

**National
Theatre
Learning**

Background pack

A white dog is hanging upside down from a lit matchstick. The matchstick is positioned vertically, with the flame at the bottom and the dog's head resting on it. The dog's body is suspended in the air, and its legs are spread out. The background is solid black, making the white dog and the orange flame stand out prominently.

Edward II

by Christopher Marlowe

Edward II

Background pack

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Welcome to the National Theatre's background pack for *Edward II*.

Through imaginative and innovative in-school, on-site and online activities, NT Learning opens up the National's repertoire, artistry, skills, and the building itself, enabling participants of all ages to discover new skills and experience the excitement of theatre-making. If you've enjoyed this background pack or would like to talk to us about getting involved in NT Learning activities, please contact us on learning@nationaltheatre.org.uk or **020 7452 3388**.

Jane Ball
Programme Manager, NT Learning
Autumn 2013

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Official rehearsal and production photographs taken by Johan Persson.

Additional photos by Jeff James, Lizzie Clachan, Gary Pell and Lena Zimmer.

Set design by Lizzie Clachan.



Click on this arrow, when you see it, for more online resources.

Further production details:
nationaltheatre.org.uk

The National Theatre's production of *Edward II*

This production opened in the Olivier Theatre
on 4 September 2013

The Royal Family

King Edward II **John Heffernan**
Queen Isabella, *wife to the King and sister to the
King of France* **Vanessa Kirby**
Prince Edward, *their son, later King Edward III*
Betrys Jones
Kent, *sister to the King* **Kirsty Bushell**

The King's Favourites

Piers Gaveston **Kyle Soller**
Hugh Spencer **Nathaniel Martello-White**
Baldock, *a scholar and clerk* **Ben Addis**

The Barons

The Earl of Lancaster **Alex Beckett**
Guy, Earl of Warwick **Matthew Pidgeon**
Lord Mortimer the elder **Paul Bentall**
Lord Mortimer the younger, *his nephew*
Kobna Holdbrook-Smith
Pembroke **Penny Layden**

The Church

The Archbishop of Canterbury **David Sibley**
The Bishop of Coventry **Stephen Wilson**

Others

Maltravers } *creatures of the* **Alex Beckett**
Gurney } *young Mortimer* **Matthew Pidgeon**

Lightborn, *a murderer* **Kyle Soller**

The Dogs **Iain Batchelor, Nathalie Carrington**
Jack Helsby, Daniel Millar
Johnny Panchaud, Jamie Satterthwaite
Dan Winter, Thomas Yarrow

The Pianist **Sam Cable**

Understudies

Iain Batchelor (Edward II)
Nathalie Carrington (Isabella/Prince Edward)
Jack Helsby (Kent)
Daniel Millar (Mortimer the younger)
Johnny Panchaud (Gaveston/Lightborn/Pembroke)
Jamie Satterthwaite (Lancaster/Maltravers/Baldock)
Stephen Wilson (Spencer)
Dan Winter (Mortimer the elder/Archbishop
of Canterbury)
Thomas Yarrow (Warwick/Gurney/Bishop of Coventry)

Director **Joe Hill-Gibbins**
Set Designer **Lizzie Clachan**
Costume Designer **Alex Lowde**
Lighting Designer **James Farncombe**
Video & Projection Designer **Chris Kondek**
Music **Gary Yershon**
Movement Director **Imogen Knight**
Sound Designer **Paul Arditti**
Music Associate **Sam Cable**
Dramaturg **Zoë Svendsen**
Company Voice Work **Jeannette Nelson**
Staff Director **Jeff James**



Edward II (John Heffernan) and Gaveston (Kyle Soller)
Photograph by Johan Persson

Synopsis

Edward I has died and his son, Edward II, is crowned king. His first act as king is to call home from banishment his lover Piers Gaveston. This appals the Barons who see Gaveston as an upstart and a threat to their power. When Edward doesn't listen to them, they join with the Archbishop of Canterbury to force Edward to banish Gaveston for a second time.

This seems to work until Queen Isabella persuades Mortimer to let Gaveston come back. When Gaveston returns, tensions immediately rise and the Barons prepare for civil war. Edward's sister, Kent, leaves him to join the Barons, but Gaveston introduces Spencer and Baldock to Edward's court.

The Barons hunt down Gaveston, and in spite of an intervention by Baldock, he is murdered by Warwick. Edward's resolution is strengthened, but his Queen finally abandons him, leaving to look for help in France. Edward defeats the Barons, and has the ring leaders executed: Lancaster and Warwick.

Mortimer, Kent and Isabella regroup in France and resolve to invade England and put Prince Edward on the throne. Spencer has now taken Gaveston's place as the king's favourite. Isabella's invasion is victorious and Edward II is captured. He is imprisoned and his favourites are sent to execution.

With Edward in prison, Mortimer and Isabella rule England, and Pembroke and Canterbury persuade Edward to give up his crown. Kent changes sides again, but fails to rescue Edward, who is now being tortured in prison by Maltravers and Gurney. Prince Edward is crowned as Edward III, and Mortimer employs Lightborn to murder the old king. Lightborn succeeds, but Edward III learns of the murder and takes revenge for his father's death.



