

Base Instincts: Burbage's Edward II turns Marlowe on its head

"All live to die, and rise to fall." - Christopher Marlowe, Edward II



Photo credit: Maggie Hall

Jeff Church, artistic director of Burbage Theatre Company is quick to explain the context of Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* as a "16th Century playwright" writing a "psychosexual thriller about a gay 14th Century king." Fans of the intrigues of *Game of Thrones* and "The Crown," he says, will be drawn to this "Elizabethan take on the powder keg that is the intersection of sex, politics and religion." All of which goes to say that, like Marlowe's better-known contemporary Shakespeare, contemporary relevance can be mined from these ancient intrigues and florid prose. He's right, of course, and by gender-bending the majority of the roles (only three cast members of the 18 are men, and none of the three are principal characters), the nature of the forbidden love that is central to Edward's undoing takes on tones not possible in a "merely" male homosexual context. This *Edward* is revealing, bloody, visceral and willing to poke the bear at every turn.

Edward II is a curious choice for any company, as it is rarely done - the story tends to drag and get weighed down by its own complexities, while offering scant comic relief. However, the history of the piece makes it an obvious one for BTC as its namesake, Richard Burbage, was initially associated with

the title role. The script seems more likely to be produced by Rebecca Maxfield's period-piece showcase, Head Trick Theatre, but upon inspection, Maxfield herself is credited as assistant director, so all bases are covered. This production (running through February 16th) had all of the ingredients to be a wild ride, given the unique casting using a stellar array of RI's finest younger actors, and those expectations have come to fruition in Church's relentless, yet sympathetic treatment of a reluctant king beset by tragedy on all sides.

Of all the intrigues available, the central one here comes down to class and privilege. Gabrielle McCauley's Edward is thrust upon the throne following the death of his father, Edward "Longshanks" the First (Andrew Stigler). With a prologue of sorts, we are set up for the opening as Edward II's confidante, comrade ... and perhaps more, Gaveston (played by Catia in a wonderfully grounded and intense performance) is exiled. The play proper opens with Gaveston rejoicing, daydreaming and planning his return to Edward's side. From here, the duration of the play is a series of reversals and plots, most of which involve removing Gaveston from Edward's sphere of influence (and vice versa). Where the subtext is and continues to be the purported homosexual nature of the relationship, what comes through in the text is issues of class and birth; the term "base" is bandied about almost as many times as characters spit on the ground in disgust (which is to say - a lot). In this particular setting, though, the insults to Gaveston's origins take on the added weight of not just prejudice against perceived homosexuality, but overt racism. McCauley's tortured to and fro as these intrigues play out (and later, as he struggles to stay alive) is heartbreaking. This is where Church's directing and the actors breathe life into a script that could come across as just another second-rate history play. Church's direction is bold yet crisp, and the subtle color choices (in an otherwise all-black palette) by costume designer Abigail Dufresne give the audience a clear sense of progression.

It's a mighty ensemble with several standouts, including the always-intriguing Valerie Westgate as Queen Isabel, leaping at the opportunity to spurn her husband and his questionable loyalties and take up with Alison Russo's Mortimer. Russo does a fine job as the slow burn of arrogance and ambition culminates in haughty defiance. Ari Kassabian delights as the young Edward III, at once the child caught in the middle of two feuding parents as well as the heir to the throne, quickly realizing that his destiny is truly in his own hands. Daniel Greene's Lightborne (the name a not-too-subtle pun, akin to Lucifer) is one of the story's purely fictional characters, but his main purpose is to serve as an almost detached counterpoint to the pitiful anguish of a suffering Edward and the play's ugliest metaphor comes to vivid light in a dungeon scene that brings all of the play's design elements to fruition (hint: the program's only graphic has dread significance).

Burbage's new space in Pawtucket has served them well and with *Edward*, they've lived up to the promise of a stellar season that the previous *Hand to God* offered. Catch this one before it closes on the 16th and get a glimpse of what happens when a skilled company and director get a hold of a dusty text and give it new life. And, if you're daring enough to sit in the first few rows, you may remain forever stained by the experience. This one is not for the meek.

Burbage Theatre Company presents Marlowe's Edward II through Feb 16. 59 Blackstone Ave, Pawtucket. For more details visit burbagetheatre.org.