



Edward II

July 23, 2008

What's On Stage

BAC

18 July - 9 August

★★★★

This revival of Marlowe's great play of public duty and private passion is a bit better than promising: director Michael Oakley, who won the James Menzies Kitchin Award 2008, has laid down a fast and polished performance that, in one of the smaller BAC spaces, is like a Donmar Warehouse production writ slightly smaller.

The king (Philip Cumbus) undermines his political standing with the church and barons by frolicking with the wastrel Piers Gaveston (Tom Robertson) while his queen, Isabella (Kate Sissons), tries to salvage her marriage by securing a reversal order on Gaveston's banishment to Ireland.

The political details of the Irish sojourn, and the gathering problems in France, were always hazily sketched in by the playwright. The play, which moves with the suppleness of a snake and glories less in Marlowe's mighty line than in his most mellifluous constructions, is a pattern of manoeuvres, an exercise in power tactics shot through with impetuous emotionalism.

Since Ian McKellen made his name in the title role (alternating it with Shakespeare's *Richard II*, a clear dramatic by-product) forty years ago, I've not seen a clearer or more persuasive version. Oakley and his actors fall on the text with relish, cutting sensibly but not skimping too many of the ornate classical allusions. And the whole show moves like a train.

Mark Friend's design is a classical central doorway with a grey marbled floor and swishy drapes, where lords and bishops are arraigned in sculpted opposition to the monarch. Cumbus is a superb Edward, charismatic and wilful, bearded and bright-eyed like a mix of Ken Branagh and Ewan McGregor. Matt Tait makes much of little as his brother Edmund, and Bill Ward is a doughty, physically imposing Mortimer.

The doubling is good and convincing, James Clarkson authoritative as both Mortimer Senior and Leicester, **Robert Gill an icy Bishop of Coventry and a humorously accommodating John of Hainault**. Best of all, Robertson doubles up on nemesis, following his louche and insolent Gaveston with the nasty red hot poker man, Lightbourne.

-Michael Coveney