Edward II (John Heffernan)
Photograph by Johan Persson

Rehearsal diary

Staff Director Jeff James documented the six-week rehearsal period; here he describes how the production developed.

Week One

One of the major changes to Marlowe's text is that the play will open with the **coronation** of Edward II, rather than with Gaveston's speech. This coronation prefigures the coronation of Edward III, which *is* in the original text of the play.

After some introductory 'speed dating', the first thing we do on Monday morning is to have a first go at the coronation. This introduces many of the ways we will work in rehearsal. There is lots of stuff in the room: costume, props and furniture. Some of these are medieval, but, like the production, they aren't limited to that time period. Joe [Hill-Gibbins, director] sets a few rules for the actors about the structure of the coronation, which include:

- there will be an oath
- a prayer will be said
- if one person says 'God save the King', everyone has to say it, and this can happen at any time
- if the king bows to someone, everyone has to bow to the king in exactly the same way
- there will be live and recorded music

The actors have 20 minutes to dress up, prepare the space and work out what will happen. This first attempt is messy and chaotic, but, even so, material is generated that we can use later on. We discuss as a group how the coronation could be improved, then the actors try again. The best ideas from the first effort stay in, and other things appear. The actors

have the freedom to improvise and to be silly – a way of working we come back to as we look at other, more complex parts of the play.

Looking at the coronation allows us to talk about some of the ideas in the production. For example, why do societies have kings? We talk about how having a king creates order, and how the coronation helps to establish the myth of kingship.

Another formal structure of our production is a series of **parties** which people have when they are winning. Imogen Knight, our movement director, leads an exercise where the actors improvise different kinds of parties. We start with a 'booze party', and Imogen makes the actors start at level 1: "This means you've had half a glass of wine."

She moves the actors up a scale to ten (just by shouting numbers at them) and the party becomes more raucous and dangerous. Imogen encourages the actors to take on movement and noises that others are making, so if one person starts stamping then suddenly everyone is stamping. The actors are not allowed to speak, but they can sing and make other vocal noises. She then looks at different kinds of parties, including a 'rugby party' which culminates in several of the actors toplessly and rhythmically jumping up and down, and a 'stag party'. In the stag party, John Heffernan, who plays Edward II, is the 'stag'. Imogen tells the other cast members to move between loving and hating him, still moving on a scale between one and ten.

Both the rugby party and the stag party seem to connect with an idea in the play that the kind of parties Edward and Gaveston have are sexual and dangerous. At the beginning of the play, for example, Gaveston talks about staging the **Actaeon** myth for Edward, with men dressed as hounds pretending to rip apart an actor playing Actaeon. These parties convey the idea that a lot of fun can be very scary, and getting everything you want can create a personal hell.



Props table in rehearsal and members of the company
Photograph by Jeff James

Rehearsal diary (continued)

Week Two

We continue to sketch through the play – often moving through large chunks of it in **jams**. For us a jam means running through part of the play while remaining in character even if your character is not on stage. The actors wear costumes which they quickly choose from the rails in the rehearsal room, and are allowed to add dialogue to what is already in the text.

One of the best jams of the week happens during scene four, where the Barons attempt to force Edward to exile Gaveston, but Isabella persuades Mortimer to change his mind. This is one of the longest scenes in the play, and we had begun working on it last week. Through jamming, we are able to find the tensions between the different Barons. On first reading the play, it seems that the Barons are one group, but we increasingly find that they are a messy group with individual interests which make it hard for them to agree. In this jam of scene four, Joe gives **Lancaster** (Alex Beckett) the note that he should not let **Mortimer** the younger (Kobna Holdbrook-Smith) play higher status than him. We established the different status of the Barons back in Week One – Lancaster keeps saying that he has four earldoms rather than one, and Mortimer isn't even an earl. Nevertheless, Mortimer is the ringleader of the Barons. When Alex plays Lancaster's frustration it is really fruitful: he tries to flirt with Isabella (Vanessa Kirby), giving her a backrub and even trying to lean in for a kiss: from his point of view, it makes no sense that Mortimer should become Isabella's lover. Once Mortimer messes up the banishment of Gaveston, Lancaster's frustration spills over and the two end up in a brawl. This fight will almost certainly make its way into the performance, but we wouldn't have been able to explore this aggression by talking about the scene, or by blocking* it for performance straight away.

We focus on several of the characters this week. Joe speaks with the actors on their own or in pairs about their character's journey through the play, and looks at the historical figure the character is based on. The actor then comes up with three ways their character would describe themselves, using the formula 'I am...'. In Kirsty Bushell's character chat we talk about the way Kent tries to be consistent, but ends up having to switch sides when it becomes impossible to stay

* Plotting out the actors' movements to structure each scene.

