

***Born With Teeth*, Liz Duffy Adams, dir. Daniel Evans, Wyndham's Theatre, October 2025**

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Liz Duffy Adams's *Born with Teeth* opens with a highly anxious Shakespeare (Edward Bluemel) outlining the paranoia and violence of the Elizabethan state, standing in front of a large screen projecting images of violence. But, while he opens the play, Shakespeare is not its focus: it is the larger than life, sexy, passionate and mercurial Christopher "Kit" Marlowe (Ncuti Gatwa) that is the play's beating heart and driving force. Adams's play is inspired by research on early modern authorship and collaboration, specifically the *New Oxford Shakespeare's* claim that Marlowe and Shakespeare collaborated on the *Henry VI* plays. In a ninety-minute production, Adams imagines the dynamic, sexualised, powerful and playful interaction between these two writers in three small rooms between 1591 and 1593.

At first glance, Adams appears to play out some of the clichés of Marlowe and Shakespeare with which scholars of early modern theatre and readers of this journal maybe be familiar. Shakespeare is the shy, conservative yet brilliant man from Stratford in awe of the powerful, bombastic and successful Marlowe. Gatwa's Marlowe leaps and bounds across the stage with energy, joking and using his quill for innuendo about his "mighty lines." He does not worry about writing what is required. Meanwhile, Bluemel's Shakespeare is initially still by comparison, earnestly leaning over his papers, anxious about getting the pages done. In the first few minutes of the play, I recalled the scene in *Shakespeare in Love* (Madden, dir. 1998) where Joseph Fiennes's flustered Shakespeare meets a powerful and composed Marlowe (Rupert Everett); the more experienced playwright gives Shakespeare the plot for his current project, *Romeo and Ethel the Pirate's Daughter*. The powerful and clever Marlowe is always the foil to earnest and humane Shakespeare.

But Adams's Marlowe is not a cliché or stereotype, but rather a fully realised character, imbued with the complexities of surviving in Elizabethan London. Thus while, on the surface, the play is a two-hander about the relationship between these two literary heavyweights, Adams gives us a sense of the dangerous sociopolitical context in which they lived, and the power of the Elizabethan theatre within that. Gatwa's Marlowe is not just bombastic energy; there is much nervous anxiety in his movements, explained by his precarious position in society. Marlowe's biography is well-rehearsed, but Adams imagines

the emotional cost of his social ambiguity as a university educated but low-born man. Marlowe is aware of the beauty and power of the written word, but also how writing the wrong thing can get you in trouble. Similarly, Marlowe's attitude to his patrons, both as a writer and a spy, is a double-edged sword. At times he expresses loyalty, but he is also deeply cynical and acutely aware of shifting allegiances. Adams has done her research, and the big hitters are all mentioned (Robert Cecil, Walter Raleigh, the Earl of Essex), colouring the life outside the room in which we see our two characters. Soon Marlowe turns on Shakespeare, demanding in a series of aggressive punchy questions answers to who the man from Stratford serves, what he believes, what he is willing to do or not do, whether he would be a willing spy or not. Central to the tension of their relationship is Marlowe's frustration with Shakespeare's reluctance to join the world of espionage despite Marlowe's threats and cajoling.

The cagey, patchy and speculative revelation of personal details that both characters engage in makes a playful comment on the fragmentary nature of historical record and our desire to project into it. Indeed, when Shakespeare criticises Marlowe's narrative embellishments of *Henry VI*, noting "it is a history play," the more successful playwright retorts "all the more reason to use our imaginations." This line is just one example of the metatheatrical knowingness that runs through *Born with Teeth* as it comments on the intersection of history and imagination, page and stage, reality and fiction. At one point, Shakespeare considers how ridiculous it would be for future audiences to speculate about his personal politics and jokes that "no one is studying" him.

Adams's play engages frankly with the question of Marlowe's sexuality, making the interaction between the two playwrights not just intellectual but also a portrayal of queer desire. Marlowe's initial teasing aggression towards Shakespeare is deeply flirtatious, and it is not long before Gatwa's Marlowe is sitting on top and kissing an initially shocked but clearly excited Shakespeare. The growing physical intimacy and dynamic movement between the characters is a great strength of *Born with Teeth*, and the work of Movement Director Ira Mandela Siobhan and Intimacy Coordinator Katherine Hardman. The playwrights' relationship moves through aggression, excitement to quite moving tenderness. In one quiet moment, Shakespeare suggests a life living and working together "like Fletcher and Beaumont," Adams referring to speculation that this playwriting duo were also lovers. In this way, Adams explores the ambiguity of sexuality and the interplay between creativity, writing and sexual desire. It is one of the many ways that this historic play feels relevant and contemporary, Adams making clear the foundational roots of the modern in the *early* modern.

