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Passion and Politics in Diego de Brea and Jakub Čermák's *Edward II*: Marlowe's Controversial History on Czech Stages

Abstract: The present article outlines the stage history of Christopher Marlowe's history *Edward II* on Czech stages, focusing chiefly on how the respective directors approached the titular character of Marlowe's play and his sexuality. The study focuses on two post-2000 productions of the play: Diego de Brea's *Edvard Drugy* for the Slovenian National Theatre, which toured to the 16th "Divadlo" International Theatre Festival in Pilsen, West Bohemia, in 2008; and Jakub Čermák's production of *Edvard II.* for the independent Czech theatre company "Depresivní děti touží po penězích" (Depressive Children Yearn for Money) that premiered in 2023 in Prague. Since for both Czechs and Slovenians, King Edward II is a minor figure of English history and Elizabethan history plays are generally less appealing to them than other genres, both the directors sideline the political dimension of the story to fully explore the issue of social and sexual norms and relate it to current social and cultural discussions both in the West and the former Eastern Bloc. Stressing the motif of social and sexual otherness even more bravely than most recent Western productions, de Brea and Čermák offered not only valuable contributions to both local and global reception of Marlowe's *Edward II*, but also raised the visibility of LGBT theatre in a region where it has only a modest history and tradition.

Keywords: Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II*, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Diego de Brea, Jakub Čermák, Elizabethan theatre, LGBT theatre, queer theatre.

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“My father is deceased; come, Gaveston,
And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend.”
Ah, words that make me surfeit with delight!
What greater bliss can hap to Gaveston[.]

(Edward II, scene 1.1-4)

A “university wit” and *enfant terrible* of early-modern English theatre, Christopher Marlowe ranks among the most significant authors of his time. His contribution to English Renaissance theatre can hardly be overstated: together with Thomas Kyd, he is credited for revolutionising dramatic blank verse, making it “native to the genius of the English language” on the one hand and “the characteristic vehicle of expression of an individual poet” on the other (Brooke 187). His first play for adult actors, *Tamburlaine the Great* (ca 1587), inspired at its time a wave of dramatic pieces with exotic settings and bombastic language, such as Robert Greene’s *Alphonsus King of Aragon* (1587), George Peele’s *Battle of Alcazar* (1589) or the anonymous *Lochrine* (1591) (see Berek); his *Doctor Faustus* continued to influence the development of English theatre well into the 18th century (see Krajník and Hrdinová). Marlowe’s dramatic works have introduced an impressive ensemble of daring and captivating characters, such as the aforementioned Tamburlaine and Faustus, as well as Barabbas the Jew, the Duke of Guise or King Edward II. His life and work have been examined from various perspectives (see Stříbrný; Bevington; Honan; Logan; Robert A. Potter; Krajník; etc.).

Of Shakespeare’s contemporaries, Marlowe is probably most embedded in general awareness, his character appearing in all major fictional biopics of Shakespeare, including John Madden’s award-winning *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), Roland Emmerich’s *Anonymous* (2011) or the short-lived television series *Will* (2017). His *Doctor Faustus* has been regularly staged since the late 19th century, with Matthew Dunster’s 2011 production for Shakespeare’s Globe or Jamie Lloyd’s 2016 production for the Duke of York’s Theatre in London being some of the recent examples. While other Marlovian plays have also enjoyed a number of modern revivals, it is his only English history *Edward II* that has in recent decades become “almost equal to *Doctor Faustus* as Marlowe’s most performed and adapted play” (Lois Potter 272).¹ Especially since the 1960s, the play has attracted the attention of a number of preeminent directors and actors for its sexually transgressive themes, including Ian McKellen, Simon Russell Beale and Eddie Izzard. Stephen Guy-Bray argues that

¹ Apart from Lois Potter’s survey, on the recent staging tradition of *Edward II* see Fuller; Stephen Guy-Bray’s Introduction to the most recent New Mermaids edition of the play (Marlowe *Edward II* x-xii); and Škrobánková.