John Heffernan (Edward II) and Kyle Soller (Gaveston) in rehearsal
Photograph by Johan Persson

with Edward. She also considers Kent's loyalty to her family, and to the Plantagenet line. Kirsty's descriptions:

"I am Edward's sister"
"I am devoted"
"I am a better man than Edward"
"I am worthless"

The contradictions of these descriptions are hopefully useful for the actor in navigating the character's journey through the play. Separately to the character chat, we look at the scene when Gaveston is murdered. Marlowe hasn't put Kent in this scene, but it seems strange that Kent joins the rebel Barons and then doesn't go with them to hunt Gaveston. We try the scene both with and without Kent, and decide we will write some dialogue to incorporate Kent into the scene.

Week Three

We finish sketching out the play in jams, and **run** the play for the first time. This run is more of a 'super jam' than a run through, as there are lots of parts of the play which Joe hasn't yet blocked closely. The point is to allow the creative team and the actors to see the arc of the play and to think about how to proceed. The run takes a whole rehearsal day and comes in at about 5 and a half hours. We're definitely going to make it a lot shorter over the next month! This isn't an attempt to do a version of the final production, and it contains lots of new improvised sections and extra text. One of the best moments is when Edward and Gaveston meet the Barons after beating up the Bishop of Coventry. Stephen Wilson, who plays the Bishop, is Irish, and John and Kyle Soller (Gaveston)



Rehearsal diary (continued)

create a bishop robot who speaks in a sort of *Father Ted* inspired 'Oirish', riling the Barons. This is both funny and offensive, particularly to the Archbishop of Canterbury. From the Archbishop's point of view, the pair are mocking his friend who they have already assaulted.

When we work on this scene later in the week, I am struck by how cleverly Marlowe shows us Edward and Gaveston being reunited, and then we see them attacking Coventry. In the first part of the scene, Edward and Gaveston seem very appealing and we feel sympathetic to the difficulties of their relationship. As soon as this sympathy is established, we see them behaving appallingly, which complicates our response.

The use of **video** is addressed this week, too. We are still working on the scene where the Barons and the Archbishop conspire against Edward. This scene takes place inside the castle which sits on the stage in the first part of the play, and we need to make sure the story is clear. This moment will be a shock to the audience as the action is displayed on video screens for the first time. It takes a lot of time to choreograph how the actors and cameras move in the castle; we want the scene to have a hand-held and chaotic feel,

but the different shots have to be carefully rehearsed. After the run, we are unsure how well this scene fits with the scenes around it, and we're now thinking of writing some new material to link it to the following scene.

Week Four

Joe thinks the first third of the play needs more work in terms of working out how to stage it. In the first part of the production there is a focus on the wooden parliament or castle which the barons conspire in. It becomes a place where people retreat for safety or to exclude others. When the **civil war** section begins, this structure is flattened and strewn across the stage. The real structure has now been added to rehearsals and we can experiment with how to use it. Dismantling the castle structure is itself a big challenge, and we spend two sessions trying to work out how this could be achieved. We need it to look dangerous and chaotic, whilst making it totally safe for the actors who run around inside a collapsing structure.

This collapse is the beginning of what we call the **alarums** or civil war section. Our movement director, Imogen, looks at ways the actors' movement can suggest a battlefield in a non-literal, expressive way. At the beginning of our rehearsal process, we played

children's games involving chase and capture. I had found a 1969 book by Iona and Peter Opie – *Children's Games in Street and Playground* – which collected games they had observed children playing. At this stage, the games we are playing are becoming increasingly removed from actual children's games, with rules and motivations: this seems to fit the form of the three 'alarums' in the play where each time the victors emerge out of chaos, rather than from strategic advantage.

For more resources used by the cast of *Edward II* go to 'Additional resources' on page 16 of this pack.

The 'parliament' as shown in the set model box.
Design by Lizzie Clachan
Photograph by Gary Pell



Rehearsal diary (continued)

Week Five

This week's main task is filming the Spencer and Baldock video. **Spencer and Baldock** appear quite late on in Marlowe's text, and their arrival feels like an abrupt break. As an audience, we have begun to get used to a large number of characters, and then suddenly we meet two new ones. For a long time, Joe had thought that this section should be on video, and we looked at several different ways this could work. In the workshop way back in February, Chris [Kondek, video & projection designer] and Joe experimented with filming the actors near the stage manager's desk in the backstage wings of the Olivier. Spencer and Baldock are observers and outsiders who get sucked into the action of the play. Perhaps they could be seen watching the play on a monitor, and then walk on stage?

An idea that we have been developing over rehearsal is to make their scene a journey into the theatre. They start as literal outsiders, and then break in to the theatre. In Week Three we filmed a test where they walked down Waterloo Bridge and then came into the foyer of the NT, slipping into the backstage area through the pass door. We still weren't sure this told the story of Spencer breaking into the story, and wanted to find a location where the NT looked as much like a castle as possible. We decided we would film on the **roof of the NT**, and got permission to get up to areas that are accessible only by ladder. Up on the roof there are few windows and the structure has an almost medieval look. Spencer and Baldock talk on one level, and masked soldiers stand on a level above, as if on battlements. Chris films take after take, with Joe directing the actors and tweaking the



'Dogs of War' during camera rehearsals on the roof of the National Theatre
Photograph by Lena Zimmer

dialogue. We also film sequences of the two actors running along the 'battlements', and breaking in through a door. Our current plan is to switch from the pre-recorded material to live feed for the second part of the scene.

