



RICHARD EYRE: WEAPONS OF UNDERSTANDING

The Dresser

The Dresser

Director: Richard Eyre

Production Companies: Playground Entertainment, Sonia Friedman Productions

Executive Producers: Colin Callender, Sonia Friedman

Producer: Suzan Harrison

Written by: Ronald Harwood

Hair and Make-up Artist: Hannah Poppy Edwards

Cast:

Anthony Hopkins (*Sir*)

Emily Watson (*Her Ladyship*)

Ian McKellen (*Norman*)

Sarah Lancashire (*Madge*)

Vanessa Kirby (*Irene*)

Edward Fox (*Thornton*)

Tom Brooke (*Oxenby / Edmund*)

John Ashton (*Gloucester*)

Ian Conningham (*Kent*)

Annalisa Rossi (*Goneril*)

Helen Bradbury (*Regan*)

Carl Sanderson (*Cornwall*)

Matthew Cottle (*Albany*)

Martin Chamberlain (*gentleman*)

BBC2 tx 31.10.2015

104 mins

Digital

Richard Eyre on 'The Dresser'

What made you want to get involved in this production of The Dresser?

I was approached by executive producer Colin Callender and asked if I would like to make a film of Ronald Harwood's *The Dresser* which I knew well as a play and I knew also from the film with Albert Finney and Tom Courtenay. He said 'It's Anthony Hopkins and Ian McKellen' – so it took more or less a second to say yes. My only condition was that I would like to do an adaptation. I said I'm not going to rewrite the dialogue but if it's to work at all as a television piece, it's got to have cinematic quality. We've got to break it down and find a way of keeping the momentum of the story in cinematic terms because theatre is a very different thing.

So as you approached that adaptation what did you find you needed and wanted to do?

I had to do some editing mostly to do with staging. Whereas the play is almost entirely set in a dressing room, I had to think, 'How is it possible to get out of the room?' There's the stage door, the stage itself, there's the auditorium, there's the wings, and there are corridors and staircases. I had a kind of portfolio of locations so that you never felt, or I hope you never feel, that you've been kidnapped and held hostage within this single room.

Tell us about the story.

It's a mistake to think of the piece as a piece that is purely about the theatre and about the process of acting. Making up and costume and the life within a theatre is the most interesting thing about it. I take the life of theatre for granted. It's how I've earned my living for the last 50 years with the odd excursion into films, television and opera. *The Dresser* is much more a parallel story to the story of *King Lear*. It's about mortality, this is a story of a guy who is collapsing and who senses at some stage that his life is running out and that he's spent it possibly worthlessly – so there is the question of whether being an actor, or being anything, adds up to something if you've sacrificed all your relationships for the sake of being the custodian of a talent, which at best is questionable. It's about how you face the end and how you have the courage to endure over adversity.

It's a look into the world of actors who you've lived with all of your life.

I'm fascinated by the paradoxes of acting. The fact that you have to be conscious of yourself, know what you're doing and yet it's fatal for an actor to be self-conscious. Actors need to have a sort of third eye on what they're doing so they're thinking, 'Well I'm putting my hand down there and putting the other there,' and yet the job is to simulate complete spontaneity. When the camera is running it has to appear spontaneous and that requires mostly intense skill, experience, nerve and talent. I was an actor and I stopped doing it precisely because the monitoring device that says you're not doing that very well became stronger than the will and the ability to do the thing I was monitoring.

How is it working with Anthony and Ian?

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RICHARD EYRE: WEAPONS OF UNDERSTANDING

Play for Today: Comedians + intro by
Sir Jonathan Pryce + Sir Richard Eyre
Sun 1 Dec 18:40

The Ploughman's Lunch
Fri 6 Dec 18:10; Wed 18 Dec 20:50

**Play for Today: Just a Boys' Game + Screen
Two: The Insurance Man**
Sat 7 Dec 17:45

Iris + intro by Professor Lucy Bolton,
Queen Mary University of London
Thu 12 Dec 18:10

Philosophical Screens: Iris
Thu 12 Dec 20:00 Blue Room

Play for Today: The Imitation Game
Fri 13 Dec 18:10

Notes on a Scandal
Sat 14 Dec 18:10; Sat 28 Dec 14:45

The Dresser
Sun 15 Dec 18:00

Stage Beauty
Thu 19 Dec 20:40; Sun 29 Dec 15:10

The Cherry Orchard
Sat 21 Dec 17:40

Sunday Premiere: Tumbledown
Tue 17 Dec 18:10

Performance: Suddenly Last Summer
Sun 22 Dec 15:10

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I've known Tony for 30-35 years socially and I've known Ian for longer. These are really, really outstanding actors. They're absolutely the top of the game. So the job is not saying, 'you can do that better' – although having said that I did say that this morning in exactly those words! But it's seeing these are very imaginative, very intelligent people who think a great deal about what they're doing. I'm acting like an audience. I'm trying to bring something out that they've suggested and occasionally, I'm doing what a conductor might do.

Tell us about that and Sir and Norman's relationship.

The Dresser is an archetypal relationship. You know, master servant. They're mutually dependent. In the case of the dresser, he's like the Fool in *Lear*. *Lear* demands the presence of the Fool because in the sense his life is mirrored by the Fool, and the Fool highlights his follies and advises him and that's very much the relationship, the dresser Norman to Sir.

Tell us about the cast and crew?

There is a wonderful cast; Emily Watson, Sarah Lancashire, Edward Fox, Tom Brooke, Vanessa Kirby. They are really outstanding actors and the actors in the smaller parts who appear on stage are all actors I've worked with. It's very important to me that there is a sense of company and a sense of common aim and ambition for the project and that's quite difficult to achieve in film. It's perfectly possible to make a film where the make-up department never speaks to the costume department and the camera department is completely autonomous and so on.

In fine Shakespearean tradition of a play within a play you're asking Anthony to give a performance as Sir and as Sir giving his Lear.

It's a *Lear* of great intensity. One of the difficult things is to decide on the degree of quality of the performance. I don't want to alienate our audience by having an actor come on and do a lot of barnstorming! It's got to be carefully calibrated in that it has to be a truthful *Lear* that is slightly notched up but it has to be affecting, it has to be a plausible performance of *King Lear* rather than a pastiche performance or a parody.

You talk about Sir and the dilapidation of his mind; you are also showing us the dilapidation of the theatre in this very specific period. What does setting it in that period add to it?

You've got to honour the period but the truth is that theatre's back stages haven't changed much in 60 or 70 years. Of course, if you have money to spend on the theatre, you spend it on front of house carpets, and new seats and bars, you don't spend it on doing up the dressing rooms.

What's in this particular production for a modern audience?

I'd like people not to think of this as a quaint story of theatre folk but think of it as a number of people with complicated relationships who are trying to live their lives and in the case of Sir, live out his life with some sort of going not 'gently into that good night'. So I'd like people to be affected by the film, to find it funny, to find it touching and to find it interesting that it accurately portrays a world which very few people know about.

BBC production notes