“the theatrical productions of the play tend to be more radical than the critical analyses” (Marlowe, *Edward II* xi); the same could also be said about Derek Jarman's 1991 film adaptation of Marlowe's piece, which “on the background of the familiar story reflects on the fight of gays for equal rights, as well as the panic in Anglo-American society caused by the medialisation of the HIV virus” (Škrobánková 65; working translation by IM and FK). It appears that, after centuries of neglect, Marlowe's play about an unpopular medieval king, whose rule was brought to an end by an invasion instigated by his own wife, has finally gained unquestionable cultural importance and found a strong popular following.

In the Czech Lands—the Czech part of former Czechoslovakia and today's Czech Republic—*Edward II* has had a modest but certainly interesting staging tradition. The printed edition of Otokar Fischer's first Czech translation of the play mentions that his version premiered on 25 January 1922 at the National Theatre in Prague and boasts that this had been the first modern production of the play, as well as its first staging outside England (Marlowe, *Edvard Druhý* 117). While Marlowe's play had, in fact, already been revived in England in 1903 by the Elizabethan Stage Society at Oxford (dir. William Poel) (Dibelius 3), it is true that the Czech production of Marlowe's *Edward II* took place a year before its first German production in Berlin and two years before Bertolt Brecht's celebrated adaptation, *Leben Eduards des Zweiten von England*, premiered in Munich (Škrobánková 64).

The 1922 Prague production of *Edward II* was directed by Karel Hugo Hilar, the head of the Czech National Theatre's spoken drama ensemble and a preeminent representative of the then young and progressive generation of theatre practitioners (he was 36 when his *Edvard II* premiered).² According to Fischer's testimony, in Hilar's staging “everything historicising was removed and what was presented was a story of the soul of a king who suffers because of his desires and is horribly punished for them” (Fischer 5; working translation by IM and FK). Considering that English directors started emphasising the play's sexual and homoerotic themes as late as the 1960s, it could be argued that Hilar's production was significantly ahead of its time. This artistic bravery, however, earned the director severe reproach from certain established reviewers. Jindřich Vodák, a prominent theatre critic of the time, called Hilar's adaptation “unfortunate, inconsiderate and harshly arbitrary,” arguing that “Marlowe's drama was forcibly adapted” to the director's decadent fondness of homosexuality and that “its dominant sexual motif was by force incorporated into it, as if Edward the Second were a pederastic lecher, who clings to Gaveston and

² For more on the production, including photographs of the set design and some of the actors in costumes, see <http://archiv.narodni-divadlo.cz/inscenace/2264>.

Spencer so passionately because he secretly uses them to his wanton need” (Vodák 4; working translation by IM and FK).

While other contemporaneous reviews argued that “Hilar should not be blamed for foregrounding the homosexual motif of the play, for only this interpretation explains the madness of the King’s deeds” (Kodíček 266; working translation by IM and FK) and that the production “with its brave style is one of the best that we have seen on the stage of the National Theatre” (Tille 208; working translation by IM and FK), *Edward II* did not return to Czech theatres for almost nine decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, Bertolt Brecht’s aforementioned adaptation was produced in Prague, Brno and Karlovy Vary three times; however, as Škrobánková points out, Brecht’s version downplays the relationship between the King and his male favourites to emphasise the motif of the prolonged war conflict, which could have been the reason why the directors opted for the adaptation rather than the original (Škrobánková 64). Furthermore, while Marlowe began to frequent Czech stages as late as the 1990s (with a single exception of a production of *Doctor Faustus* in a regional theatre in Liberec, North Bohemia, in 1985), Brecht’s dramatic pieces were regularly staged in Czech theatres at the time, so it was in all probability his name rather than Marlowe’s that motivated the productions.

The revival of Marlowe’s *Edward II* on Czech stages thus only took place in the new millennium. On 13 September 2008, the Slovenian National Theatre brought Diego de Brea’s production of the play (which premiered in Ljubljana in 2005) to the 16th “Divadlo” International Theatre Festival in Pilsen, West Bohemia. Fifteen years later, on 16 June 2023, Czech director Jakub Čermák staged *Edward II* as part of the “WILD!” festival of queer theatre with his “Depresivní děti touží po penězích” (Depressive Children Yearn for Money), an award-winning independent theatre company based in Prague. These productions were staged in a cultural context very much different from Hilar’s pioneering endeavour a hundred years earlier: Marlowe’s plays—especially his *Doctor Faustus*, which was translated four times into Czech (see Krajník and Mitrengová) and repeatedly staged both in Prague and the regions—had found their home in Czech theatres and Czech public awareness. An additional factor contributing to Marlowe’s relative popularity among Czech audiences was the strong tradition of the Summer Shakespeare Festival in the country, an open-air theatre festival devoted to the works of Shakespeare, established in the 1990s, which popularised early-modern English drama even among casual Czech theatregoers (see Krajník and Kyselová). The latest Czech translation of *Doctor Faustus* (which premiered in Ostrava in 2015) was done by Martin Hliský, a preeminent Czech scholar and translator of Shakespeare, and the “academic face” of the Summer Shakespeare Festival.