During an evening rehearsal we look at the scene when Edward tells Gaveston that he is banished. This scene is very complex, with lots of corners for the actors to negotiate. Joe uses the language of **events** and 'wants' to create the psychological structure of this scene. An event is something that happens in the scene which changes what all of the characters want. One example is when Edward and Gaveston exchange miniature portraits of each other. Joe works with John and Kyle to decide on what the wants are for each chunk of action. For example, after the exchange of pictures, *Gaveston wants* to ease Edward's pain at parting, and *Edward wants* to convince Gaveston to stay. The actors then play that section again, trying to get the thing they want. This way of working is extremely useful at unlocking the most psychologically complex scenes, but is not a vocabulary we use with the actors during day-to-day rehearsals.



Nathaniel Martello-White (Spencer) and Ben Addis (Baldock) in rehearsal
Photograph by Johan Persson

Rehearsal diary (continued)



Kobna Holdbrook-Smith (Mortimer) and Vanessa Kirby (Isabella) in rehearsal
Photograph by Johan Persson

Week Six

We rehearse the second half of the play on a high platform. Mortimer and Isabella are trapped up above on a castle of power they have created, and Edward is seen in prison below. This creates lots of practical problems, as the actors are 10 feet in the air and their movements need to be carefully controlled so there is no risk of falling.

We rehearsed these scenes last week, and on the Sunday, Joe decided that we needed to push it further. When Mortimer speaks to **Maltravers** and **Gurney** they should be at the front of the stage facing out, rather than on the platform as well. This increases Mortimer's isolation, and reinforces the idea that he is trying to control events elsewhere which eventually spiral out of his control. Following this idea to its conclusion, Joe decides that Mortimer's interview with **Lightborn** should also take place at the front of the stage, and Edward III will send Mortimer to his death from the same position. As with many aspects of the production, the creative team talk about how to establish a form and where we can deviate from it. Lightborn feels very different to Maltravers and Gurney: they are human torturers, but he is the Devil. His name is an Anglicisation of Lucifer. Nevertheless, we keep the same form for Lightborn's meeting, and hope the writing will make the distinction.

We have a breakthrough with one of Mortimer's speeches in the second half. When Mortimer tells the audience that he does what he will, Joe asks Kobna to imagine he is a man flexing his muscles in front of a mirror. Kobna takes this literally and rips his shirt off at the beginning of the speech, repeating the name 'Mortimer' again and again as if it were an incantation, all the time moving his body to tense different parts of it. The madness of this fits the madness of Mortimer's speech, and Joe tells Kobna that he should keep going with this. What could have been just an exercise gives a real steer on how to stage this moment.



The rehearsal structure for Mortimer and Isabella's castle
Photograph by Jeff James

Rehearsal diary (continued)

From: Gary Pell
Sent: 02 September 2013 09:33
To: All
Subject: Edward II Technical calls

Good Morning,

08:30 – 12:30 Painters
10:00 – 13:30 Stage work as required, underlay and drum levelling
13:30 – 14:30 Dinner (Stage Technicians)
13:30 - 14:00 Photo call (yellow curtain in)
14:00 – 17:00 Rehearsals as called
(Lx light over rehearsals)
17:00 – 17:55 Stage reset
17:55 – 18:55 Dinner
18:30 – Vocal warm up
18:55 – the Half
19:30 – Preview 5

Thank you

Gary Pell
Deputy Production Manager

Technical Rehearsals

The final stage of rehearsals is the tech, when we move into the theatre and slowly work through the play. For every moment of the play we have to decide on the lighting state, incorporate all the sound effects, and work out exactly how the video works. We have three days to do this in, and work 12 hours each day.

Once we are in the theatre, it becomes clear that some things do not work. For example, we have rehearsed a complicated coronation ceremony which involves the ritual passing of objects to the king. As soon as we see this in situ, it feels overlong, and we immediately simplify it.

Our rehearsal room is smaller than the Olivier stage, so we also change some of the blocking to make it fit this bigger space. It is great to be able to see the play from further away, and to see our finished set. The parts of the play that take the longest to work out are the parties and the alarums. We need to fit together the movement of the actors with light, sound and video, sometimes a complicated one-minute sequence can take more than an hour to get right.

Previews

At the end of the tech we start showing the play to an audience. The first six performances are previews to give us time to change and try things out, responding to the audiences and the technology of the theatre. After the first preview it is clear that the civil war section is still far too long. We edited Marlowe's text a lot before starting rehearsal, and made some further big changes during rehearsal but some of the scenes are still superfluous, or too long. During the day of the second preview, we cut out three scenes from the civil war. That night the first half of the play is half an hour shorter, and much more exciting.

