canidius] said, "The people really like him, and they're really into him, and they really think he's important, and they really think he's charming." And you can watch Antony respond with, "I gotta take care of that. No one can be more charismatic than me." And then you can see in the ship scene that Shakespeare wrote that the two of us are just having

a great time, and Caesar's written to be non-participatory to a certain extent. Shakespeare's showing you two charismatic guys throwing a party where Caesar is not really included in it, and not only to humiliate him. So Pompey is an amazing trigger to, as you said in rehearsal, break the triumvirate. He creates and exacerbates the tension in the triumvirate to the point that Antony and Caesar come to blows, which unravels the whole thing. That, and the marriage to Octavia are the two things that the first half of the play really deliver.

Elmore: I think Pompey's tragedy is that he would be up there in that demigod realm with the other three. He would absolutely go on to rule part of the world or rule the whole world. But the tragedy that Shakespeare wrote for him is that he's the only one that's honest. He's the only one that's got honor. He has an opportunity to kill all of them and he responds, "I can't. I can't do it. For my pride, for my honor, for myself, I cannot be a part of that." And then you never see him again. You spend the rest of the play with the three people who don't really have it.

Audience member: But you hear about what the villainous Octavius does to him.

Elmore: One of the things we cut out of the text that annoys me ever so slightly, though I understand why we did it, is that when we go back to war with Pompey Lepidus betrays Rome. He betrays Caesar and goes to Pompey's side to help to hedge his bets. And then he just gets it wrong. That's why he has Lepidus executed. And we just we sort of gloss over that a little bit, so I think add to the tension, which is cool.

Kent: Last time I did this play, I did it in rep with *Julius Caesar*, and the same two actors. I called it Maximum Antony day. I don't think Octavius called it Maximum Antony day. But--if you just look at the end of *Julius Caesar* and watch Mark Antony and Octavius's scenes in *Julius Caesar*--in the first play, Antony is always talking about how "Fortune is with me. Fortune is ours. Fortune, fortune, fortune. Fortune's amazing." Shakespeare then many years later writes this play, and all Antony can say is, "Why do I have no luck? Why is it I lose every bet? Why is this happening?" not realizing it's because he's doing it to itself. He has to externally project that, but it's fun to watch.

At the very end of *Julius Caesar*, Mark Antony delivers a speech that very much feels like the end of a Shakespeare play. And then Octavius goes, "No, I'm going to finish the play," steps forward and does another speech that is very political and less emotional. That is the beginning of what you then watch an entire play do in *Antony*. It's not that we're not both emotional and political, but Antony's deeply emotional to the point of fault, and Octavius is deeply politically savvy and intelligent about such things. You can watch that little conflict in *Julius Caesar* explode into a full play. It's so cool.

Audience member: Talking about the rehearsal process and coming to understand these characters and what you were doing with this production, I want to know, are there "Aha" moments or moments you had to untangle with this? I'm especially interested in moments that you found difficult and worked through. What did you come to in this production because of that? What did you figure out in the process? It's a big question.

Kent: Actually, talk about Agrippa and Caesar because the rehearsal process illuminated your relationship in a way I had not seen on the page. The kingmaker part.

Bissell: The kingmaker part.

Elmore: Yeah. Historically, if I remember right, Octavius and Agrippa were lifelong friends. I think after the events of this play end, they were schooled together, and then Agrippa ends up marrying Octavius' daughter or something. There's a kind of family tie. They're close their whole lives, and they're good friends and confidants in that regard. Which we don't necessarily set up, but we do set up that there's a familiarity and that Agrippa can say things to Caesar that other people can't.

Bissell: It's interesting that Agrippa's a woman in our production and historically was not. I think what's interesting to me about that is that a lot of people talk about this play as Rome versus Egypt, masculine versus feminine, emotional versus analytical. And when you do some cross-gender casting and you have a woman as the right hand person to the person who's supposed to represent the analytical, masculine world, it's a way of cracking open this gender dynamic and saying, no, women are capable of being emperor makers. And beyond the Agrippa Octavius relationship, in the National Theater production, they also cast Agrippa as a

woman, and there was clearly a relationship between Agrippa and Enobarbus. So I brought that to the table. Chris Mixon, who's playing Enobarbus, really liked it. And we kept building on that as a way to show Agrippa, yes, she's having her fun, but she's also gathering information by having access to Enobarbus. And very late in the process, Carolyn said to me, "This plan to marry Antony to Octavia. I think that Agrippa knows it's not going to work, and it's all part of the plan." That was something Carolyn said to me pretty late in the process that she was realizing "Agrippa's behind it all. Agrippa's the kingmaker."