The following text will examine each of the two productions of Marlowe’s *Edward II* that appeared on Czech stages since 2000, comparing and

contrasting their approaches to the original text and their strategies to make it relevant and relatable in the former Eastern Bloc at the beginning of the 21st century.

Diego de Brea's Directorial Vision: Exploring Themes of Homosexuality and Power in *Edvard Drugi* at the "Divadlo" International Theatre Festival

Founded by the government of the Republic of Slovenia and financially supported by the Slovenian Ministry of Culture, "Slovensko narodno gledališče Drama Ljubljana" holds the formal status of a national statutory institution. It carries on the rich tradition of the Slovenian Dramatic Society, which presented its first production in the Slovenian language back in 1867. Over time, it evolved into the Provincial Theatre in Ljubljana, and in 1892, it was officially renamed the National Theatre in Ljubljana. Following World War II, the theatre adopted its current name, the Slovenian National Drama Theatre of Ljubljana (SNG).

Throughout its history, SNG has not only produced Slovenian plays but also presented well-known world dramatic pieces, encompassing both classical and contemporary works. In recent years, SNG has earned a reputation for its innovation, high-quality productions and audacious performances, solidifying its position as one of Slovenia's most daring theatrical establishments. The ensemble has also been active on the international stage, participating in numerous prestigious festivals across a range of countries, including Germany, Sweden, Portugal, Poland, Romania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, South Korea, Greece, Croatia, Italy, Austria, Serbia, Montenegro, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic.³

Pilsen hosted SNG at the "Divadlo" International Theatre Festival in 2008. This festival is dedicated to introducing and showcasing significant Czech and foreign theatrical productions, including spoken drama, music, dance, puppetry and street theatre. Its objectives aim to connect performing artists from diverse corners of the world with theatre enthusiasts, creating a platform for unconventional performances and interpretations. In doing so, the festival contributes to the integration of Czech theatre into the broader European and global theatre landscape.⁴ The 16th edition of the "Divadlo" International Theatre Festival featured a highly enriching and thought-provoking program, boasting remarkable productions such as Václav Havel's *Leaving*, Jozef Gregor-Tajovský's *Estates in a State*, John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the*

³ For more information, see <https://www.drama.si/en/>.

⁴ For more information, see <https://festivaldivadlo.cz/en/>.

Western World, Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and Leoš Janáček's *Jenufa*, among others. Notably, Marlowe's *Edward II* (or *Edvard Drugi* in Slovenian) dominated the stage at the Josef Kajetán Tyl Theatre on 13 September 2008 (as mentioned above). The performance was delivered in Slovenian with "running subtitles" in Czech to ensure accessibility.

The direction of the play was helmed by the Slovenian director Diego de Brea, renowned for his interpretations of classical works like Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* or Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, alongside contemporary texts, such as his own play *Duel*. De Brea's unique style, characterised by lively sentiment, expressive flair, astonishing realism and his exceptional work with actors profoundly influenced his approach to staging Marlowe's piece. De Brea's naturalistic and emotive stage adaptation of Marlowe's text served as a valuable addition to the impressive array of Marlovian productions, demonstrating the director's talent and vision.

The opening scene is effectively set on a darkened stage, drawing the spectator's attention to Piers Gaveston (Saša Tabaković) emerging from a trapdoor. Clad in close-fitting turquoise green attire, Gaveston begins to read a letter from Edward, summoning him back from exile and offering to share the kingdom with him after his father's demise. The letter fills Gaveston with delight and pleasure, evident not only in the triumphant tone of his voice but also in his gestures, which allude to his sexual orientation and the nature of his liaison with the King. The emotional intensity of the scene is further amplified by the letter's striking red colour, evoking a plethora of symbolic connotations, including passion, love, desire, strength, arrogance, ambition, and even foreboding hints of tragedy for Gaveston and possibly the King as well.

