

# The queen is dead, Diana's a ghost, and Charles makes a mess of things in new play

Amy McRary, Knoxville News Sentinel  
Published 9:00 a.m. ET Feb. 3, 2019

Great Britain's Queen Elizabeth is dead. After decades and decades of waiting, Elizabeth's son Charles is finally king. He promptly makes a royal mess of things.

After all, there's much ado in the Shakespearean-like play "King Charles III." Diana's a ghost, Kate's a schemer, and Meghan Markle's nowhere in sight.

Thus goes the tale of Britain's next king as told in this what-if world set in a time not all that distant.

Let's be clear. The play that begins Feb. 6 at the University of Tennessee's Clarence Brown Theatre isn't a biography. Its characters are based on today's members of the British royal family. But this is theater, not reality.

The play supposes what happens after Elizabeth, Britain's longest-reigning monarch, dies. Charles finally ascends to the throne. In his effort to rule in a constitutional monarchy, he sends Britain into crisis by refusing to sign a bill limiting freedom of the press.

## Styled like Shakespeare

Playwright Mike Bartlett wrote most of the play in unrhyming iambic pentameter, the style William Shakespeare often used. That style "allows things to build in a way," said actor Kurt Rhoads, who plays Charles.

"The verse elevates the ideas and emotions on stage. It's like an acting partner in a way. When it's done right, it grabs the audience's attention a little more; the audience sits up in their seats a little more," Rhoads said.

The storyline may make audience members reflect on Shakespeare's often told stories of royal families, power struggles and betrayal. The late Princess Diana is a ghost who appears to her former husband and her older son, William.

Class snobbery's woven in. Prince Harry hasn't met Meghan Markle, but his girlfriend here isn't considered of royal "class." Charles has some King Lear-like moments, questioning his own abilities and worrying he's losing his children.

Before being cast as Britain's future king, Rhoads wasn't a royal watcher. Now he's a Charles sympathizer.

"When I read this play, my heart broke for Charles," he said. "I never felt that empathy for him. I really started digging about him and found a lot of qualities I really admire in him."



Kurt Rhoads; by Elizabeth Aaron

In “King Charles III,” Rhoads said, Charles is “a man who has been groomed and waiting all his life for this moment. And it gets there, and he’s a little bit confused, and he knows his reign is short, unlike his mother’s in every way. He feels the pressure.”

Rhoads last played at Clarence Brown as Titus in 2016’s “Titus Andronicus.” His wife, actress Nance Williamson, plays Charles’ wife, Camilla.

## **Playing married royals**

The couple know Shakespeare. They fell in love playing lovers Orlando and Rosalind in “As You Like It.” They’ve acted for years at New York’s Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival. They’ve been married almost 35 years. “King Charles III” is their 66th play together.

When Williamson tells people she’s playing Camilla, their reactions are sympathetic toward the actress. “They would go, ‘Oh I’m so sorry. That must be hard playing her.’ “

But she says she’s not playing the real Camilla or the Camilla people think they know from news stories or tabloid tales. She’s playing the play’s Camilla. Director John Sipes, early in rehearsals, helped her divine the difference.

“He said they are connected, but we do the play. I wear a blond wig, I dress like her. It’s a nod to who they are.

“She loves him, and she is there to support him. When he starts making choices that seem wrong, she questions him. But he’s the king,” Williamson said. “So I suppose it’s a lot like husbands and wives, (when one says) ‘Honey are you sure? Is that a good thing to do?’ “

“King Charles III” runs through Feb. 24 on the Clarence Brown main stage. Showtimes and ticket prices vary and are at <https://clarencbrowntheatre.com>.