Elmore: What a take.

Kent: I love that.

Bissell: I haven't ever been in any other production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, but you said it illuminated things about the relationship.

Kent: It's partly your relationship with the actor playing Cleopatra. But also, what I love about the play, and Shakespeare is doing it on purpose, is that Antony and Cleopatra's relationship is extremely public. They are never, in the entire play, alone together, except for when he says he's going to kill her. It's the only time in 60 scenes that *Antony and Cleopatra* are alone on stage, without attendants, without someone to perform for, or someone to be witnessed by. And I think in the other production I learned that kind of late in the run, and in this production I started to realize that this is always witnessed. Who are they playing to? How often are they being truly honest with each other when his soldiers are always standing behind him when he talks to her? I don't think he forgets they're there. Her servants, who are her friends, are all there every time they have an argument, make out, whatever. It's always witnessed. So what is it like as a famous character to always be seen? They don't get that balcony scene. They don't get a scene, just the two of them, to say how much they love each other. It never happens. And I think in this production I really, really enjoyed being aware of the fact that he is always performing and so is she. So you never really get to see the entirety of their honest selves because they're always being witnessed.

The other thing I learned about the play in this production that I think I didn't pick up on earlier is that it's a love story, but this love story is way bigger than Antony and Cleopatra.

There's a complicated love between the two of us. There are other relationships. But what hits me most profoundly is both of us have someone who is a friend that dies of a broken heart. Iris and Enobarbus die of their connection, of love and loss. And then Charmian and Eros both kill themselves. It's partially tied to the philosophy of the time, because you have to chase the spirit or it's gone because the train has left the station, right? But also there's the parallelism that each of them has a servant that kills themselves for them, and each of them have someone who just dies for the lack of them. That is incredible.

And then the other thing is to do *Macbeth* at the same time, because he wrote them very close to each other. And you can feel it. You can feel the parallelism of it. You can feel how Lady M exits the play, and then Mac continues on. You can see how I exit the play, and Cleo—There's a lot of parallelism between these two plays. In this production I'm always on stage with Katie, and we each have an aide de camp in the play. I have Walter who plays Canidius and Caesar has you, who plays Agrippa. And that's Mac and Lady Mac, both working as the advisors to these two, which is a great thing about rep.

What else do you want to know before we finish?

Audience members: Fight choreography question.

Kent: Sure.

Audience member: I've seen a handful of the things that you choreograph, etc. I don't know if I've seen you participate, particularly against four at the same time. Are there any sources or inspiration for your fight choreography?

Kent: For this show, particularly?

Audience member: Yes.

Kent: There are two ship battles in this play, which are kind of unstageable, hence the flags, right? And every production I've ever been in insists that you can't cut it because it's an important plot point. So you go do a ship battle, wondering what would Shakespeare do? I've seen people walk around with tiny boats around their waists. Last production I did, we had little ship sails, and people walked around on the stage with tiny ship sails. The National had boats, and they pushed them with sticks as they talked about it, like it was a military table showing you World War II stuff of battleships moving around.

Carolyn and I were talking about wanting a piece of action, and Shakespeare does this really weird thing in this play, and it's historical but he's also picking and choosing what to do, where he shows loss, loss, loss, and then he gives him a victory. He gives them both this random victory, which I assume is just so he can knock them back down again because they're so low that he needs to lift them back up first. So he chose a victory so that they can all be super happy. So then he can now give them more misery. So when Caroline and I were talking about that fight, we were like, we want to do that too. "How many people can I have," I said, "in our cast?" We did the math, and we were like, "Four." And I remember going to you and going, "Wanna be in a sword fight?"

Bissell: If you'll have me.