Gaveston then proceeds to tear the letter to pieces, resembling a child's play, akin to plucking petals off a flower while asking simple questions. The ensuing encounter with the King is similarly intense and emotional. The King (Janez Škof), distinguished by his crown and a red cloak, visibly rejoices at the sight of Gaveston. De Brea accentuates the animalistic nature of Edward and Gaveston's reunion. Beyond mere hugging and kissing, they engage in spitting at each other, displaying the raw openness of their relationship and highlighting its physical aspect. Edward's emotional claims for Gaveston further emphasise the physical nature of their love, as he repeatedly utters Gaveston's name in almost every sentence, revealing his deep attachment to him. However, while Edward and Gaveston revel in their long-awaited reunion and intimacy, Edward's lords are disgusted, perceiving the scene as vulgar and obscene. This contrast presents the spectator with a dichotomous view of Edward and Gaveston's relationship that permeates the entire production.



Figure 1: Left to right: Nina Valič as the King's niece, Silva Čušin as Queen Isabella (top), Janez Škof as King Edward II (bottom), and Saša Tabaković as Gaveston in Christopher Marlowe: *Edvard Drugi*, dir. Diego de Brea, season 2004/05, Big Stage, SNG Drama Ljubljana. Photo by Peter Uhan

In Gaveston's presence, Edward finds himself unable to distinguish between his private desires for the young man and his public royal status, which demands a certain degree of regal dignity. Instead, Edward's life becomes governed by overwhelming love and passion, emotions he can no longer control—perhaps, deep down, he does not want to control them. Without Gaveston, he appears as a lifeless puppet, a mere figure whose entire world can be summarized in the short proclamation, “I want Gaveston” (“Gavestona chaču”). Throughout the performance, Edward and Gaveston appear both physically and spiritually intertwined. In a poignant gesture symbolising their absolute closeness, Edward at one point places his royal crown, the emblem of his power, onto Gaveston's head. In this moment, the boundaries between the monarch and his low-born favourite blur, and Edward and Gaveston's roles are suddenly reversed: the King is stripped of his regal symbol while the confident young man proudly raises his head, now “burdened” with the crown. This temporary exchange of roles raises questions—possibly with an underlying threat—about who the true King is and how far this “frolic” may extend. As Edward bestows the crown upon Gaveston's head, revelling in his physical presence, the King's lords, who disdain Gaveston and, by extension, Edward,

openly display their homophobia. They make a spectacle of attempting to wipe off any spots touched by the royal hand, as if trying to distance themselves from what they perceive as an unsavoury association.

Diego de Brea shifted the focus onto Edward II, elevating him to the central figure of the production. Furthermore, he accentuated Edward's (and Gaveston's) homosexual orientation, making it the driving force behind the performance. This aspect profoundly influenced all the events, which were now perceived and interpreted through the lens of Edward's sexuality. The King's orientation thus became a symbol of his otherness, acting as a prism through which both Edward's actions and the consequent political turmoil were observed.

The latent militarism within Edward's lords, represented by the array of ruthless intrigues, seemingly arising from their discomfort with Edward's homosexuality, ultimately leads to Gaveston's removal and Edward's subsequent deposition and murder. The lords' fury is evident through their impatient running to and fro, clandestine negotiations behind the King's back, nervous whispers and the signing of petitions.⁵ Their actions convey a sense of confusion, disorderliness and futility.

As a consequence of their Machiavellian intrigues and relentless pursuit, both Gaveston and Edward eventually meet their demise. After Gaveston's death, a noticeable transformation occurs in Edward's character, lending him a more vulnerable and relatable quality. This change is marked by an acute awareness of the gradual erosion of his authority, reflecting both a physical and mental transformation or, more precisely, a resignation to his fate. However, the King's "alteration" can be seen as parallel to the degeneration and failure of the entire ruling hierarchy. The gradual loss of Edward's royal and human attributes is underscored by the symbolic act of removing his clothing. Stripped to the waist and seated on his golden throne, he retains the crown on his head and clutches a sabre in his right hand, symbolising his brief readiness to defend himself and his crown. Subsequently, events escalate rapidly. Naked and humiliated, Edward is dropped into a cesspool, left to his fate. His captors arrive to torture him, foreshadowing his inevitable death.

