

THEATRE REVIEWS

Edward II

Presented by the **Chicago Shakespeare Theater** at **Navy Pier**, October 7–November 9, 2008. Directed and adapted by Sean Graney. Scenic designer Todd Rosenthal. Costume designer Alison Stiple. Lighting designer Philip S. Rosenberg. Sound designer Michael Griggs. Wig and make-up designer Melissa Veal. Composer Kevin O'Donnell. Fight choreographer Matt Hawkins. With Jeffrey Carlson (Edward II), Scott Cummins (Mortimer the younger), Karen Aldridge (Queen Isabella), La Shawn Banks (Gaveston, Lightborn), Lea Coco (Kent), Kareem Bandealy (Bishop of Coventry, Earl of Arundel, Gurney), Kurt Ehrmann (Mortimer the elder, Matrevis), Zach Gray (Prince Edward), Erik Hellman (Spencer), John Lister (Bishop of Canterbury), and Chris Sullivan (Lancaster, Rice ap Howell).

ANDREA STEVENS, *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

Sean Graney's production of *Edward II* at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater was, simply put, one of the most exciting performances I've recently seen. Edited for a running time of around eighty minutes, the production focused on the shifting fortunes of Edward II and his rival, Mortimer. The action began with the return of the King's favorite, Gaveston, to England. The resumption of this relationship—and the tenor of it—was signaled very well with costume: although he arrived from France in nondescript dark clothing, Gaveston, once re-installed, made a flamboyant entrance in furs and a purple teddy (although Edward wears a suit and not a teddy, at one point he is shown leafing through a *Details* magazine). There was no attempt to leave the nature of their relationship ambiguous; they were lovers, and while their sexual desire for each other was openly depicted, it was never sensationalized. One reviewer objected that Graney “spoon-feeds sexuality to the audience;” I saw no evidence to support this judgment, unless showing affection between men counts as “spoon-feeding.” Nearly immediately this relationship was checked, however, by the various factions whose power constrained Edward's own. The production made explicit that the court objected not to Gaveston the man, but to Gaveston the foreign-born commoner (with the possible exception of Lancaster and the Bishop, who did seem to disapprove of homosexuality as such). More problematic still

was Edward's subordination of all royal concerns to the pursuit of private desire, as was evident both in his childish stomping and in his plaintive wish to parcel up England rather than banish Gaveston again: "so may I have some nook or corner left / To frolic with my dearest Gaveston." By the last act we saw Edward torn between his attachment to privacy and his attachment to kingship; in 5.1, he very reluctantly handed over his crown to the Archbishop of Canterbury.

At the beginning of the play, our sympathies were aligned with Mortimer and Isabella and against a petulant Edward and a frivolous Gaveston. In their first joint exercise of power, the couple humiliated the Bishop of Coventry by publicly stripping him of his robes; later, we saw Edward strike Isabella to the ground. Because of Jeffrey Carlson's superb acting, however, Edward's transformation from sulky tyrant to tragic—and abject—victim was completely compelling, and in the final moments of the play Edward achieved transcendence in his abasement. Karen Aldridge as Isabella was exceptional, too, although I was never quite clear about the director's vision of her shifting allegiances—was she always conspiring against Edward, or did she only reluctantly join with Mortimer after her neglect became too much to bear? When exactly did their adulterous relationship begin? One choice that did emerge quite clearly was Gaveston's surprising sensitivity to Isabella; at least twice he appeared to condemn Edward's harsh treatment of her.

Graney's most striking choice was to stage the play in the promenade style; as he explained in his director's note: "I thought that a play as unique as this, with its shifting point of view between protagonists, needed a unique staging . . . breaking with traditional staging asks you to engage physically in the decision." Actors therefore performed among standing audience members who moved freely around the intimate space of this small black-box theater (the octagonal stage was surrounded by a balcony with seats for those not inclined to stand; they lost out). This license created a level of active engagement that fixed seating simply cannot. We could move with the actors, take up different vantage points, share the actors' light, sit on benches or stand, and scrutinize details of costume, face, or body. If the actors needed to occupy a particular space—if, say, they wished to climb upon one of the few stone benches that also doubled as acting platforms—they would simply move people out of the way by making eye contact or by lightly touching them. Extras in dark jumpsuits also helped steer the audience out of the actors' paths. (The litigant in me kept wondering about non-dramatic things like liability, as there were moments that struck me as potentially dangerous—as for



After intervening to repeal Gaveston's banishment, the neglected Queen Isabella (Karen Aldridge, right) finally receives attention and praise from her husband, King Edward II (Jeffrey Carlson, left). Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2008 production of *Edward II*, directed by Sean Graney. Photo by Michael Brosilow.



