

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA:

An Interview with Patrick Mulcahy

By Thomas Rankin

How did you decide to produce and direct *Antony and Cleopatra* this season?

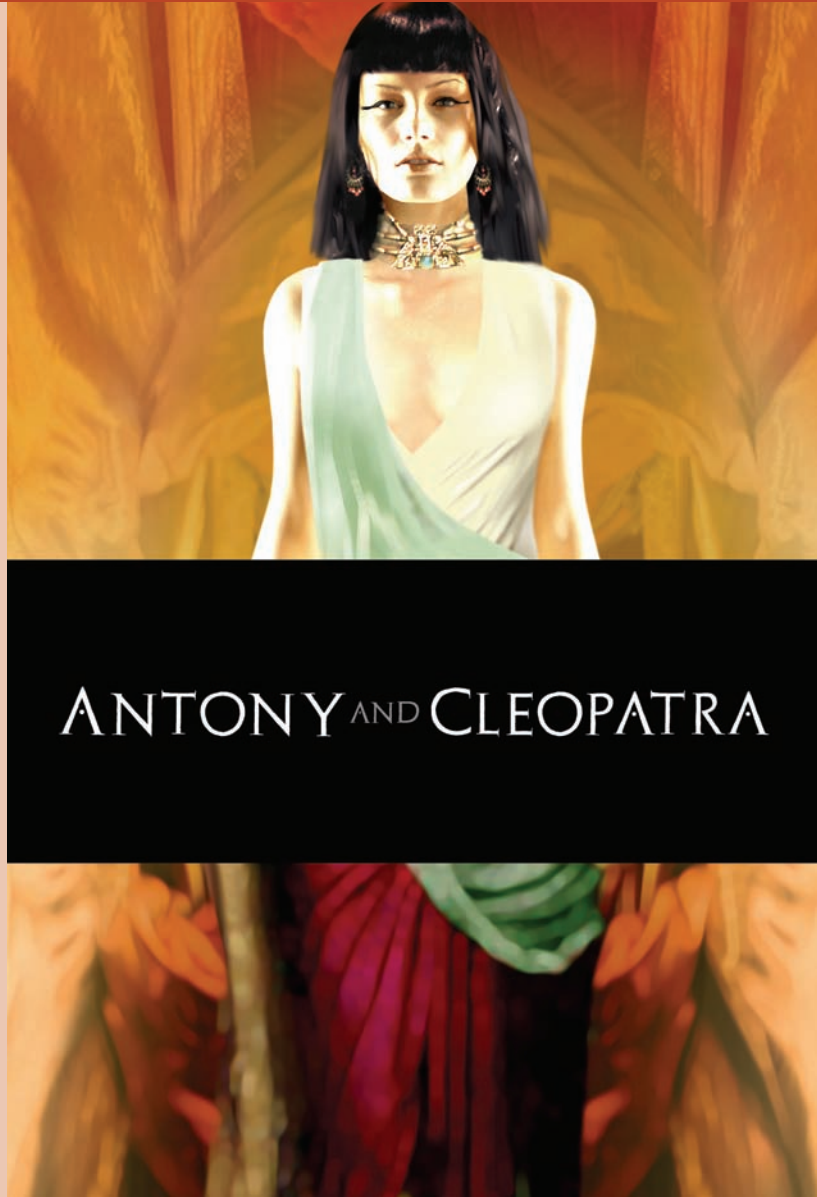
It's a fascinating play. I had thought about it for years. And then last summer, patrons responded with great enthusiasm to curtain speeches and in our survey to the idea of PSF producing the play. *Antony and Cleopatra* was their number one choice. It's a sexy title, and a play most people have not seen on stage. And we're a Shakespeare festival. The Festival continues to delve deeply into the Shakespeare canon, as we did last year with *King Lear* and with *The Winter's Tale* in 2007.

Another reason to direct the play is to explore the question: who were those people? Watching the *Rome* series on HBO reminded me of how interesting it is to glimpse these fascinating characters up close in three dimensions. Antony and Cleopatra have been described as the world's first celebrities. We've heard their names and we know of their legendary status, yet we may know very little about them. Celebrities continue to captivate.

But the best reason to do the play is to tell a great story and to explore the fundamental human longings explored in it, like the ache to transcend the mundane. The plot unfolds in antiquity; the play is about us in any era.

The play calls for drastic set changes. Scenes go from the Roman Empire to Egypt very quickly; how do you address this challenge as a director?

The play doesn't call for set changes, the play places Antony and Cleopatra on stage in Egypt and then a moment later we're in Rome. Shakespeare didn't have elaborate elevator systems and fly systems and he didn't



have wings to hide big set pieces. The play was written for a stage platform that is fairly neutral. This works because the language is soaring, specific, descriptive, and illuminating. Add human behavior that is equally vivid and the imagination can take care of the rest. So costumes become the scenery and the actors become architectural. That's not to say there won't be scenic magic.

