

BACKGROUND NOTES

Pendulums will swing.

This concise line could describe the action of Queen Goneril, and it could also describe how writer Erin Shields approached this play’s creation. She’s a huge fan of Shakespeare, a lover of his language, his characters, the universes he generates. Still, her love swung toward questions too: why is his work so prominent in our culture given he wrote during a time when women weren’t even allowed on stage? How does that skew his narratives toward a male (and white) perspective? If that perspective were changed what would be revealed about these characters? About us?

Shields loves big, juicy challenges. A few years ago, for example, she (brilliantly) adapted Milton’s *Paradise Lost* for Stratford. So, the sheer “gall” of taking on this beloved epic was irresistible. What she has imagined is not a backstory but a parallel story that unfolds 7 years before the events in *King Lear*.

Past his heyday, Lear swears he’ll hand over power to his eldest daughter ... soon. The title character, played by Virgilia Griffith, is ready (over-prepared) to take over but her father keeps stalling. Scenes overlap, tensions escalate as Goneril walks a tightrope to secure her future. The climactic scene in the original has Lear howling on a heath in an epic storm. Shields gives Goneril a storm and invites us to grapple with her amid the elements.

Goneril tries so hard do everything right as a daughter, a sister, a leader. She plays by the rules. Her sister Regan swings a different way.

She has big appetites; she craves intense experience. The youngest, Cordelia, fights to be seen and acknowledged by her sisters, and to find a way out of the constraints of her assigned role as sweet, comforting little girl.

Goneril – and Shields – are interested in power, its reach, and its responsibilities. Can it be won, or must it be taken? This play aims to change not only the way the story is told, but what gets told and by whom. *Queen Goneril* reflects its predecessor but is also in dynamic conversation with it. This is why we programmed the two together. The actors perform the same roles in each play, giving them – and us – the opportunity to consider the story from two very different perspectives. We’re thrilled to premiere this vital new work. We hope you find revelations and resonances to savour in full swing of the pendulum between Shields and Shakespeare.

PLAYWRIGHT BIOGRAPHY

Erin Shields is a playwright, actor, and educator. Her plays often highlight the misrepresentation of women in classical texts by adapting them through a feminist lens for a contemporary audience. Her play *If We Were Birds* premiered in 2010, won the Governor General’s Award in 2011, and has gone on to productions across Canada. Her adaptation of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* premiered at Stratford in 2018 and won the Québec Writers Federation Award that same year. Upcoming adaptations include *Jane Eyre* for the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton, and *Ransacking Troy* for the Stratford Festival. Shields lives and works in Toronto.

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