We continue to make changes up until Press Night. During the previews we realise some members of the audience do not understand that Gaveston has died. When the same actor, Kyle Soller, plays Lightborn at the end of the play, they think there is a complicated story of resurrection going on, or that he has been spared in return for killing Edward. We respond to this confusion by clarifying the scene where Gaveston dies, and by adapting Lightborn's costume and accent so Kyle is noticeably different when he returns. We want the audience to enjoy the parallel between Gaveston and Lightborn, but need them to understand that they are different characters.

After six previews, we have the Press Night, the official opening of the play. At the NT all the actors' dressing rooms look onto a central courtyard. There is a tradition on Press Night for the actors from each of the National's three theatres to bang on the windows just before going on stage. This rouses everyone for the opening night, and celebrates the end of the rehearsal process.

Jeff James – Staff Director

Above: Technical rehearsal call from Deputy Production Manager Gary Pell

Interview with dramaturg Zoë Svendsen

Dramaturg Zoë Svendsen was interviewed by Staff Director Jeff James.

Could you tell us a little bit about what it means to be dramaturg on *Edward II*?

The role of dramaturg is very much dependent on the relationship between the creative team as a whole, and particularly, on the relationship between the dramaturg and the director. How I perceive it, is that the role relates to thinking through the structure of the play in time and space. You might describe what I do as a production dramaturg as a contrast with something that's often called literary management in the UK. Literary management thinks about the text as a distinct entity, whereas I spend more time thinking about the shape and form of the production. The result is to develop, with the director, a concept of the visual patterning, the rhythmic patterning, and the structure in time of the performance. We then work back from that to thinking about the scenes. We look at the play chronologically and try and understand what the scenic structure of the play is on stage.

With plays like *Edward II*, which was written in the 1590s, it's very much a case of clear psychological patterning in the relationships between characters, rather than a very specifically laid-out time and place and environment or location. I would say that Marlowe was distinctly uninterested in location. Despite the fact that in the play he mentions many different locations which are, more or less, historically accurate, there are no transitions between locations; it's almost as if it all occurs in the same place. Psychologically, the play happens in one place, so one of the things we've done is streamline it by taking out lots of the place names – not because we are trying to hide those locations but simply listening to what Marlowe's really talking about: the structure in relationships. As theatre-goers and theatre-makers, we are used to a modern, contemporary dramatic structure in which location really matters. When we hear a location named in a performance we tend to think about it: 'Ooh, Tynemouth. Where's that? And now they are in Bristol, what relation does Bristol have to Tynemouth?' In *Edward II*, this is a distraction and doesn't help you think about the play.

We started by trying to identify the themes of the play, and what is bothering Marlowe, what matters most to the playwright in order that it can be the core of what we stage. We think of it as staging situation rather than the lines and seek to understand as clearly as possible everything that the writer is expressing in terms of the **psychic structure** of the play, and then we work to stage that psychic structure. From there we think about editing the play in order to make that clearer.

Can you give an example of an element of 'psychic structure' in *Edward II*?

An example which runs through the first third, which I think is probably the most difficult section of the play, is a cycle of repetition and accumulation. The characters seem to just be doing the same thing, over and over again. A modern approach to that might be to try and make those repetitions as different as possible in order to keep the attention of the audience. However, I think the repetitions are deliberate because they are producing a cumulative structure, and this is less common in modern dramatic writing because it doesn't imply any kind of psychological development in terms of the characters. Instead, the characters have specific desires which are very clearly worked through, and those desires are consistently thwarted. What changes is not what the characters *want* to do, but what they feel they *can* do. At the beginning, the idea of deposing and murdering a king is completely unthinkable. When the barons first threaten Edward with war, there's a sense in which this is simply rhetorical. But once the barons have voiced this idea, it starts to become a possibility. We haven't tried to reduce the number of repetitions and instead enjoy them as they move us closer and closer to tragedy.

And was that sense of repetition obvious when you first read the play or were there processes early on – working with Joe [Hill-Gibbins, director] – which made it clear?

I think the fact that it might be possible to make repetition work became clearer when we were in the workshop, about six months before we started rehearsal. My experience of reading *Edward II* for the first time was like, 'have I read this bit already?' The final third of the play is intensely dramatic in the sense that you watch Edward and his struggle with his situation of being, as we think of it, in Hell – which is how Marlowe probably thinks of it as well – once he has been deprived of his crown. The structure of the third phase of the play, after the interval, was always more transparent. We have edited those scenes the least, but with scenes early on in the play it was absolutely unclear what might be stageable and what might be clear to an audience. It was a process of workshopping which helped us to understand it, and hold off on cutting lines too soon.

One of the principles was: not to edit out anything that we don't understand or don't think an audience would understand, but instead work on it until we believe it is clear. Certain lines become redundant because the scenic structure or staging makes their intention clear. What's spoken in the original text then becomes visual in our production and doesn't need the lines. But it is not a case of trying to change the intrinsic structure of the play in terms of what Marlowe is actually doing: *not* to make Edward a more consistent dramatic figure, for example, in the first third.