In the 19th century, the habit with this play was to try to outdo the scenic overkill of the last guy's production, so they had ship battles on stage, which is odd to imagine now. There are plenty of Shakespeare plays in which on-stage battle scenes are integral to the plot. This is not one of them. But Victorian producers were catering to

the tastes of the times and also trying out all this new stage technology they were developing, just as 20 years ago a helicopter landing on stage in *Miss Saigon* was worth the price of admission.

Antony and Cleopatra doesn't require massive, complicated moving set pieces, though you can do it that way. Today, the general wisdom is that elaborate machinery may compete with the story. And it is possible to create stunning moments visually without a lot of stuff. Sometimes less is more.

Could you describe the approach you're taking with this production?

Two of the keywords driving our artistic choices are transcendence and paradox. As these notions can't be observed directly, our artistic choices want to somehow reveal the human energy of seeking transcendence and navigating paradoxes.

As a director, I'm always interested in making the invisible visible, illuminating the undercurrents that

drive behavior, and revealing the distinctive insights the playwright has tapped—not just the psychological, but the elemental, the primal. That's what interests me on stage. How we define the locale with scenery is important, but important as a context, a world that makes it possible for the invisible to manifest in visible human interactions.

How would you describe the relationship between the title characters?

In the play, Cleopatra is described as embodying “infinite variety”—which speaks to the intensity and diversity of her emotional responses. Her feelings turn on a dime. She's the archetypal star. She's unpredictable,

continues on page 4

Antony and Cleopatra

continued from page 3

facile, mercurial, which is partly what makes her interesting.

Then you have this hero, this Hercules, one of the most celebrated warriors of his time. But being the warrior hero is no longer at the center of Antony's interests—Cleopatra is. But the warrior hero is his public, political, and, to a large extent, personal identity. It was the source of his power, and his power is what creates his ability to do as he pleases. But now with Cleopatra, he wants to achieve a perfect experience of fulfillment.

Antony and Cleopatra are obsessed with one another and no other experience can measure up to the passion they feel and hope to sustain, which creates some problems for living in the world.

Some see this play from a feminist perspective, because Cleopatra remains true to herself despite everything that happens. And then there is an argument that she is ultimately a coward, given her final actions. What's your take on her character?

I do think that if we get to a point in rehearsal where we think we have completely figured her out, we will probably have failed. Again, the interest lies in the paradoxes and the questions are more interesting than the answers. The play should leave you asking some questions. I do agree with scholars that say Cleopatra is one of the most fascinating characters in Shakespeare for this reason.

The production will tackle one of your earlier questions—what is going on in this

relationship—not necessarily to answer it fully, only to explore both the elusive core and the distinctive dynamism of the relationship. And I think that's why more than 400 years later we're still doing Shakespeare. That's the fun: it's inexhaustible. We don't answer the questions definitively. We plumb their depths. We try to reveal some of the paradoxes and contradictions and draw them out, illumi-

creatures consumed with the honeymoon phase of relationship? Is it love? The answer is that it is an all-consuming passion and it also defies categorization.

You have two people who essentially say: "Forget my responsibilities. I want to ascend to an unparalleled, transcendent experience of connection and joy." At the end of the play I

think Antony fails, and to some extent Cleopatra succeeds. Her death is different from his. I don't think the play asks us to judge them morally. People will (and have), but I don't think the play is really interested in questions of morality. The play focuses on this human ache to transcend earthly limitation to achieve a soaring experience—perfection.

Really, it's as if they want to ascend to the god-realm. Each is perceived as a god-like character, part of which is perhaps self-promotion and marketing. But Antony claimed he was a descendant of Hercules and Cleopatra was associated with Isis, an Egyptian Goddess of motherhood and fertility.

I think at some level we all yearn to take this ultimate journey and enter space that is perfect. Antony and Cleopatra have their own way of going about actually trying to achieve it.

It goes back to the quest for the next level of existence. The more powerful we become in this realm, the closer we feel we may be getting to inhabiting the next one. We're not done with Antony and Cleopatra. I think we're a long way from that. ■

Thomas Rankin is a graduating English major at DeSales University who served as an editorial intern for PSF last fall.



In one of many films inspired by Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor created a sensation in the 1963 film *Cleopatra*. Reprinted with permission ©Sunset Boulevard/

nate them. We can't help it. We recognize them from our own experience. It's just more intense with Antony and Cleopatra.

It's almost saddening to know that their love can never fully get to where they want it to be.

I suppose that's why they call it a tragedy, which raises an interesting question. Is it a tragedy? I'd say yes, but it does not fall into the tragedy category smoothly or easily. It is probably the tragedy with the most humor. And is their love real, or is it self absorption bearing no resemblance to what we might call a mature love. Are they just fascinating