Kent: Because I needed a fourth, and I had a few choices, and I thought you might be interested. So first I built the team. It's like doing a heist movie. You build the team. I was staging a four on one, and it wasn't working for me, artistically because--I've done a lot of *Musketeers*, and when you're fighting multiple people, the hard job is coming up with why they don't kill you when waiting for their turn. You have to constantly keep four people in motion to make it work. And we were hitting diminishing returns in rehearsal. I went home, and I thought about it, and I came back to Carolyn, and said, "I think it's like the *Cyrano* fight." Cyrano fights Valvert, and then later in some productions he does what's called the 100 on 1. He fights a hundred men in the streets. Of course, I've never done a production with 100 actors, but I've definitely done it with eight actors who just keep coming on and coming on and coming on. It's vignettes. Let's do vignettes. Let's take the flags we're using in the ship battle, and let's use them as wipes, like improv scene wipes, where they just wipe through an hour in different parts so you get the sense that this battle has been happening over a long period of time. That was the archetype which allowed me to do one on ones and two on ones, and then combine them into what we had.

The only reason in the entire play they have those shields is because Geoff Kent wanted to go through a shield wall, because I just thought that'd be cool. And those shields are mostly Lexan. They really lightweight. We're working with aluminum swords, really lightweight. And the nice thing about Roman sword work is

that it's really close because the swords are already really short. So you're really in punching distance because the swords are this long. So that's where that came from.

While performing it, 60 seconds into it I'm always like, "I should have ended this right here because I have to talk, and I am tired." And it goes on for another about 25 seconds after that. But it didn't get to speed until right before we opened. And so when I realized it was too long, it was too late. And I did it to myself, so I just had to deal with it at the end.

Audience member: I really appreciated that you brought up gender and playing with gender. I think this play is particularly interesting with masculinity, which is something that we actually talked about with *Macbeth*, as well. There was this really interesting question of what masculinity is, what does it look like? It felt like *Macbeth* played with that with Macduff and crying about the death of his family. And now with the way that you're portraying Antony, you're doing more of that. There's not so much of this hyper masculine broness. It's like, "Look at this whiny teenage boy."

Kent: He's pretty weepy.

Audience member: Yeah. Right. Almost like a Romeo in some ways, right? That kind of weepy emo boy situation going on. I'd appreciate hearing from you folks. How did that playing with gender roles affect your experiences so far with this performance or how did it change your relationship with the text?

Kent: You're playing multiple roles that have been re-gendered. Do you want to talk about that?

Bissell: You're gonna put it on me.

***Thomas*:** I mean, I have not gotten to play many female-identifying characters in Shakespeare, but—

Bissell: It's not going that direction.

Thomas: Which is probably for the best.

Bissell: That's true. I mean, it's interesting. I feel like—gender is a construct, and it's cultural, and it's where we are in time and it changes. And one of the things that I love about Shakespeare's plays, and why we're still doing them all, is that ultimately he is tapping into our humanity. There's a universality to all of these journeys. And it's interesting for our modern sensibilities when we have these conversations about gender and our notions of what's

masculine, and what's feminine. But also that's cracking open a larger fact, which is that gender is a thing that has always been fluid. It's always changing. I love getting to do these plays and speak these words because ultimately everybody should be able to find something relatable in all of these characters. And yes, gender is a factor. I don't mean to be dismissive of that. I have a degree in gender studies, in fact. But it's glorious that we are now living in a moment where I get to play Jaques, and I get to play Agrippa, and that hopefully is cracking open conversations. Hopefully people are walking away from the theater thinking, "How did that change it for me? Why did it change it? Why does it change it to see a woman playing Agrippa or a woman playing Jaques? What does that do for us?" And that then makes us reflect back on our current society and why we feel the way we feel. So that's a rambling answer. Anybody else?

Kent: I'd like to speak to it as a stage combat teacher, I generally teach multi-gendered rooms, and often, I'm teaching rooms that are predominantly feminine in terms of the students that are participating in theater studies. That's often where that energy is. And I find female-identifying students pick up swordplay faster than male-identifying students who just assume they know how to do it, because men know how to war. Things are stereotypical. There are always exceptions to these rules. But, we all have even more than a binary, but we all have both sides of the yin and yang within us. And when you're playing characters, when you're performing actions, you're pushing parts of yourself forward and pulling parts of yourself back.

