

# The Production Process

Director Michael Grandage talks about directing *Edward the Second*, one week before rehearsals begin.



## **Michael Grandage talks about his attraction to the piece and Marlowe:**

During the period when Marlowe wrote **Edward the Second**, one in every four plays produced (not written but produced) was a history chronicle. Political theatre ran and ran then and there was nothing more exciting and no better box office than a patriotic rabble-rouser... Shakespeare was obsessed with the notion of preservation of order, he was in no confused state at all about deposing a king. He says in **Richard the Second** (which was written after **Edward the Second**) that the 'blood of the English shall manure the ground'. It's interesting and more characteristic however that Marlowe is more obsessed with Gaveston than he is with England. So in the plays you have two different sets of agendas.

Shakespeare is fantastic at dealing with the notion of kingship and its effect, whereas Marlowe's obsession is on the nature of a man wanting to flee from that and, in a sense, give up his responsibility for all men to one man.

What that does is produce a fantastically interesting idea about the possibilities of a King who is needy of love and lust - it's a

sexually-based relationship with Gaveston, balanced against Edward's lack of ability/willingness to govern effectively. We see his journey with Gaveston first and then Spencer (who almost like an understudy takes over from Gaveston), and then finally he meets this man with a devil name called Lightborne and in one of the most brilliant acts of seduction manages to seduce Edward into a place where he feels comfortable to give himself to him. And in doing so he is killed.

Interestingly, writers for four hundred years (for example Howard Barker) have become obsessed by the notion that the point of orgasm is the closest we can come to the point of death. There was Marlowe in this brilliant final scene doing exactly that, bringing on this extraordinary character in this extraordinary relationship. There are all of these things in a classical text that seems to be contemporary. It's a complex text that very rarely gets done and it's a rare opportunity to tackle a great classic. ✿



## **The Production Process includes:**

Director's choice of text | Casting | Building Character | Importance of design.





## Casting

Casting **Edward the Second** is a particular challenge because the dynamic is different to most plays in that we have sixteen men and two women. That's not usual in any play. It will provide an unusual balance in the rehearsal room. The eighteen actors are playing sixty-one characters, so there will be a number of doubling, tripling and, in some cases, quadrupling of parts. So what we are looking for is a versatile company who are up for playing multiple roles and are able to integrate and take on the specific challenge of dealing with the subject matter in this play, which is on the surface a political play but more specifically a drama with a strong homosexual content.

We hire a casting director who is in this case the person I have involved in all the projects at Sheffield Theatres - Toby Whale. I send him a cast breakdown, listing all the parts in the play and stating how I see each character physically, emotionally and in terms of how I would like the play to work. He then would draw up a short list of actors we know or whose work we know, check their availability and then make them an offer. In the case of those for whom we have to make a wider search, we set up auditions and do the remaining of the casting that way.

This has been a bigger process than most - I was so keen to get the dynamic right that I have spent three months on this, trying to work out the right combinations of people. I have had, of course, one piece of casting in place for nine months which became a centre piece both because it is the main part, but also because it is a high-profile actor in Joseph Fiennes. The fantastic thing about that is once that part was in place it became a catalyst for the other roles for determining age etc. With this play ages aren't specified and it has become commonplace to have an older King and a younger Gaveston, in some cases up to fifty years older, when it becomes a play about the young versus the old...



Having an actor like Joseph does make a difference to box office - the first performances are sold out and the 'advance' is ticking up. In profile terms and casting it's made a considerable difference too in that we have now - a week to rehearsals - a full cast and the quality of that cast is of the highest order one could ever expect. This has been determined by a number of factors which include the rising national profile of Sheffield Theatres which is significant, and most significantly Joseph Fiennes. A combination of factors means this is a venue where actors want to be, so for this reason we have an extremely strong cast. ❁

## Building character

"Building a character is the most significant part of the rehearsal process, because the actor starts with only him/her self. You have, first of all to find what the text gives us - anything about the history, the psychology of the character - similar to the building up of a criminal profile. Beginning with evidence from the text and then using your imagination by following the 'through-line' of the character within the play.