Interview with Zoë Svendsen (continued)

There's the sense in which the play is written from an external perspective. You see characters through the eyes of others. In contemporary theatre-making – or in the UK anyway – you tend to work from inside out, we think about the psychological through-line of a character. That doesn't necessarily apply with Marlowe. Marlowe seems to work with changes in perspective, he draws attention to one set of characters – maybe the Barons – and then the attention switches back to Edward. Working with actors in a contemporary theatre we also have to consider what those internal through-lines are. A lot of my work with Joe is to match up an understanding of the play as it's written with the staging that we feel will most express the big themes that it has to offer, alongside working out a rehearsal process which will enable the actors to get inside the characters. The actors have to play for themselves a through-line within the bigger structure that's been written.

[In the civil war section, there is quite a lot of adaptation from the Marlowe text. Why did that come about?](#)

It was something quite simple to do with the notion of accumulation. The situation remains the same: Gaveston is a problem for the Barons and is Edward's great love; Edward cannot have Gaveston and remain king. This conundrum produces a situation where Gaveston is exiled then repealed and then immediately angers the Barons again, and so on. It builds until the point where the Barons kill Gaveston, and produce a change in the whole structure because the initial problem is solved. Marlowe in the original goes into a sequence which moves all over the place very rapidly in order to compress a good number of years of history into what feels like a few weeks.

But what I think is really important is understanding that the Barons have made a mistake. They think getting rid of Gaveston will solve the problem but it doesn't because Edward immediately confers important titles on Spencer, effectively substituting Gaveston. Marlowe demonstrates this in a long scene with very little action in it, and so we decided to take out the scene and just leave the speech in which Edward reacts to his grief at Gaveston's death. In this speech he transfers his affections and power to Spencer – and that's very concisely and clearly expressed. In the original scene, a character comes in and describes the death of Gaveston, which we've already seen on stage. We felt that by the time you've listened to that, you might not pick up on the most important bit of the scene, which is that Spencer replaces Gaveston. This is the action that makes civil war inevitable.

The middle section of the original is also a bit saggy, it feels like it becomes a bit weighty with these different times and places and lots of different things happening. There was a sense in which the idea of Isabella being driven out and returning from France to fight Edward is important. We streamlined that because I think in the Marlowe she goes to France then Belgium, and then comes back to England – and she's sent to France by Edward, even though she's going to go to France anyway. Suddenly you find yourself, even if you are just reading it, in a situation of trying to figure out just what she is doing and where, and that didn't feel helpful to expressing her sense of rejection and overwhelming need to deal with Edward's incapacities as a king.

The play's history builds a sense of momentum and people find themselves on different sides. Kent's story in relation to that, for example, was another reason for reshaping the civil war section. By making the story of the different sides clearer, we also strengthen Kent's conundrum that he – or rather she, we changed Kent's gender – wants to support the king her brother and does so for as long as she can. When Edward rejects her, she joins the Barons. Late in the play she realises it is actually a betrayal of the realm or her idea of what England should be. In a way she offers a moral compass for us in a play which has very little moral anchor – it's all about negotiation, who's on what side and when, and what they can get out of it. Kent offers a kind of moral perspective and yet Kent is the one who most clearly switches sides. So Marlowe is asking, where is the bottom line? Where can you turn to help you understand where right might be? By clarifying the central story, we felt we could focus the audience more clearly on these themes.



Kirsty Bushell (Kent) in rehearsal
Photograph by Johan Persson

Interview with Zoë Svendsen (continued)



Rehearsal props
Photograph by Johan Persson

[In the production Kent and Pembroke are women, but obviously that's not the case in the Marlowe text. Where did this decision come from?](#)

There are lots of different reasons why we made them women. One answer in relation to Kent is that Kirsty Bushell is the perfect person to play Kent – and she's a woman – she was in one of the workshops and she's brilliant. And we felt that would be the clearest expression of the moral ambiguity. Personally, I find it more interesting when there are more women on stage.

A lot of our perspective on women's rights before the time of Henry VIII and the enclosures acts (which also had an impact on marriage laws and the idea that women might be considered property – once you were married you were the property of the husband) – these ideas came in after the time of Edward. There is evidence to suggest that despite the society being patriarchal, women had power and exercised it, it's just not easy to find a clear picture of that. It didn't seem anachronistic; it wasn't trying to become modern to cast Pembroke as a woman – but to provide a sense of a wider social base.

[How does this production relate to the 13th/14th century – as well as the 16th century, when it was written?](#)

As a creative team, we are interested in how the story undercuts any stable idea of us as civilised beings and how rapidly we follow base desires, whether sexual or in terms of violence, to get what we want – and that's what Marlowe is also interested in. We were seeking

the means to tell that story most clearly, and the idea of setting it in a very specific time and place – whether medieval or modern or Marlowe's time – doesn't feel as if it helps. Despite being a history play, it doesn't invite us to think about the precise social landscape, except in so far as it helps tell a story about anarchy breaking out when the monarchy is challenged. Marlowe has chosen a subject that was made legend in chronicles very soon after Edward's death – which is where Marlowe is drawing his material from. He's taking something that had already been shaped into a story and pulling out the thematic interests, which are about human relationships.