As Antony, the feminine side of me, that is stereotypically emotionally available and willing to show that emotion is something I lean into. I think Shakespeare was also limited in what gender he could put on stage, no matter who they played. He's already showing a fluid gender construct, because Cleo was played by a man when the show opened, and that man was probably exploring his femininity in the performance of it. Gender is so fluid. But also the minute you flip the gender of the actor playing it, you then get to analyze. Are we re-gendering the character? Are they performing as that gender? Are we changing the pronouns? Are we not changing? And that discussion happens in every play, and it's a great discussion because there's not a right or wrong answer to

it, because every play has got to find its own way. Sometimes you end up in that role because they needed more women in another play. Other times you have a situation like this with Carolyn, who wanted to flip the gender because she thought it was going to change the dynamic. And that's what makes rehearsals so much fun.

Elmore: Yeah, I think the dynamic between the masculine and the feminine is probably what Shakespeare was going for. But I also wonder, some days, if that's the most productive way for us to think about that dynamic between Rome and Alexandria in the 21st century. Because I think there are other ways that you can go about it. You know, the militarism versus the hedonism or the sexual oppression versus the sexual freedom. The dichotomy exists no matter what, given the structure of the play, so we can sort of tweak it however we want in order to convey the message that we want to convey. And then you have characters like Agrippa and Maecenas who are played by women in Caesar's camp. I think it inherently calls attention to the tradition of that dichotomy without necessarily making a statement either way about it. We can address the fact that these dichotomies can exist within anybody. That was the way that I was looking at it. And I thought that that was really, really productive because then we can take it out of the realm of masculine versus feminine traits and put it more in the realm of diametrical opposition where there could be any number of reasons why. We just need to put them on the stage.

Audience member: Can I ask a question? First of all, I love Pompey, and I'm interested in—

Bissell: The people love Pompey.

Audience member: And you're a man of the people. But we had a conversation in the grocery store last year.

Thomas: Yes.

Audience member: It was when you were in *Winter's Tale*, and we were talking about Leontes, and I said, "Is it hard to do this?" And you said to me, "No, because Leontes thinks he's right." And in this play you've talked about characters being whiny teenagers, kingmakers, demigods, or arrogant. How does it help in your playing of these characters if they think they're right? Do they ever question whether they are not, in your minds?

Thomas: Do they ever question—hmm.

Bissell: Agrippa doesn't.

Thomas: It is not like last year when I did *Winter's Tale*. I was frequently aware that I had doubts that I was suppressing or constantly overcoming. And that's not something I feel as Pompey. As Pompey, I do kind of feel like I'm doing what needs to be done, and I'm making whatever kind of calculation I need to make, and ultimately, it's for the greater good. But, like they've said, I have an opportunity to kill them all, and I don't take it. But I also would have been fine with it had it happened, if I didn't know about it.

Bissell: "Thou wouldst not play false and yet would wrongly win."

Thomas: Yeah, there is some sense of morality. Pompey feels he needs to take over, but I ultimately think Pompey thinks that his intentions are noble.

Kent: Does Caesar have any regrets?

Elmore: Actually, I do have a real answer to this question. The way that I conceived of Caesar for this production he questions whether he's right every time he gets to look into Antony's face. I don't think Shakespeare wrote him as the villain, but I do think Shakespeare wrote him as the foil. And that's really hard to do in a play where Antony and Cleopatra are is such delicious characters that the audience loves to see. Arrogance, which you were talking about, becomes an obstacle, but I think that Caesar's questioning sort of sets up the fact that, yeah, Caesar may be kind of an ass, and he does have that demigod sort of complex going on, but ultimately he makes all the right decisions. And Antony could have made all the right decisions too, and just doesn't. Going back to what Chauncey was saying, and I completely agree with, about thinking, "Okay, who's the lead and how can I help them tell their story," setting up that self-doubt catapults that relationship into new levels. I don't know if you want to speak to that.

