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King Cromwell

A Play

Oliver Ford Davies

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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ISBN 978-0-573-11213-3

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CHARACTERS

Oliver Cromwell: Lord Protector of England, Scotland and Ireland; 58
John Thurloe: Secretary of State; 41
Frances Lambert: John Lambert's wife; 35
Bettie Claypole: Oliver's daughter; 28
Richard Cromwell: Oliver's eldest surviving son; 31
John Lambert: Second-in- command of the Army; 38
Andrew Marvell: tutor and poet; 38
Edward Sexby: former colonel and leveller; 42

The musician, John Hingston, is never seen

The action takes place in the Palace of Whitehall, London, at the end of Cromwell's life in 1657

KING CROMWELL

First presented at the Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond, on 12th November 2003, with the following cast:

Oliver Cromwell	Oliver Ford Davies
John Thurloe	Hugh Simon
Frances Lambert	Miranda Foster
Bettie Claypole	Claudia Elmhirst
Richard Cromwell	Damien Matthews
John Lambert	Paul Goodwin
Andrew Marvell	Sean Baker
Edward Sexby	John Ashton

Directed by Sam Walters
Designed by Sam Dowson
Lighting by Kevin Leach
Stage managed by Stuart Burgess, Sophie Acreman, Samantha Tagg and Hannah Wye

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The play is fiction. It certainly couldn't all have happened on one single day. Some of these scenes undoubtedly took place, but we have virtually no record of what was said in them. At the same time all the facts referred to in the play are true — whether the offer of the crown, the succession issue, Lambert's ambition, Richard's painting, Bettie's feud with Frances, Marvell's secretaryship, Sexby's pamphlet and capture, Thurloe's spies, Hingston's music, or Davenant's operas. A significant amount of what Cromwell, Marvell and Sexby say in the play is taken from their writings and speeches, but a great deal is invented. I doubt if the real characters had such a clear analysis of what was going on in 1657, but then that is the inevitable prerogative of history plays — to add a degree of hindsight to the proceedings.

Between 1649 and 1660 England had a major revolution, followed by a republic. It is a period that has always fascinated me, particularly because the English revolutionaries, unlike their American, French and Russian successors, had no Rousseau or Marx to guide them. They made it up as they went along. A great debate took place, thousands of pamphlets were written, daring experiments in government were attempted. Cromwell seems to me to exemplify the search, the experiment, and the ultimate failure. He was a mass of contradictions. He was a military dictator searching for a democratic basis for his rule. He was a religious fundamentalist seeking godly reformation, who also believed in a broad tolerant national church. He was a resolute parliamentarian who held free elections and then excluded the opposition. He was a leader of unassailable authority who could find no-one comparable to succeed him. All these are major 20th, and probably 21st century themes. In all the confusions of his conservative radicalism/radical conservativism, Cromwell is a very English political figure.

Oliver Ford Davies

ACT I

The Palace of Whitehall, London. 1657

The scene is a room, or a space with or without walls. There are a door; a table and chairs; and a bed

Thunder, which continues intermittently throughout the act

Cromwell, in a grey nightshirt, is asleep on the bed, the covers in disarray —it's been a bad night. There is a particularly loud clap of thunder. He starts, sits up, peers about him uncertainly. He slowly gets out of bed and stands, a tall, bulky figure, high colour in his face and nose, long straggly brown hair flecked with grey

He crosses and tries the door, but it's locked. He thumps on it. Muttering under his breath he looks around the room. He kneels by the bed and starts to pray

After a moment, a key turns in the lock. He tenses, as if to defend himself

Thurloe enters, sober bureaucrat and spymaster, always awash with papers

Cromwell Thurloe!
Thurloe Your Highness.
Cromwell Don't let the Scots in.
Thurloe Certainly not, Your Highness.
Cromwell I won't speak to the Kirk.
Thurloe No.