As Edward faces death, he discovers a sense of kinship with his murderer, Lightborn (Alojz Svete), and embraces his fate with a peaceful resignation, seemingly reconciled to his impending end. In this poignant theatrical moment, Edward takes on the semblance of a martyr, possibly owing to his sexual "otherness". The climax of the performance—the scene of the King's murder—overflows with pathos and draws a symbolic parallel between Edward's brutal demise and Christ's crucifixion: the naked and bleeding Edward becomes a metaphorical figure nailed to an imaginary cross (represented by

⁵ The lords used large peacock feathers for signing the documents on the stage.

a trolley-like structure in reality).⁶ Despite the evocative imagery, the true motive behind Edward's crucifixion remains shrouded in ambiguity. It is uncertain whether his homosexuality serves as the driving force behind the act or if it is the lords' insatiable thirst for power that propels this violent event, allowing the spectators' imagination to interpret and ponder the underlying meaning.

The closing moments of the performance bear resemblance to the ending of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, where the victorious Earl of Richmond (the future Henry VII),⁷ having defeated King Richard, emerges as both a saviour and the new King, yet simultaneously poses a potential threat of new tyranny. Similarly, Edward II's son, the future King Edward III, silently appears before his crucified father, symbolizing a new hope and, perhaps, a looming menace.

Diego de Brea's *Edvard Drugi* unfolds on a minimalist, Elizabethan-inspired stage adorned with minimal props. It features a versatile trolley, two chairs (one serving as a mobile throne, while the other, a child-sized seat, occasionally accommodates both Edward and Gaveston) and a small statue. Alan Hranitelj's simple costumes complement the director's naturalistic vision. The lords are dressed in black and grey attire reminiscent of medieval courtly fashion, while Queen Isabella (Silva Čušin) and Gaveston don a similar shade of green and grey, perhaps symbolising their intertwined relationships with the King. Throughout the performance, events unfolded rapidly, resembling a sequence of clips, which, unfortunately, contributed to a slightly chaotic ambiance.

From Love to Tyranny: Jakub Čermák's *Edvard II*.

In many respects, de Brea's *Edvard Drugi* prefigured Jakub Čermák's production years later. Unlike his Slovenian colleague, before staging Marlowe's play, Čermák had been mostly associated with *avant-garde* theatre and Czech independent scenes (see Zahálka). Yet, throughout his career, he repeatedly turned to classical pieces, be it E. A. Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, or Euripides's *The Trojan Women* (staged with Ukrainian refugee actresses in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of their homeland). A year before his adaptation of *Edward II* (*Edvard II*. or

⁶ As we shall see, both the directors employed the "Edward-as-Christ" trope in their productions. On the Christ motif in Marlowe's original, see Krajník 39-40 and 106-107 (fn. 16) of his translation of the play.

⁷ The notion of the triumphant "golden-haired" Henry Richmond was emphasised, for example, in Jan Burian's 1999 production of *Richard III* for Josef Kajetán Tyl Theatre in Pilsen (see Mišterová 205-209).

Edvard Druhý in Czech), as a guest director he staged Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the studio theatre of South Bohemian Theatre in České Budějovice—a production with which he, in his own words, greatly struggled at the beginning but which ultimately “rehabilitated” Shakespeare in his eyes (Kalusová). When he decided to produce Marlowe's *Edward II*, like Hilar or de Brea before, he was not really interested in showing a chapter of English history (for Czech audiences, King Edward II is a virtually unknown name)—rather, he strove to relate Edward's story to modern society and its attitudes to the LGBT community. In an interview before the premiere, he explained that “the queer community is perceived as a victim, which it is, but we point out that the tables can turn when the ill-wishing environment drives an individual to the utmost extreme” (Benediktová; working translation by IM and FK). To emphasise the piece's strong message for contemporary audiences, Čermák's *Edvard II.* premiered as part of the annual “WILD!” festival of queer theatre in Prague, whose main feature is a “synthesis of social engagement with high artistic demands” (DN; working translation by IM and FK).