The actor informs the character in the rehearsal process by forensically investigating the text and then by building the layers. I tend, in that process as a director to offer guidance if I feel the actor has gone off the journey. My directing is entirely

intuitive - I have notes based on the text about what words mean. For example; an actor has the word 'Tanti!' and I will have a note on the corresponding page as to a meaning of the word if the actor asks, 'What does the word Tanti mean?'. Beyond those notes I make no other; how we arrive at what they are doing on the stage is entirely intuitive. ❁

## The importance of design

"As always with me it's crucial, critical. Christopher Oram, who has worked with me many times in the past, has set about trying to create a space where the text can get on without anything standing between it and the audience. So in this case we have come up with an empty black stage that will be defined by lighting and I hope this will drive the narrative forward and let character unfold before you without any real visual aid being added. So it's another character/actor led piece. We do have to be multi-locational - we have to be in France, in the Court, in London, on the battlefields of England, we have to be in Tynemouth by the sea waiting for Gaveston to return from exile - we have to be in hundreds of places. The best thing to come up with in this case is always a non-specific environment where you can locate all of these locations but give the piece a strong visual identity. ❁

# An interview with two actors playing the parts of Lady Margaret de Clare (Susie Trayling) and Earl of Warwick and Sir Thomas Berkley (Robert Demeger):

## Becoming the character

### Robert Demeger

There's a kind of rawness about Marlowe's verse. It's not so sophisticated... he can be startlingly modern, wonderfully clear and then there can be a bit which has classical imagery, piling one on the other. And Shakespeare for me doesn't do either of those things; his is a much more poetical metaphorical language. It's really interesting to work on [poetical language] ...my character doesn't have much of that

**...he's a character of war, he's a man of action and so he tends to be quite direct,**

but it has been very exciting listening to the other actors using the language of Marlowe. Perhaps Shakespeare wouldn't have existed if Marlowe hadn't gone just before.

**Marlowe wouldn't have known what was meant by 'building a character' -**

the idea of a character that comes on and speaks... the character is the language, the words are the character. You don't have anything to do between the lines because you don't exist, you don't have an offstage life. It's the complete opposite of Chekhov. For example, with Marlowe what you say is everything and in Chekhov it's what happens beneath it.

**As an actor you need to have a toolbox**

and you may pull out a certain tool for a certain play, or a particular production or a scene or even a line and you can't say the line so you go into your toolbox and take out the screwdriver and unlock or unpick that moment. You might improvise it, you might do a substitution exercise, you might use Stanislavski. I personally don't know many actors who have a method that they force onto everything.

### Susie Trayling

**I would be very scared about going into a rehearsal, having already formed a character,**

taking ideas and thoughts with you. I think what Robert said about language is absolutely crucial... and the subtext you bring on with you, it's all there for you as an actor to find. Listening to other characters is also important.

## Rehearsals to performance

### Robert Demeger

Do we create the play in the rehearsal room or in performance? There isn't a simple answer to that... but certainly I feel that it's in the rehearsal room where I do the work. I may have an idea whilst walking round the town or whilst listening to a piece of music. Part of

**being an actor is about always having an alert mind,**

about being a bit of a magpie picking things up, but you can't do it on your own, you have to do it in the rehearsal room and share it.

### Susie Trayling

You can have a million thoughts but until you try it up on its feet in rehearsal you don't know whether it will work.

### Robert Demeger

So what you are doing in rehearsal is kind of putting together a skeleton that moves and walks, then

**in performance you put the skin on it afresh each night**

and the shape of that creature depends also on the audience, but you do still also have to hold on to the work that you did in rehearsal. But you will never see the same show twice.

### Susie Trayling

I think that is what rehearsals are about and why they are so important. You throw in so many things and you figure out where the boundaries are and within that it's flexible and you can experiment - the skeleton is there.

### Robert Demeger

As soon as possible in rehearsal you have to free up and lose all embarrassment and be honest with people. That's why with actors in day three of rehearsals you find you are telling another actor things about your own life that you wouldn't tell your own mother or your wife, because you have to have that kind of openness and there's a huge trust. You can't play a love scene or a hate scene unless you can trust them emotionally.