Beat

Cromwell This is not my room. Is it?
Thurloe No.
Cromwell Why am I here?
Thurloe Your bed. There was an explosion.
Cromwell Explosion?
Thurloe Gunpowder had been placed under your bed. It went off early… praise be!

Cromwell Where was I?
Thurloe Addressing the parliament. General Lambert thought it best kept a secret.
Cromwell From me?
Thurloe You in particular. You're to keep on the move.
Cromwell But … why so far?
Thurloe Far?
Cromwell Why Edinburgh? I hate Scotland.

Beat

Thurloe You're in your palace, Your Highness.
Cromwell In … Whitehall?
Thurloe Yes.
Cromwell Not in Scotland?
Thurloe No.
Cromwell No Kirk?
Thurloe The war is over, Your Highness. Six years.

Beat

Cromwell Whose room is this?
Thurloe Your son Richard sometimes sleeps here when he's in London.
Cromwell Might have known — feather mattress. Didn't get a wink. Who put me here?
Thurloe General Lambert. It's for your safety. Too many attempts on your life. He's doubled the guard on every door. You are not to leave the palace and not to visit Hampton Court.
Cromwell I can ride in the park?
Thurloe No.
Cromwell I'm a prisoner.

Beat

Thurloe The Parliament want their answer.
Cromwell They're not still here?
Thurloe The storm was so fierce they slept in the gallery. The Strand's under water, and there's no way through to Chelsea.
Cromwell Give them a boat.
Thurloe The current's too strong.
Cromwell I need time.
Thurloe It's their fifth time of asking. And I think their last. If you want to be king, you must decide today.

Beat

Cromwell Any news of Blake?
Thurloe None. The Spanish fleet may have given him the slip. He could be in Jamaica still.
Cromwell He could be dead. I'm going back to my room.
Thurloe You can't. Lambert's ripped out the floorboards.
Cromwell Why?
Thurloe Searching for gunpowder.

Cromwell groans

We cannot risk your life, Your Highness.
Cromwell Ay, none of you are quite ready for me to die yet.
Thurloe (*producing two pamphlets*) "Killing No Murder".
Cromwell What?
Thurloe (*reading*) "To Your Highness justly belongs the honour of dying for the people... and it cannot choose but be an unspeakable consolation to you in the last moments of your life to consider with how much benefit to the world you are like to leave it."
Cromwell Who wrote that?
Thurloe Edward Sexby. He's on the loose again, handing these out.
Cromwell Never remember Sexby having a sense of humour.
Thurloe Gunpowder under your bed?
Cromwell Hm. Good soldier. Enlisted with me at Huntingdon, second year of the war. Never stopped talking about revolution ... overturning ... king, church, law — everything. And I was the man to do it.
Thurloe And now killing you is no murder. We know he's in the pay of Spain. He'd rather the Stuarts were back on the throne.
Cromwell Why, Thurloe? Why?
Thurloe He claims you're "the greatest tyrant in history, surpassing Nebuchadnezzar."
Cromwell Leveller claptrap.
Thurloe All his Levelling breed have turned assassin. Or Quaker. I don't know which is worse.
Cromwell God still has work for me to do in this world. It's no part of his plan that I should be murdered by Edward Sexby.
Thurloe Amen.
Cromwell Where's my music?
Thurloe Mr Hingston's at choir practice.
Cromwell Fetch him. Tell him to bring his instrument. And I need breakfast.
Thurloe Papers to sign.

Thurloe puts papers to be signed on the table, bows and exits

Cromwell pushes them aside, and takes up the pamphlet

Cromwell "At your death you will be shown the greatest tyrant in history, surpassing Nebuchadnezzar." Sexby, how can you write such turd? (*He finds his clothes by the bed and starts to pull his nightshirt over his head*)

Frances Lambert, an attractive voluptuous woman, enters

Cromwell hurriedly pulls his nightshirt down, and stares at her. She takes off a wet cloak; underneath she has an elegant low cut dress

Frances Good. I've found you. I almost had to swim here.
Cromwell Lady Lambert.
Frances I know, I know. I shouldn't have come. But Thurloe will cover for us.
Cromwell Does he know...?
Frances Of course. How else would I have found you?
Cromwell And your husband?
Frances He didn't send me, Noll.