The “victim turned tyrant” theme of the production is exposed even in the prologue written by Čermák, which takes place immediately before the beginning of Marlowe's text. In the silent opening scene, the English kingdom is shown as a factory producing royal merchandise, governed by a harsh and capricious King (that is, Edward I, played by Jan Dolfi). As a tyrannical manager, he forces his employees (who turn out to be the lords of the realm) to fulfil fatuous tasks for his pleasure, such as jumping over the tables and running around the office, for which they are rewarded with cigarettes and the King's condescending approval. The young Edward (the future Edward II) would prefer to stay away from these ostentatiously manly pursuits and rather quietly read from his book of poetry. He is, however, forced by his father (who commands him with a whistle) to join the others, leading to his (the Prince's) general embarrassment. A large postage box is shoved in, from which the French princess in a bridal dress emerges. With obvious disgust, Prince Edward is made to have sexual intercourse with her, with the King again encouraging him with his whistle and the lords observing the act with enthusiastic glee. After the act, the old King collapses and dies, leaving his older son as the sole manager/ruler of the realm. Edward is finally free—from his father's commands, from the inferiority complex before the lords, and from his wife, whom he never desired.

The oppressive machismo of the scene abruptly changes with the entrance of Gaveston. Čermák envisioned Edward's lover as an arrogant and vain disco boy, who immerses the royal court in wild gay partying. What is significant here is the age dynamics of the relationship—a key issue in any stage adaptation of Marlowe's text. While the historical Piers Gaveston was several years older than Edward II and Edward's father, in fact, placed the Gascon

squire in his son's household as a role model for the Prince (Warner 27-28), Marlowe is not specific about the age of the two men and in modern adaptations there have been middle-aged Edwards being infatuated by younger Gavestons, as well as young Edwards having Gavestons in their forties as their counterparts.⁸ Michal Kern, the actor playing Edward II in Čermák's adaptation, was forty-four when the play premiered; Denis Šafařík, Čermák's Gaveston, was twenty-nine, but convincingly portraying a significantly younger man, making the age difference even more pronounced. Kern's Edward's love for Gaveston therefore looks like juvenile infatuation that compensates for the previous stages of the King's life when such feelings were forbidden to him. Edward is ready to engage in Gaveston's hedonistic lifestyle, to the displeasure of the lords, who, on the one hand, assure one another that the new King's sexuality does not bother them, while, on the other, retch at the sight at Edward and Gaveston together. Since Čermák removed most of the political implications of Edward and Gaveston's relationship from his production, the lords' objections become an enactment of modern society's intolerance towards sexual minorities, denied by claims such as, "I am not a homophobe, but..."

An interesting casting choice on Čermák's part was the American dancer and performer Becka McFadden, who enacted Queen Isabella. With her thick accent, McFadden showed the Queen as an outsider, far from her family and homeland, who, spurned by her husband, desperately looks for support—only to find it with Mortimer Junior (Jiří Racek). Čermák employed McFadden's movement skills to underscore Isabella's physicality: she manages to win Mortimer and the barons not through her eloquence, but through her body. When Gaveston is expelled and subsequently resumed, an attempt to establish co-existence between King Edward, Gaveston and Queen Isabella is expressed through an erotic "polyamorous" dance, in which McFadden and Šafařík, in synchronised movements, both try to seduce the King. Both actors, stripped naked, seem to form one common body for a moment in order to pleasure Edward together. Isabella is thus willing to give away her exclusivity to her husband's bedroom to maintain peace in her household and the country. The performance, however, is brought to an abrupt stop by the King, who finally chases the Queen away to engage in a fierce sexual intercourse with Gaveston. The dynamics of this bizarre love triangle is enacted without a single word—a technique popular with Čermák, who in his productions likes to replace literal dialogues with more abstract stage action and imagery. Yet, the situation always remains clear to the audience.

⁸ In Hilar's 1922 production, both Edward and Gaveston were in their mid-thirties. In de Brea's *Edvard Drugi*, King Edward was in his mid-forties and Gaveston in his mid-twenties.