To focus on the human relationships, we've produced a double structure so that the production is deliberately not located in any particular time and place, but instead the characters use what's to hand. We've become excited about medieval accoutrements, whether armour or objects, to symbolise titles, because they seem to be concretely invested with power. They make clear statements about status. The ideas around costumes came out of the workshops as we borrowed lots of costumes and props from the NT's store. The actors were delighted with trying things on – put on a cloak and you're the king; put on some armour and you can fight – and it was that gesture, the act of putting on a costume, that led us to this double world of medieval and modern elements. It's more the sense that it is modern and the medieval is placed on top of that, or around it, to tell this story of desire and violence and the requirement to fight for survival.

Set design and *Edward II*: interview with Lizzie Clachan

Set Designer Lizzie Clachan was interviewed by Jeff James during rehearsals.

Could you start by telling us about some of the early ideas which informed the design, when you first starting working with Joe?

The fact that the National looks like a castle was a nice easy place to start, from which we have developed many things. I have lots of paintings by Bosch: his paintings of Hell and depictions of people in torment and dressed as animals. We talked a bit about the UN and the political arena, and about the constraints of the Olivier, which isn't directly related to the ideas of *Edward II*, but there are parameters which inform what you might do. Joe and I had worked together once before, on *The Girlfriend Experience*, and there was an assumed knowledge of each other, and each other's aesthetic. The question was how to depict a medieval aesthetic in a contemporary theatrical production, without it looking really stupid.

Joe and I discussed the notion of medieval: what look like medieval objects and the traps you can fall into when you try and depict the *idea* of medieval aesthetically. We wanted to appreciate, in a way, the past glory of productions at the National Theatre – the history of history plays. We had great fun imagining the productions of Laurence Olivier in the 1960s, and we found out the last person who used the throne we chose was Ian McKellen in a production of *Richard III*, which was very exciting. The National Theatre has decades of all this stuff and a lot of them are symbols of royalty: swords, crosses, thrones, chairs, rugs, throws and statues; there's the armoury; there's the costume

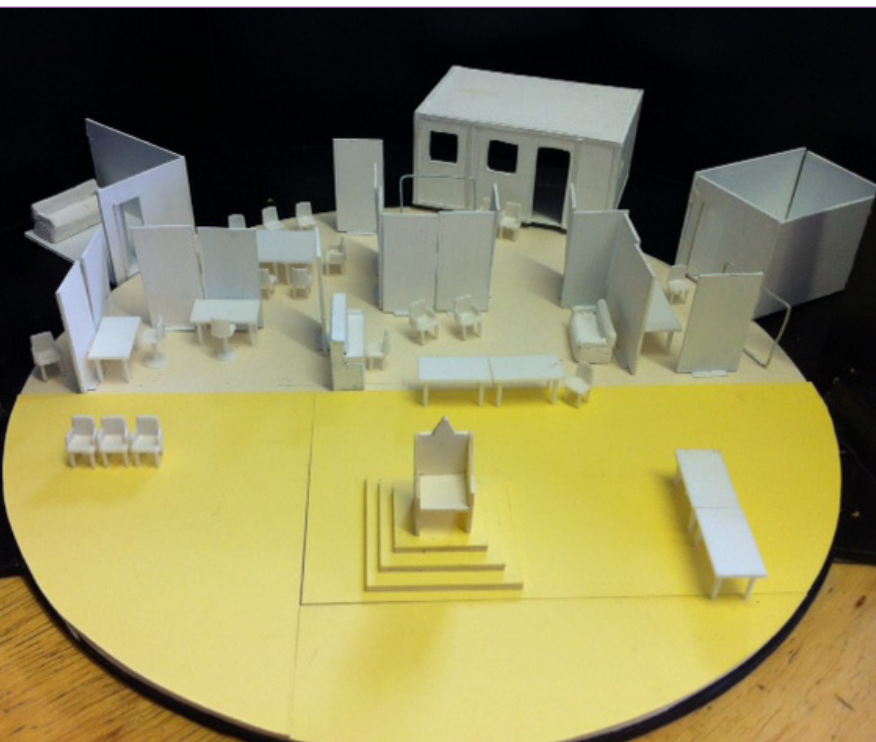
store. It is all here and we wanted to make the most of this resource to create the props and costumes of this production. And of course, this was linked to the idea that the National Theatre looks like a castle, and within this castle (the National) there is an armoury, huge kitchens, dungeon-like basements, and so on.

The set changes a lot throughout the course of the show. How do those changes relate to the life of the play?