Cromwell sits heavily

What's the matter?
Cromwell Just a little giddy.
Frances (*feeling his forehead*) You've a fever.
Cromwell It comes and goes.
Frances Have the doctors seen you?
Cromwell There's nothing they can do. Sit by me, Frances. I can't give you much time.
Frances I came to see you about John.
Cromwell He's put me in this terrible room.
Frances He's obsessed about your safety.
Cromwell I preferred it when it was gardening.

They laugh

Frances Do you know he has a new tulip — a golden one? He wants to show it to the Dutch.
Cromwell It'd start a new war. What's the next colour?
Frances Black.
Cromwell Black!
Frances I know. Who would want a black flower? But black is to be the crown.

Cromwell I teased him once about his tulips. He's never spoken of them to me again.
Frances Hates being teased. A true Yorkshireman.
Cromwell (*laughing*) He was never happy in the Fens, was he?
Frances No. Too much sky. The land's so flat, you're forced to look at the heavens.
Cromwell No bad thing.
Frances It makes you a little crazy.
Cromwell Perhaps.
Frances John looks at the ground.
Cromwell Where battles are won.
Frances But not where imagination is found. John has none.
Cromwell No.
Frances John is no Cromwell. But there is no-one else to succeed you.

Beat

Cromwell Frances, I've not long to live …
Frances Noll! Doctors are wrong …
Cromwell All the time. But I feel it myself now. This palace has become my tomb.
Frances Then leave today. Come and stay with us at Wimbledon. We miss you. The children wonder where you are. They still treasure the games you gave them.

But Cromwell won't be drawn

You used to confide in me — remember? Four years ago. Whether you should become Protector.
Cromwell Ay.
Frances John was away in Yorkshire.
Cromwell I haven't forgotten.
Frances You said many things.
Cromwell Best not to remember.
Frances You said it was your dearest wish that I should one day be first lady in the land. And you had it in your power to make John your successor.

He is silent

But now you are to be king?
Cromwell Nothing is decided.
Frances The gallery is stuffed with Parliament men — no, they didn't see me — all waiting your answer.

Cromwell Let them wait.
Frances If you take the crown, your family succeeds you. That means King Richard.

He is silent

You're angry with me.
Cromwell No, I think of nothing else.
Frances Then follow your nose.
Cromwell (*touching his large nose*) Not difficult. You once said it was a beacon to all England.

They both laugh. Cromwell touches her

My jewel.
Frances Noll, stay Protector ... and nominate John when the time comes ...

Bettie rushes in — spirited, attractive, six months pregnant, in a rich dressing-gown. Richard follows in an elegant but battered suit. He has a sensitive, delicate face

Bettie At last! (*She embraces Cromwell*)
Cromwell Bettie. Richard.
Richard Father.
Bettie I've opened every chamber door in Whitehall. Some surprises, I can tell you ... (*She sees Frances*) Oh! Lady Lambert.
Frances (*slightest of curtsies*) Lady Elizabeth, Lord Richard.
Bettie What an early call.
Frances My husband was concerned about His Highness' quarters.
Bettie He chose this awful room?
Richard I sleep here sometimes.
Bettie Exactly. And why did General Lambert not have the courtesy to consult any of His Highness' family?
Frances The fewer people who knew the better. The assassins may still be in the palace.
Bettie I see. Just Lambert, Thurloe ... oh, and Lady Lambert. And where does my father drag his mattress tonight?
Frances Your father's safety is paramount ...
Bettie (*losing her temper*) Are you to be the judge of that? You hold no position at court, Lady Lambert. Nor are like to do so.
Frances His Highness needs support ...
Bettie His Highness' needs will be supplied by his family.
Frances (*becoming reckless*) Naturally, but I have known Oliver since you were a child ...

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