**I don't see myself as having a character, I see myself as having lines to say and serving the plot.**

It's not for me to think about; it's for the audience to think about. I'm not setting an exam paper, I'm not an academic... I learn my lines and I move on stage to support the action. That's my job... I see the world from Warwick's angle so therefore I see the King in a certain way, and Gaveston, so it's difficult to hop outside myself and say 'is he right to do that?'

### Susie Trayling

One thing I've learned from this play is how much information there is in the text, how much you are given in the character Lady Margaret de Clare. By introducing my character in the fifth scene of the play, you are bringing on fresh information, a whole new history going against what the audience has already been given. It's my job to give them information about my character at each step and hope they follow me on this journey.

# Do it!

## AS/A level Drama, Theatre Studies and English Literature

Some directors are famous for their attention to the detail of a text well in advance of the first rehearsal, with meticulous researching of the socio-historical context of writer and text, and detailed annotated breakdowns of scenes with position and expressions for actors. Others adopt a more problem-solving approach and enjoy experimenting and discovering through the process of rehearsing.

Each director applying their approach to creating a play will need to focus on each of the following at some stage of the process:

*the given circumstances*  
*language of characters*  
*the dramatic action*  
*the playwright's intentions*

### 1. Given circumstances

The **given circumstances** is a term used by Stanislavski to mean the essential information about the characters in the play and socio-historic background in which their story is set.

Usually plays are set in the **time** in which they were intended, but some directors choose to set their version in a different time.

**Seasons, weather and the time of day** can be significant and relevant to the dramatic effect.

**Timescale** is important too, as plays lasting usually around two hours often have to cover years.

The **economic environment's** impact on the lives of the characters should be considered.

The **political climate** may not always appear to impinge on the action but it will usually add to our understanding of the play.

In a small group, write down **given circumstances** for the following characters :

*Edward II*  
*Gaveston*  
*Isabella*  
*Mortimer the Younger*

### 2. Language of character

Choose 3 from the following characters:

*Edward II*  
*Gaveston*  
*Mortimer the Elder*  
*Isabella*  
*Edmund*  
*Lightborne*

In your small groups, read sections of the play in which your characters appear and discover what their language tells us about the following:

*Social Class*  
*Their image of themselves*  
*Their view of others*

For each of your three chosen characters decide on the following:

*Their super-objective - what are they ultimately trying to achieve?*  
*Their moral stance*  
*Their needs*  
*Their will*  
*Their physical appearance.*

### 3. Dramatic action

Stanislavski suggests that in order to truly understand the shape, rhythm and significance of a play, each scene should be broken down into its smaller parts or units.

- a. Choose a scene from the play and, with a partner, work through that scene and **break it down into units**. You will have to come to some sort of agreement after discussion about where a unit begins and ends, giving reasons for your choices. Work through the units and give a title to describe that unit.
- b. **Reading between the lines - sub-text.**  
The subtext is the information given in the spoken text about events and characters that is not immediately clear. It is an impression we get from 'reading between the lines'.

Go back through each unit and add a word to each unit title (in brackets) which best describes the unit sub-text.

### 4. What the playwright intended

In a small group:

Discuss the Marlowe's intentions behind the full title of the play - *"The troublesome raigne and lamentable death of Edward the Second, King of England: with the tragickall fall of proud Mortimer. And also the life and death of Peirs Gaveston the great Earle of Cornwall, and mighty favourite of King Edward the second."*

In pairs make notes on what the Director Michael Grandage believes are Marlowe's intentions behind the play. What do **you** think his intentions are?

#### Web Links

##### Design

[www.siue.edu/PROJECT2000](http://www.siue.edu/PROJECT2000)

##### Stanislavski

[www.bemorecreative.com/one/1286.htm](http://www.bemorecreative.com/one/1286.htm)  
[www.optionline.com/comptons/ceo/04529\\_A.html](http://www.optionline.com/comptons/ceo/04529_A.html)