Christopher Marlowe's

Edward II

DeNada Dance Theatre

Cast

Edward II: Will English
Piers Gaveston: Mariano Zamora
Isabella: Tahlia Russell
Marty Junior: Ruby Portus
Lightborne: Sebastien Kapps

Team

Choreography: Carlos Pons Guerra
Music: Luis Miguel Cobo
Design: April Dalton
Lighting: Barnaby Booth
Rehearsal Director: Phil Sanger
Associate Designer: Eve Wilson
Producer: Andrew Wilson
Executive Producer: Sarah Shead
Community Producer: May McQuade
Marketing Manager: Jennie Gentles
PR: Martha Oakes PR
Social Media Manager: Emily Varey

Act 1: 50 mins
Interval: 20 mins
Act 2: 40 mins

Content Warning: Contains scenes of a suggestive erotic nature, bullying and sexual assault

Final Girls

By Carlos Pons Guerra

The dream is almost always the same, with some variations. Me, the classroom, the smell of glue and pencil shavings, the impending sense of dread and danger. The unshakable feeling, paralysed as you sit at your old desk, that somebody's watching you. Initially, the Big Bad seems to be the test you haven't studied for—in my case, Spanish literature—but the true evil is not the incapacitating lack of knowledge. It is them, the mean girls and boys, the bullies, who have become disembodied, but whose violence survives as a phantasm that manifests itself at least once a week.

There is also a feeling that I should have outgrown this space. I'm thirty-eight years old, I'm too big for this desk, too tired to be chased in this way. Yet here I am: in a place where I don't belong, a time that is not right, and surrounded by threatening forces. This is how I see the character of Edward in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II.*

Marlowe's 1592 play dramatizes the life of the English monarch (reigned 1307-1327) whose infatuation with his male favourite, Piers Gaveston, scandalised the English court. Edward's granting of lands and titles to Gaveston, and his perceived reluctance to carry out his kingly responsibilities led to political unrest and war. Spearheading the war with Edward was his wife, Isabella of France, who is romantically involved with Edward's former ally, Mortimer Junior. In Marlowe's play, Gaveston is captured and beheaded; and Edward meets an infamous tragic end through anal impalement with a burning iron rod.

Perhaps it's the burning pipes and the dungeon scenes; or it may be how Edward and Gaveston are punished for their sexual behaviour. It could be the chasing of the final girl that is Edward, as he races across England escaping Isabella and Mortimer; or the shifting of what you knew to be good into a mortal threat. Maybe it is just the nightmare quality of it all. Whatever the reason, to me, as a gay man, *Edward II* has all the elements of a terrifying high school slasher.

I go into this nightmare willingly, like Nancy Thompson in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). In the film's finale, this final girl forces herself to sleep to defeat her nemesis, Freddy Krueger, who only appears in dreams. With this production, I enter the nightmare not just to face the violence of *Edward II* and the trauma of homophobia so many of us queer folks experienced in school. I return to this place of despair trying to bring some light, hope and relief to an otherwise desolate dreamscape.

In *Halloween* (1978), Jenna Lee Curtis fights Michael Myers with kitchen knives, wire hangers and, inventively, knitting needles. My weapons are of the imaginative kind: the question *what if?* History has long denied the love of Edward and Gaveston, calling it 'good friendship', a kind of medieval bromance. Edward has been described as having uncontrollable, unnatural desires, and Gaveston as a self-interested social climber. This version of the story asks *what if* these two men, who met as teenagers at the court of Edward I, were

actually two people who were deeply in love? *What if*, instead of the violence, humiliation, and terror I experienced growing up, like Edward and Gaveston I, and many others, had found love in a hopeless place?

What if the characters around Edward and Gaveston— Isabella, Mortimer, Lightborne— were not motivated purely by power, but by deep, messy and interconnected human emotions? To better ask all these questions, I felt I had to remove Edward and his peers from the court. Many believe that Edward's responsibilities as king mean that his story cannot be read as the story of a gay man, as he is too deeply immersed in politics. And so, I transported them to another set, one that is as horrific as the medieval court of England and that is governed by equally dangerous rules: high school. In doing so, I took myself back to the nightmare, and I invite you to visit it with me, to delve into your memories of that space and to fire the weapons of *what if*.

Death is a necessary feature of any slasher. It is also a defining element of *Edward II.* The play starts with the death of Edward I; shortly after Gaveston narrates the myth of Actaeon, transformed into a stag by the goddess Diana after seeing her forbidden body, who dies eaten by his own hounds. The play ends with multiple deaths. Audiences in Renaissance England would have been familiar with—and probably enticed by— Edward's alleged form of murder. In medieval life, death was a constant figure in the popular imaginary at a time of pestilence, war and famine.

In high school too death is ever-present. The death of innocence, the death of friendships, the death of childhood, the first *petit mort*, those parts of us that die as we are chased down school corridors, locked up in boiler rooms, or pushed into toilets. The medieval imagination had a choreographic image for this: the *danse macabre*, or dance of death. In it, Death would call mortals from all ranks of life to dance with him. Murals in churches across Europe depict reluctant kings, queens, abbesses and minstrels dancing amongst funky skeletons, in a dance that very queerly dissolves the lines of class, gender, sexuality and, importantly, the dead and the living.

The first act of this production ends with a *danse macabre.* In it, all characters unmask their emotions and intentions before the figure of Death. As if possessed by a medieval dancing plague, they launch their bodies into exhaustion, dissolving character dynamics and barriers. I believe this image clearly describes what this version of *Edward II* does. It dissolves, merges and confuses the walls of time, gender and sexuality. It suggests, for example, that sixteenth-century Puritans condemned dance and sexuality just like the more recent slashers of the previous century did. It proposes that maybe not so much has changed since the time of Marlowe and Edward II. At the same time, I hope the production invites you to use the powers of *what if*. *What if* things are more different than we think? *What if* the past wasn't as big, or as bad? *What if* we imagined a different future?

I firmly believe that we all have a resourceful, tenacious and sassy final girl inside us, waiting to release her powers of survival. The production you are about to watch does not hide the violence of history, or the brutality of homophobia. But I have also invested it with the hope, tenderness and reparation of my own *what ifs*. I look forward to seeing what emerges as you release your own.

The creation and tour of Edward II has been made possible through the generous support of Arts Council England; the Arts and Humanities Research Council; Northern Ballet; Barnsley Civic; the Northern School of Contemporary Dance and the School of English, University of Leeds.

If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in the performance and would like to speak to someone, support is available:

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Mind Mental Health Support: Call 0300 102 1234 or visit mind.org.uk

You can also speak to a member of the Front of House team if you need assistance while at the venue.

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