In a workshop we watched the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953 and it was really brilliant: a kind of Technicolor idea of royalty and monarchy at its greatest at work. There was this yellow carpet – I was so taken by the yellow carpet and thought the whole play could be on a yellow carpet. It was on the one hand particular and period and, on the other, so suburban. We discussed whether the whole play could be in one room; how do you do location – was location important? We talked a lot with Jeff (staff director) and Zoë (dramaturg) about how important location was, and that had a great impact on how to approach the piece. Quite quickly we decided that, although the text doesn't start with a coronation, it would be very interesting to begin with one to reinforce the notion of reverence and monarchy; a kind of assumed knowledge which Marlowe had at that time and we have probably lost. So we start with a coronation – a very clean, magnificent coronation. There is a big curtain and a big carpet, a throne (exactly the throne at Westminster Abbey, an existing version of which the National Theatre already had from a previous production) and we created a beautiful space, which over the course of the production gets disrupted and then sort of returns at the end. The curtain can move up and down, and behind that there is a wooden structure,



Set design and *Edward II*: interview with Lizzie Clachan



made out of old theatre flats, creating a room you can't see from the outside which is a sort of Parliament. The camera goes inside that space and we see what happens there largely through video, until the point of war and civil war, when this structure gets completely destroyed and the whole of the infrastructure of this world lies shattered on the ground. For Mortimer's court in the Third Act, all of these elements are combined again to create another kind of castle, a new infrastructure if you like. There are three distinct worlds.

How does the space function in the middle section of the play, during the civil war?

Joe always had a really strong instinct that he wanted to use the Olivier space in its full depth, its vastness in a way, so that actors could run from one end to the other and break out – there are not many spaces as big as the Olivier where you can do that – and coupled with this there was a concept of children's games. We had been playing a game called 'prisoner's base' and Jeff discovered there was actually a reference to it in the text, which is extraordinary I think*. This instinct about children's games felt really good. Being able to open the space out in order to allow that to happen as a way of exploring war was also good: we could explore war through running and not through having to do fake fighting.

Above: photograph of *Edward II* model box, courtesy of Lizzie Clachan
Previous page: The company of *Edward II*
Production photograph by Johan Persson

In the final third of the play after the interval, there's action quite high up on the platforms of Mortimer's castle, but there's also Edward in Hell below. How did you start thinking about that series of scenes?

The script yo-yos between the two locations – so you could cut between them. The idea that people were on the stage together felt quite important. In the workshop, there was a moment when Prince Edward was playing the piano and it became inadvertently the backdrop, the sound track to Edward's torture. Some of these ideas, which felt quite light-footed in the workshop, really began to underpin and inform how these two spaces could and should be together. There's a whole thing about Elizabethan theatre and how they might use the space, which is important, but I think the idea that Mortimer and Isabella are up high is to understand their isolation. There is a sense of doom about the way they are perched on these objects, you know it isn't going to end well for them. The image of all the stuff piled around them infers a sort of retreat or last stand. In the same way, you don't come into this play wondering what happens to Edward – you know he's going to get poked. The correlation between them up on high and him down low is a good one; in a kind of literal way, Edward is in the dungeon. There is a whole idea that the third section takes place in Hell: we are in Hell for Edward, he is in a different spatial reality.

In terms of the video in this production – how has thinking about that informed the design?

Our current thinking about video in this production, is that it is a way of revealing where the audience can't or shouldn't see properly (maybe as a voyeurs). The video reflects some of the intrigue of the dealings going on behind royal power. Spatially and visually we have this great big swathe of royal power going on at the front of the stage in the form of the carpet, plinth and throne – that's there all the time and is very obvious – then in some respects the wooden castle behind represents an alternative power structure and is full of hidden dealings and intrigue in its corridors of power: the camera allows us to go inside that world and see what's going on in a way that we wouldn't normally be able to do. As the piece progresses, and those structures and power begin to disintegrate, the video no longer needs to do that job. As the structure falls down, we can now see everything. And what's interesting is – and I suppose Marlowe is writing this as well – he puts all the deaths off stage, he makes everything quite illicit, but by the end of the play we see the death of Edward on stage. The video in some respects reflects that journey by allowing us to see things we shouldn't, but at the end there is no need for the video and the thing we shouldn't see at all, is done right in front of us.

* ['We will find comfort, money, men, and friends/ Ere long, to bid the English King a base' – John of Hainault, *Edward II*. John of Hainault was cut from this version of the play.]

Additional resources



From the National's Bookshop:

The text of *Edward II* in the New Mermaid edition, plus background reading – all part of a wide range of books, recordings, gifts and merchandise.

The programme, priced at £3: Stunningly illustrated with full-colour medieval illuminations and **Johan Persson's** beautiful black and white rehearsal photographs, it contains revealing articles by **Zoë Svendsen**, the production's dramaturg; **Emma Smith**, on Christopher Marlowe; and **Samuel James**, on *Time and Misrule*. A synopsis of the plot and who's-who of the company complete an invaluable accompaniment to the play.

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Elsewhere:

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Isabella. She-Wolf of France, Queen of England by Alison Weir (Vintage, 2012)
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(Yale University Press, October 2011)
ISBN: 978 - 0300178029

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