

***Edward II*, directed by Alex Pearson for Alex Pearson Productions in association with Glass Splinters, The Jack Studio Theatre, Lewisham, London, 16 April 2026, centre.**

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This was a clear, concentrated and nicely trimmed telling of Marlowe's tragic history play by a tightly organised and highly flexible group of six female actors. The doubling and tripling of roles demanded some occasional character short-hand: Gurney and Matrevis were a "coupla Esseeex geezers," for instance, but, in the main, it was a thoughtful and lucid production with several intelligent readings.

The performance space was an open square with a doorway upstage on either side of a raised dais, on top of which a nineteenth-century *chaise longue* provided a languorous Wildean note (design by Eve Oakley). As we entered we could make out the silhouette of Gaveston, stretched indolently on it before he woke and excitedly read Edward's letter: "My father is deceased; come Gaveston / And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend" (1.1.1–2).¹ Elinor Machen-Fortune's minion was rather too over-animated in this opening monologue—which readily (given the proximity of the tiny pub-theatre audience) opened up into an address. But before the action quietened down, Machen-Fortune felt the need to perform a physical gesture on every line. This got things off to a wobbly start but, once she relaxed into the script, she proved to be one of the evening's most accomplished performers.

Natalie Harper's Edward was a solid and stolid statesman. Lacking the volatile flightiness of many Edwards, this king was brazenly confident—even entirely rational. Reprimanded by Mortimer for his favouritism towards Gaveston, he is asked, "Why should you love him whom the world hates so?" (1.4.76). Edward's response—"Because he loves me more than all the world"—was not emotionally loaded at all but a mere statement of fact, as though putting it in such bald terms were its own justification. In this way, the production may have been more authentically Marlovian than modern. The play, in recent times, has been interpreted as a gay struggle against the repressive homophobic institutions of the State (see especially Derek Jarman's 1991 film version—a gay rights impassioned response against the homophobia promulgated by the introduction, three years earlier, of the Thatcher

¹ References are to Christopher Marlowe, *Edward the Second*, ed. Charles R. Forker (Manchester University Press, 1994).

administration's Section 28). In fact, in the play, the courtiers' profound objection to Gaveston is not prompted by his homosexuality but his low birth. As Mortimer Senior puts it, "The mightiest kings have had their minions" (1.4.390). Pearson avoided any representations of (homo)sexuality stressing, instead, the play's dark political machinations and betrayals.



Natalie Harper as Edward and Elinor-Machen Fortune as Gaveston. Photo by Steve Gregson.

Though hardly deliberate, there was a resounding presentist political note at one point. The king is told that he is subject to Papal authority and that, if he fails to prevent the persecution of Canterbury (here more "senior" than "statesman" and rendered, doddering and muttering, by Machen-Fortune hunched over a walking stick) that complaints will be made "to the see of Rome" (1.4.53). Edward, outraged, responds: "Why should a king be subject to a priest?" (line 96). For the play's first audiences, such anti-Catholic rhetoric would have surely been a Protestant *cri-de-coeur* but, coming just two days after the American vice-president warned Pope Leo to "be careful" when talking about theology, and fresh on the tail of Donald Trump posting AI-generated images of himself as Christ, the line took on a whole new consequence—proof, if proof were needed—of the continuing cultural weight of the literature of the past.²

² See Richard Luscombe, "JD Vance defends Trump amid spat with Pope Leo: 'Stick to matters of morality'," *The Guardian*, 14 April, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/apr/14/jd-vance-defends-trump-pope-leo-spat>.

Good use was made throughout of the presence of the audience. As Edward showers titles on Gaveston, his public displays of affection are best served by a crowded stage. But, with the exception of Emma Louise-Price's shocked Kent, the stage was empty. Edward's conferring of these promotions was addressed outwardly to us so that we became the serried ranks of appalled onlooking courtiers. This not-quite "audience participation" was effectively deployed when the warrant for Gaveston's banishment was being signed off. Eager to see Gaveston's exile, Canterbury calls for the document: "Give me the paper" (1.4.3). Next Warwick (Louise-Price) took hold of the folder but instead of signing it immediately, he perused the small print of three or four pages like a meticulous civil servant. The audience was co-opted into sharing Lancaster's impatience: "Quick, quick, my lord; I long to write my name" (line 4).

The dungeon captivity of Edward was accompanied by a sound-track of echoing drips (sound design by Hannah Clancy) and Harper shed her earlier style of logical speaking for a genuine pathos. As he recalls his favourites, Gaveston and Spencer, Edward bitterly martyrs himself: "for your sakes a thousand wrongs I'll take" (5.3.43). Harper spoke these lines with real anguish and we felt the double-bind of sympathy while registering Edward's mercenary corruption which had brought him to this pass.

Machen-Fortune was a particularly nasty Lightborne, relishing the agonising damage he had inflicted on earlier victims: "I learned in Naples how to poison flowers, / To strangle with a lawn thrust through the throat..." (5.4.30–31). Dressed in a long black leather coat, tied nonchalantly at the waist, he personified the gleeful sadism of a Nazi officer wielding his stick, like a snooker cue, as though practicing for the poker's aim.

Of course, the theatrical climax of *Edward II* is the dreadful sequence involving the king's pressing and anal penetration, a sequence that has caused outrage and disgust because, as William Empson pointed out in 1946, "The obscene torture by which he is at last killed is an appalling parody of the homosexual act." The principle of *lex talionis* positions the play not so far from Dante's *Inferno* where spirits are condemned eternally to suffer the offences of their own crimes. This is not an easy sequence to stage but when it is taken offstage entirely, as here, the euphemising of the murder is tantamount to a complete defanging of Marlowe's ravenous lupine imagination.

The play ends deliberately with anti-climax as Isabella (Alison Young) and Mortimer (Srabani Sen) get their well-deserved comeuppance, a largely perfunctory piece of poetic justice following the horrendous violence we should have witnessed. The trouble was that this anti-climactic coda followed the anti-climax of the offstage murder and so the show came

to a grinding halt. Some theatrical moments—the suffocation of Desdemona, the blinding of Gloucester, the stoning to death of a baby in a pram in Edward Bond’s *Saved* or the cannibalism of Sarah Kane’s *Blasted*—are unnegotiable. Pearson’s decision to dodge this particular bullet seemed too much like the easy option and meant that this mainly sound production of *Edward II* finished very much with a whimper.

Bibliography

- Luscombe, Richard. “JD Vance defends Trump amid spat with Pope Leo: ‘Stick to matters of morality’.” *The Guardian*, 14 April, 2026. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/apr/14/jd-vance-defends-trump-pope-leo-spat>.
- Marlowe, Christopher. *Edward the Second*. Edited by Charles R. Forker. Manchester University Press, 1994.