Kent: Well, in this play there aren't soliloquies where we can express confusion and mistakes. *Macbeth* gets those. He gets, "What have I done?" moments. And Antony doesn't get those textually. But this production is so different from my last production. In the last production, I really felt like he got trapped into marrying Octavia. He wasn't playing chess very well, and he exited that scene with a new wife wondering, "What do I do now?" And in this production it was fun to explore something different.

Enobarbus, every chance he gets, is like, "This is never going to work. He's going to go back. He's gonna-- he loves her. I've seen it. It's all fine." But I realized I didn't have to play that. I played walking willingly into the marriage with Octavia, making the choice to stay there and believe he's never going back in that moment. And the regret he has is in his realization when she doesn't let him kiss her on the lips, and then when he realizes that she wants to go to her brother because she loves him as much as Antony. I think that's where he knows he's made a huge mistake.

And Antony is drawn to amazing women, right? Fulvia is an amazing person in history. If you haven't read it, she's incredible. And then he has Cleopatra. And then he has Octavia, and Octavia is an amazing woman in history. All these amazing women and Antony manages to marry all three of them and not be the right match for any of them. So I think he does have regret. The way the play is written, he doesn't regret that he hurt Octavia. But I do think he realizes that by marrying her and now abandoning her, he has forced Caesar's hand. And in doing so, he regrets the collapse of what he held so dear, his reputation and his third ownership, or half; sometimes he says half because nobody counts Lepidus anymore. "With half the world I played as I please making it my fortunes." He regrets that he has destroyed himself, but only in those moments.

As the play goes on, what confuses the audience all the time is at the end, I'm like, "Ah, Cleopatra betrayed me. My fleet has yielded to Caesar. And that is definitely Cleopatra's fault." He projects that failing onto somebody else. We all have had that moment in our life. We blame someone else for our own mistake. And he definitely blames Cleopatra for a mistake that he completely created on his own. He doesn't regret it. He just projects it. But I do think the Octavia decision is a mistake he doesn't realize he's making until he's already made it.

Shelley: We're drawing up on the hour, so we've got time for probably one or two more questions. Go ahead.

Audience member: I'm curious about the repertory experience for this. You've alluded a little bit to that with *Macbeth* and the connection between these plays. How do you navigate the bleed over that might happen, especially for this play, for *Antony and Cleopatra*? Do you lean into that? Do you move away from that?

What is your experience with that, especially with your characters? Has there been crossover, and have you tried to avoid it?

Kent: It doesn't cross over in the sense that you're never making pasta for dinner and accidentally cook a hamburger. You are able to compartmentalize. But as we all know here, if you've not experienced the way rep gets built, for the first month, we switch plays every four hours. But in those four hours, we also often end up jumping into the other plays because you're not called for an hour. And then they pick up a secondary over here, and then you have a fitting, you know. So you'll do an *Antony* scene, then do a secondary that is a fight rehearsal for *Macbeth*, then do a costume fitting for *As You Like It*, then have a character meeting for that, and then come back, and you're Antony again, and that's in four hours. And I think we all experience that, which is manic. It's crazy. How do you approach building three different plays as an artist?

Elmore: Supreme diligence. All the famous actors that you've ever read about have said that rep is where actors cut their teeth, right? It's where you find out what you're made of. And I think it's insanely difficult because you're switching every 4 hours or 2 hours or one hour. You write everything down, and then you go home. And technically, the way the schedule works out is every other day you're not working on one specific play. So there is a little bit of time to marinate in thoughts and possibly work notes because there's no room to backslide. But the other benefit of rep here, and the thing that made it easier versus reps I've done in Philly in the past is that I'm on location. I'm in that artist housing. My entire purpose while I'm here is just to work on these plays, and rehearsals don't start till 1 p.m. so sometimes you wake up at 9:30, and you're busting out those lines for three hours. The other benefit that I really enjoyed is that casting in rep, the matrix that they use is insanely complicated and difficult, but if it's used really, really well, oftentimes, you've got characters that are not similar in any way. Orlando is not similar to Caesar by any stretch of the imagination. And it does make that separation a little bit easier, I think. Where you can switch gears into a lighter, more vulnerable place or switch gears back into a more driven sort of power dynamic.