Figure 2: Left to right: Denis Šafařík as Gaveston, Michal Kern as King Edward II, and Štěpán Tuček as the Earl of Kent (in the background left to right: Tomáš Procházka as the Bishop of Coventry, Jiří Racek as Mortimer Jr., and Jakub Koudela as the Earl of Lancaster) in Christopher Marlowe: *Edvard II.*, dir. Jakub Čermák, 2023, *Depresivní děti touží po penězích*. Photo by Michaela Škvřňáková

The breaking point for the King—and the production—comes with the lords’ rebellion and Gaveston’s execution. Unlike in Marlowe’s original, where Edward learns about Gaveston’s death from Maltravers’s account, Čermák’s Edward is a first-hand witness of the demise of his lover, with whom he is ultimately left alone on the stage. The flow of time ceases, as it were, for a while to create space for the full manifestation of Edward’s love for Gaveston, without the previous disco craze or gay stereotypes. In a Christ-like fashion, the King slowly and methodically removes the dead Gaveston’s shoes and starts washing his feet. Marlowe’s lines “And could my crown’s revenue bring him back, / I would freely give it to his enemies / And think I gained, having bought so dear a friend” (scene 4.309-311 in Marlowe’s text), originally pronounced by Edward after Gaveston’s banishment, have been transplanted here, gaining a new meaning and intensity. After a moment of silent contemplation, Edward stands up and, on the brink of madness, shouts out the soliloquy “My heart is as an anvil unto sorrow...” (scene 4.314-319). At this moment, Michal Kern masterfully embodies the transformation of a childish, effeminate weakling into the tyrant whom the audiences are to observe in the second half of the play.

Indeed, after the intermission, the “corporate” settings of the first half of the production changes into a hotel room-like environment, in which Edward appears in a black cowboy outfit, similar to Gaveston’s outlandish clothing of the first half of the production (here the achievement of set and costume designers Pavlína Chroňáková and Martina Zwyrték should be mentioned). The King no longer cares about the rules or opinions of others and, without any restrictions, revels when watching on a large television screen the war that he wages on the barons. His emotional tenderness and longing for love resurfaces, however, when he meets Spencer Junior, who reminds him of his Gaveston. For this purpose, Čermák restructured Marlowe’s text (originally, it was Gaveston who introduced Spencer Junior to the King) and allowed Denis Šafařík, the actor playing Gaveston, to re-appear as another lover of the King. Despite the physical similarity, upon their first kiss, Edward is unable to reprise the feelings which he had for Gaveston, indicating that he primarily strives for an emotional rather than sexual connection. Yet, when Spencer is killed during Isabella and Mortimer Junior’s invasion (which, again, takes the form of a stylised dance performance), Edward repeats his “And could my crown’s revenue bring him back” speech, which he first pronounced over Gaveston’s dead body.

The assassination scene has been, at least since the latter half of the 20th century, traditionally acted with an erotic or sexual subtext, often with a sense of a parodical homosexual intercourse.⁹ In Čermák’s staging, Edward is stripped of his clothing, remaining only in white underwear (looking very much like a suffering Christ figure, cf. de Brea’s employment of Christ-like imagery above), while the majority of the props have been removed from the scene. Šafařík enters in his third role, as Lightborn, the King’s assassin. Dressed in a police uniform, he performs a striptease for Edward, only to lie next to him almost naked. No act of violence takes place: Lightborn kisses the tortured King, who closes his eyes and calmly dies. It is not obvious from Čermák’s interpretation whether Lightborn actually murders Edward or the King dies after the last act of love. By tripling the roles of Gaveston, Spencer and Lightborn, Čermák’s production shows the three men as a line of Edward’s attempts to find love, intimacy, understanding and emotional fulfilment. It could be argued that only with Lightborn does he achieve these and can finally die satisfied.

In the very last scene of the production, Prince Edward (played alternatively by Jakub Král and Oliver Vyskočil) is majestically crowned King Edward the Third and the audience might expect an auspicious ending, promising the end of tyranny and chaos in the country. However, both Mortimer Junior and Queen Isabella are killed and the new King remains emotionally and physically incapable of ruling. Seeing this, one of the anonymous lords (Jakub

⁹ See, for instance, Fuller 89-90, 97 and 109-112; and Woods 74-75.

Koudela, who previously played the Earl of Lancaster) takes up King Edward I's whistle and, in the same manner as Edward I in the prologue, commands the King to get in line and accept his new responsibilities. The audience is left at a loss as to whether Edward III will make a good monarch and put an end to the spiral of violence or whether he will follow his father's footsteps and ultimately become a bullied man, forced into a role that goes against his nature and too afraid to speak up for himself.