King Edward II (Jeffrey Carlson, center) laments the death of his beloved Gaveston and rants against the traitorous nobility. Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2008 production of *Edward II*, directed by Sean Graney. Photo by Michael Brosilow.

example when an actor came out swinging a mace at young Edward's ascension ceremony. Death by drama indeed.)

Certainly, Graney's choice to use promenade staging is not unprecedented. Nonetheless, it was my impression that this mode of spectatorship was new for most of us. To acclimatize us to the use of space, the actors mounted a pre-show in which they volleyed a beach ball first among themselves, then to members of the audience filing into the theater (Edward spent this pre-show sulking up on his throne). The game—its inherent silliness in sharp contrast to the violent, tense performance itself—informed the audience that the space was theirs to occupy playfully rather than reverently, and theirs as well as, or as much as, the actors'.

It was fascinating to watch the way spectators disciplined themselves with respect to this freedom of movement. Nobody entered the modern, tiled bathroom located at one corner of the stage; separated by a plastic curtain and containing a toilet full of blood, the bathroom became the space for nearly all of the play's executions. Most of these deaths followed the same routine: the actor was brought into the bathroom, shot with a gun contained in a plastic lunch box, and blood was painted on

the wall. The bathroom became increasingly blood-smeared as the play progressed. On a poster outside the theater door was the injunction “be brave,” the director’s note also advising “don’t stay out of the way;” what might have happened, I wonder, if a more intrepid—or naïve—audience member had entered the Murder Room to sit on the toilet for part of the show? The question seems ridiculous, but does indicate that the audience’s more conservative sense of its own role persisted even within this ostensibly unstructured, more participatory kind of audience-performer contract. I wondered, too, to what degree the director depended on this. Notwithstanding the rhetoric of brave spectatorship, the success of the show still required certain forms of decorum be observed.

As my description of the bloody bathroom suggests, this production did not eschew violence. Once an execution had taken place, a masked and beaked “Death,” accompanied by tolling bells and rolling fog, would enter to escort the body offstage. This was effective at first but the repetition grew somewhat tiresome. The repetition paid off, however, in the play’s final moments. Unlike these more ritualized killings, Edward’s murder was staged with the house lights on and with no accompanying special effects whatsoever. The removal of theatrical trappings made the moment all the more intense, focused, and unbearable. Lightborn, Gurney, and Matrevis moved a few audience members off of a bench, flipped it over, and rested Edward on it. A mattress was partially placed over him, his pants pulled down, and the infamous poker inserted graphically and violently. In an unsettling use of doubling, the actor who played Gaveston also played Lightborn.

My lone objection was the play’s fever pitch, which sometimes manifested as actors shouting rather than delivering their lines; I wished some of the performers were encouraged to show more restraint. Also, some of Graney’s few additions to the text were unsubtle, to say the least. Gurney and Matrevis called Lightborn a “motherfucker,” and elsewhere in the play somebody shouted “faggot.” This contemporary idiom did not make Marlowe more legible or accessible, nor did the words intensify the action at these moments; the material needed no help in this regard. The play’s final image was the white-clad Edward facing his son, also wearing white, as “snow” fell from the ceiling. A student of mine who attended the play thought that the snow, or at least the color symbolism, signaled “a return to order.” The snow did seem somehow sanitizing, but I’m not sure if we were meant to be hopeful about this new regime. My sense was that, by the end of the play, young Edward was well schooled in violence. Spectators filed out covered in snow and, from what I could

see, deeply affected (especially those who had been standing nearest to Edward during his murder).