The intimacy in the playwrights' interaction is another way *Born with Teeth* departs from the stereotypes around Marlowe and Shakespeare's relationship. Lots of fictional encounters interpret them as competitive rivals, but Adams is interested in the conversation between Shakespeare and Marlowe about writing and how to create art in a highly charged political context. What seems like competitive questioning over the course of the play becomes Marlowe shaping Shakespeare's sense of the writer he wants to be. Adams touches on the way in which Shakespeare has a gift for blending in, for neutrality, for humanism that stands in opposition to Marlowe's bright and bold insistence on political expression. In a play committed to an imaginative exploration of history, I would have liked to see this notion explored further, asking the audience to grapple with questions with which academics are more familiar perhaps: is neutrality the key to Shakespeare's longevity and popularity? If Marlowe had lived, would his unrelenting bombast have been sustainable? *Born with Teeth* hints at a lot of questions about Marlowe and Shakespeare but never really focusses in on one or provides clarity on any answers whatsoever.

Marlowe and Shakespeare's encounters take place in a private room in an inn. Joanna Scotcher's set is one of big screen projections (between acts) and banks of blinding lights, mixed with more realistic and grounded wooden floors and tables. The set, like the play, is a curious mix of historical realism and heightened metatheatre. Scotcher's costumes also walk the line between historical and contemporary. In an article in the programme by Peter Taylor-Wiffen, Scotcher describes her design "We have the magnificence of the silhouettes that epitomises Elizabethan England—but instead of damask silk we've got rough leathers with biker jacket-style stitching. It's constructed in a very correct historic manner, while exploring a very contemporary presentation." Again, there is an alignment here with a play that is deeply historical and well-researched but interweaves that work into contemporary or indeed universal themes of sexuality, creativity and identity. As the play progressed, the stripped-down aesthetic became somewhat monotonous. A set for the third act of the play which changed this aesthetic and gave more of a feeling of the materially rich world of early modern theatre, rather than relying solely on the dialogue to flesh out this world, might have been beneficial.

Ultimately, though, *Born with Teeth* engages most with the world of the Elizabethan state which looms omnipresent in the language of informants, warrants, arrests, loyalties and spying. Adams does not stage Marlowe's death in a tavern in Deptford, but it hangs forebodingly over the play in the violence of his language and gallows humour. Gatwa's edgy and restless energy conveys how Marlowe feels his precarity as both agent and threat to the

state, as someone waist-deep in violence and political game playing. By contrast, Bluemel's Shakespeare initially does seem almost carefree and naive. But his narrative arc is one which marks a loss of innocence. In the end, it is Shakespeare who betrays Marlowe in the hostile political game of Elizabethan England. This plot development is the ultimate overturning of the power dynamic of their relationship and gives an imaginative context for Shakespeare's eventual dominance over Marlowe. Tinged with guilt and pride, Bluemel's Shakespeare explains that his great canon is an attempt to write the mighty Marlowe back to life as Henry IV, as Hamlet, as Richard III, etc. In some ways, this ending feels too neat for a play that raised so many questions about the playwrights' lives, identities and creativity. Considering the complexity of the relationship portrayed over ninety minutes, does Bluemel's Shakespeare really simply want to revive his lover / friend / enemy / sparring partner / rival / colleague / shadow self?

Overall, *Born with Teeth* is an engaging two-hander about two great playwrights and perhaps its most thrilling moments are those where we see these literary masters actually writing *Henry VI*, defining Joan of Arc's character, playing out key scenes (Cade's rebellion) and tinkering with lines. It is exciting to think that current research on early modern theatre (*The New Oxford Shakespeare*) can produce such creative and dynamic responses. Duffy came across the *Henry VI* research in a *Guardian* article in 2016 and *Born with Teeth* reminds us of the exciting outcomes when research on early modern theatre intersects with contemporary theatre. But the play is more than a thought-exercise inspired by research. Adams does well to make Shakespeare and Marlowe more than their biographies. These characters feel very alive and dynamic and, as noted, the metatheatrical knowingness provides further vividness to their portrayal. Deeply early modern, but also oddly contemporary in their negotiations around politics, creativity and sexuality. In other words, *Born with Teeth* functions as a dynamic piece of theatre for modern audiences, while also engaging genuinely with some crucial academic questions around Shakespeare and Marlowe. I enjoyed it immensely as a theatregoer and as an early modern theatre historian.