Bissell: While it's frustrating to not get to land in one play for very long before you have to go to another one, it also does allow for variety. If the casting has been done well and it's been

distributed well, I get what I have now that we're in full runs, where I'm very, very grateful that we do the Scottish play, and then the next night is *Antony and Cleopatra*, because for me, Agrippa is definitely fun. I really enjoy playing Agrippa, but it is my lightest load. It does not have an emotional life to it. So after doing a *Macbeth* night, it sort of feels like a night off. It is not a night off because I still have to have a cheat sheet in my pocket of what scene is next and where I enter, because that's the nature of *Antony and Cleopatra*. But it doesn't have the emotion. It doesn't take what *Macbeth* takes out of me. I love it once we get into performance, and I feel settled, and I feel solid in each of the plays. That's really a cool thing about rep. The building of it is hard. And this is the first time I've done three here at the same time. And I really felt it this season. I was like, "Oh my gosh, my brain is struggling with this." But you know, you do what you gotta do. Get up at 9 o'clock in the morning and—

Elmore: Just come in and make a choice.

Bissell: Right.

Elmore: There's no use dilly-dallying.

Thomas: For me, I remember coming into this before I knew what we were going to be doing in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Knowing Banquo I was thinking, "serious dude." And then doing Duke senior, who is kind of nurturing, I was just thinking, "I just want to be funny. No one's let me be funny here. I don't know if they know that I'm funny." So I came into *Antony and Cleopatra* going, "I hope that I get to be funny in this play." Very quickly in rehearsal, once I heard where Carolyn was going, I went that direction, but also, my Banquo started to get funnier.

I do feel like I am trying to delineate the characters in all three plays. I think that's the main point. For the most part, when I'm doing one play, I'm just doing that play. I don't really think about what I'm doing in the other shows, but at the same time I am trying to show a variety. I know the audience is going to see me three times. I want them to see three distinct things.

Kent: I'd say, rep here used to be a different schedule every week. They shuffled the cart, and there were literally days when I would come to the theater at seven and see the costumes and go, "Oh, we're doing that. I thought we were doing--"Rep gives you chances to change gears. It also gives us a chance to support each

other, which I think is really special about rep. You know, Lennox barely talks, and I get to be there to just listen to Walter. And then we turn right around the next day and he's Canidius out there listening to me, and that's really, really unique.

We were talking last night about the fact that we only have nine left. We have nine Mac-B's [*Macbeth*] left. We have nine *Antony's* left. And there's just miles of it that I haven't unpacked in my mind. There's depth I haven't remotely been able to reach yet. And I'm feeling the clock. But I don't know that that hunger would exist if I was doing it eight shows a week in the same way, which is the normal game. Eight shows a week, same show, then it ends. And every day is Tuesday is what we say here. Because normally in theater, here it's Monday, but every day, the first day of the week is your first show. You're always a little herky jerky in your first show. Well, every single day we do a show here, it's the first day of the week because you haven't done it for three or four days, and in between that you have done two other plays. So I'll exit an *Antony* scene and go, "Oh yeah, next time we do that, I'm going to do this." And then I do *As You Like It*, I have a day off, I do *Macbeth*, I come back around, and that moment goes by me like a speeding bullet. "On Friday I do--"

You're chasing your own tail a bit, but it's really refreshing, and it's really fun to support. I think my favorite part about rep is, sometimes in normal plays, you can drop into a hierarchy of leads, supporting, and small bits, and they create their own microsystems in rehearsal. They talk to each other, they hang out with each other, and it kind of falls apart. Whereas here, we take turns grabbing the mic, and the other people take turns listening to that person speak. And that is really special.

Shelley: Thank you. Please give them a round of applause. Give yourselves a round of applause. Great questions. Really thought provoking. Thank you for your time, for your expertise. For your gracious answers. I will make sure, Chauncey, to let John know you are funny. What an incredible opportunity to engage in conversation. I've been saying all season long that this seminar grove, where we usually have our discussions with Dr. Isabel Smith-Bernstein, and where we have our actor seminar, this is the Forest of Arden. You have arrived. You're at the heart of Arden, where we can ask questions, where we can be honest, where we can

be real and be who we choose to become. So thank you for joining us in Arden.