While the central themes of Marlowe's *Edward II*—especially the issue of gay relationships, the conflict between private passions and public responsibilities, and the question of social acceptance of otherness—suggest the play for modern rewritings and reinterpretations, with his queer version of the story, Jakub Čermák goes further than most of the directors who staged the play before him. His *Edvard II.* is not purposelessly provocative, it does not aim to shock. Rather, it seeks to fully employ Marlowe's text to explore very contemporary issues, while pushing the historical and political motifs into the background or even removing them completely. However, even with this approach, Čermák treats Marlowe's text with respect and it is obvious from the production that the director was aware that he was staging a classic.

Concluding Remarks

Based on the productions discussed here, it would be too bold to make any judgements about the significance of *Edward II* in Central Europe or the prevailing strategies of the directors from this region who opt for Marlowe's play. De Brea's *Edvard Drugi* was the first Slovenian production of the play and Čermák's *Edvard II.* only the second Czech one, making them rather anomalies than a more general trend. However, both productions share certain tendencies that might point to certain local specifics, especially when viewed in the context of Shakespearean histories.

For obvious reasons, Elizabethan plays about English history are generally less appealing to Central European audiences than they are to English theatregoers. According to the databases of the Theatre Institute in Prague, since 1945, *Henry V*—one of the most popular historical plays by Shakespeare in the UK—was only staged three times, including an English production with Czech subtitles by the Prague Shakespeare Company in 2013. The three parts of *Henry VI* were staged just once, in a regional theatre in Ústí and Labem, North Bohemia. *Richard II* was staged only six times in Czech theatres, out of which only one new production took place after 1990. The only Shakespearean history that could compare to Shakespeare's comedies or tragedies in terms of its popularity among Czech theatregoers is *Richard III* (staged twenty-nine times),

which can easily be presented as a tragedy with a Machiavellian anti-hero even to audiences who do not know anything about the Wars of the Roses.¹⁰

It is, therefore, no surprise that out of all Shakespeare's contemporaries who wrote history plays, it is Marlowe and his *Edward II* that in the last century repeatedly resonated with Czech audiences and dramaturgical boards of Czech theatre festivals. Especially in the 21st century, when LGBT rights have become one of the central themes of Western cultural debates, Marlowe's play easily allows the dramaturges and directors to sideline the historical and political layers of the work to explore the issue of social and sexual norms and relate it to current discussions in today's society. In this context, it is almost natural that pioneering attempts to bring Marlowe's *Edward II* to Central European stages came from Slovenia and the Czech Republic—the countries that are considered most progressive from the former Eastern Bloc in regard to LGBT rights.¹¹

Both de Brea and Čermák focus primarily on the universality of King Edward's story. Neither of the stagings define the King's character solely by his actions—whether virtuous or malevolent—but rather through his sexuality and its consequences for his environment, which assume a central role in the productions. Edward's non-normative sexuality becomes a motif highlighting his social otherness, and it shapes how his actions are perceived by those around him. De Brea's production of *Edward II* explores obsession, passion, violence and murder as its fundamental elements. It refrains from providing any unequivocal judgement or comprehensive explanation of human behaviour. Instead, the performance offers a glimpse into the world of politics through the lens of Edward's "queerness." Čermák, who has had a long-term interest in queer issues and their representation on the stage, employs Marlowe's play further to explore the relationship between an othered individual and society. His Edward is a deeply flawed man, but from the very beginning, he has at least the partial sympathies of the audience. His hatred and cruelty have a humanly understandable motivation and the audiences are forced to ask themselves whether they should blame the King or his environment for them.

Both de Brea's and Čermák's productions represent valuable contributions not only to the reception of Marlowe in Central Europe, but also to the global reception of *Edward II*. They offer artistically unique takes on one of the most prominent Elizabethan plays outside the Shakespeare canon and provide their own image of its current societal and cultural relevance from both local and global perspectives. Moreover, these productions may serve as catalysts for further exploration of historical plays and their intersection with contemporary social issues, fostering meaningful dialogues in Central European theatre and beyond.

¹⁰ For more information, see <https://vis.idu.cz/Productions.aspx?lang=en>.

¹¹ For a detailed comparison of LGBT rights worldwide, see <https://www.equaldex.com>.

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