



Edward II by Christopher Marlowe

Performed at [Royal Exchange Theatre](#) , directed by Toby Frow and designed by Ben Stones

Reviewed by [Charlotte Starkey](#) September 2011

Five weeks after the murder of Christopher Marlowe, on the evening of 30th May 1593 in Deptford, the text of *Edward II* was entered in the Stationer's Register, as required by law, and it has been argued that the play itself was in existence as early as 1591 – a date recently argued for some of Shakespeare's English history plays, too. Marlowe dramatizes the brief reign and downfall of a monarch whose dates (1284 – 1327) mark a fractious period in England with nobles excluded from power and decision-making, a weak king reliant upon favourites, civil war and a wife, Isabella, participating in the plot against her husband. Material like this was the stuff of playwrights such as Shakespeare and would continue to be so in Shakespeare's 'Henriad' (*Henry IV*

,
Part One

and

Two

, and

Henry V

),

Richard II

(so close in theme and structure to

Edward II

) and

Richard III

.

There was much in such stories from England's post-Conquest history to mirror the dangerous sixteenth century Tudor London world, and particularly the circles of power, with which Marlowe was familiar, a world of ambition, time-serving, threat and counter-threat, betrayal and double-dealing at the very heart of government with executioners such as Topcliffe to add horror to the lives of many. Four years before the first appearance of *Edward II* Mary Queen of Scots, tried for treason, was beheaded and Marlowe himself in the same year (1587) had to rely on the Privy Council to gain his Cambridge M.A. after failing to keep term because he was on 'government business', we are informed cryptically.

The Royal Exchange production of *Edward II* shifts this complex web to the 1950s of the Parisian Mars Club, a popular jazz haunt now gone, and then to an English monarchy with costumes and couture of a 1950s imagined court circle. The cover of the programme itself just suggests the old post World War Two Ration Book with its relatively unadorned utilitarian cover, and the production is crossing many historical routes to bring Marlowe's play to Manchester. The two main locations figure the key polarities of the play, the dilettante playboy homosexual world of Edward with his favourite Gaveston, shrouded in the mood music of the late-night jazz jamming (composed by Richard Hammarton), and the impossible imposition of this ethos on the 'gentleman's club' that is the court world of the original Plantagenet London to become, in this production, a mix of peers, senior civil servants and aspirational political eunuchs. The programme timeline sets a tone for the dour adult world of England in the 1950s, emphasising a number of homophobic legal cases connecting with Edward's own problematic relationship with the court over which he rules. Before the interval, the almost deliberate frivolity of Edward presents a figure completely isolated and politically emasculated within an unimaginative scheming court circle which is so important to Marlowe's portrayal of Edward.

