

Edward II Lives!

Marlowe's provocative play finds new life on stage and screen.

by Gerard Raymond

CONSIDERING THAT IT IS FOUR HUNDRED years old, Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* is holding up pretty well—especially director Derek Jarman's exciting movie version currently playing a limited release across the country.

In Jarman's provocative introduction to the published screenplay of the film, titled *Queer Edward II*, he asks: "How to make a film of a gay love affair and get it commissioned?" His answer is typically outrageous: "Find a dusty play and violate it." But *Edward II* is far from dusty, as Stan Wojewodski's Yale Repertory production recently proved, and Jarman is rather faithful to Marlowe's text.

"I think it is a great tribute to Marlowe," exclaims actress Tilda Swinton who gives an unforgettable performance as Isabella, Edward's rejected queen-turned-monster, in the movie. "It's marvelous that when we wanted to make statements about issues that concerned us, there was this play that was written four hundred years ago which said pretty much what we wanted to say. It is my hunch that Marlowe would be really pleased with the film and, I hope, rather titillated."

Jarman and his group of actors use the play to make pertinent comments on governmental homophobia such as the anti-gay British laws like Section 28. He has combined some characters—the two Mortimers, uncle and nephew, are turned into a single fascistic commander who becomes Queen Isabella's lover—and he has redistributed some speeches and contemporized some of the language. Jarman calls this a "facelift."

"I updated various words which I thought were out of date, like turning the word 'poniard' into 'knife.' Four letter words were restored to their modern versions, as opposed to their Elizabethan versions because they didn't work." Discovering that all the reference books could only define as "expletive" the word "Tanti," which Gaveston spits out in his opening monologue, Jarman changed it to

read "Fuck Them." "I suspect that purists who believe in the inviolability of the text, whatever that might be, will be upset. I haven't found any, except a few British actors—the Royal Shakespeare type—who think they have done it better. But I can assure

them they haven't!"

The major liberty Jarman takes with the play is subverting the ending where Edward is murdered with a red hot poker up the ass. "It isn't too difficult to take that leap at the end," Jarman argues, "and in fact, the verse doesn't actually hinder you." If you take the text at face value, Lightborn, the murderer, swears he will not kill Edward. "It is quite easy, to restructure the end with existing verse," Jarman explains. "And I think we all want to see that poker thrown away," he adds with a grin.

"How do you make a gay film and get it commissioned? Find a dusty play and violate it."—Derek Jarman



Edward II (Steven Waddington) kisses the hand of Gaveston (Andrew Tiernan) in the Derek Jarman film.

If pressed, Jarman, who studied art and history before he turned to filmmaking, has a historical justification for his subversion. He cites letters that reached Edward III which claimed that Edward II was alive in a monastery in Lombardy. Further, Jarman is intrigued by the fact that Lightborn and the other servants who were involved with the murder, retained their positions in Edward III's court, seeming to indicate that they were not guilty of killing the new king's father.

Even if Edward's escape from death is wishful thinking, Jarman's film illuminates Marlowe's approach to history; he gives a love story between two men the same tragic weight as his contemporary, Shakespeare, gave straight stories. And yet the theme of the movie is universal. Jarman ex-

plains, "Everyone has a friend who has fallen incomprehensively in love with someone one doesn't really like, and you ask 'Whatever did they see in them?' But in the end you have to respect other people's passions."

When Edward is asked why he loves Gaveston, "whom the world hates so," he answers "because he loves me more than all the world." Both in the play and the film, Gaveston is not very likeable, yet his love affair with the king is very moving.

One of the striking and most exciting features of Jarman's film is his use of contemporary and anachronistic images. He is quite proud that his film may set a trend in the genre. "I think it will be more difficult for someone trying to film an Elizabethan play, to just do it in full costume." Taking his cue from Gaves-

ton's speech about introducing masques and homoerotic entertainment to Edward's court, Jarman includes two performance pieces, one by a young man clad in a g-string with a snake coiled around his body and another by the controversial British avant-garde dance duo DV8. The snake charmer has a somewhat Renaissance flavor but DV8 is obviously modern.

"It's meant to upset and disturb people," Jarman acknowledges, intending a comment on the contemporary dilemma about funding controversial art. Since Gaveston introduces these questionable entertainments in the court, it increases the hostility of the barons and the status quo against the "king's minion." Jarman declares, "I feel that if art has any job to prick these people, you should have something like DV8. I mean Edward should have been collecting Robert Mapplethorpe photographs. If Robert was still around," he adds, "I'd have asked him to be in a scene as the court photographer, that would have been excellent!"

It is easy to forget that four hundred years ago, the thirty-year-old Marlowe was writing a contemporary interpretation of historical events that occurred a full 200 years before his lifetime. How does Jarman feel about looking back to Elizabethan times and beyond? "Before this film, I was in awe of the Elizabethan past, but now I am not. We forget that the present is just as interesting, perhaps more so."

Stan Wojewodski, who directed *Edward II* at Yale recently, acknowledges that Jarman's approach to the play has its own validity, especially in the context of making a movie, but he argues that playing Marlowe as written still brings out the unusual power of the play.

"*Edward II* is really not structured in the way a history play is structured. It's astonishing how fast it moves, I mean, it's a page-turner. But then once Edward captures Worth and Lancaster [two rebelling barons] and has them beheaded, the play shifts gear and we slowly begin that very, very beautiful meditation on kingship and the state, and economy, and larger metaphysical questions

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"Marlowe sets Gaveston up as someone who is destructive."—Stan Wojewodski



Edward II (Byron Jennings, right) bestows his ring on his favorite, Gaveston (Thomas Gibson, left).

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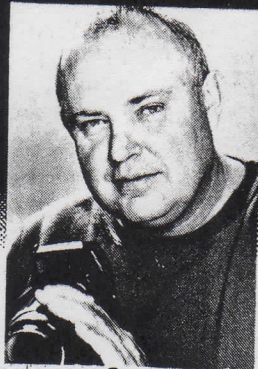
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"There are four tragedies here. I was concerned with making a world in which they would each have dignity."—Wojewodski

about human nature. Marlowe uses history dramaturgically to get to the point where he can then meditate on those larger issues. To use history in such a sophisticated way, the poetry that the king has when he is alone, talking about giving up his kingship, and the level on which that works metaphorically is just astonishing.

"It is clear to me that at the very beginning of the play Marlowe sets Gaveston up as someone who is destructive. Gaveston states at the beginning of the play that being the king's favorite allows him to be at enmity with the world, and that in no way has he to negotiate his position in the society as it is set up. He can go directly to the power source in the society because he is the favorite of the king. His presence seems to give Edward a kind of power that Edward does not have without Gaveston. Actually Edward uses Gaveston to do things that he would not personally do on his own, like attack the church. In a way, Edward really behaves like a little rich boy who buys off the neighborhood bully.

"There is also the issue of who you are sleeping with as opposed to who you are married to, and the political nature of that," Wojewodski points out, referring to Edward's lack of attention to his Queen, Young Mortimer's affair with Isabella and, particularly, Gaveston's arranged marriage with Margaret which is left out of Jarman's film version. The match is fully approved by Edward himself, and is clearly designed to give Gaveston, who is of French Gascon ancestry, a noble English pedigree.

"There are four tragedies in this complex play: Gaveston, Edward II, Isabella, and the young Mortimer. It is not just Edward who is the tragic victim. I was very concerned about trying to make that very clear, that the production would create a world in which they all have the dignity of their tragedies." □