

Edward in the buff

Confrontational and profane, Nearly Naked Theatre's disturbing adaptation of Marlowe's *Edward II* engages both the mind and the heart.

'E2' recasts Marlowe, with a twist

Kerry Lengel

The Arizona Republic

Jun. 12, 2005 12:00 AM

For any heterosexual male in the audience, *E2*, the first original play from alternative troupe Nearly Naked Theatre, offers one of the rare moments when staring at a woman's bare breasts constitutes an intellectual experience.

But more on that later.

Dubbed "a heretical adaptation" of Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, writer-director Damon Dering's interpretation - or interrogation - of the Elizabethan original gives the audience a lot more than nudity to think about. Perhaps too much. And, in the end, perhaps too little.

Marlowe's 400-year-old piece about a murdered monarch is considered the first play to deal with homosexuality, as Edward's obsession with his lowborn lover, Gaveston, leads him to neglect his kingly duties and allows a conspiracy of spiteful lords to overthrow his reign.

For Marlowe, Gaveston is an opportunistic Svengali and Edward a dissolute weakling. His sin isn't homosexuality per se - indeed, the very concept of gay identity is a modern one - and Gaveston seems to be hated as much for his ignoble breeding as anything else.

Dering's adaptation makes homosexuality the central focus. Edward and Gaveston are no longer evil (although they remain far from perfect), and homophobia becomes the force that drives their enemies. Much of Marlowe is preserved, but carefully orchestrated subtractions and additions transform the text.

Consciously anachronistic, messily mixing Elizabethan and modern language, costumes and props, *E2* becomes metatheater, as Gaveston breaks the fourth wall to address the audience directly. In contemporary English studded with vulgarities, he defends his own actions, questions his persecutors' motives and even takes Marlowe himself to task for misinterpreting history.

Complicating the picture is the casting. The king and his lover are played by men, but more than two dozen other roles are handled by nine women, to heighten the sense of transgressed boundaries. This ploy serves to draw some intriguing connections. For example, one actress plays both Edward as a young man and his son, Edward III, and, in one of the play's most devastating scenes, she is conscripted to portray the king's assassin.

It's not hard to suspend disbelief over the gender reversals until one actress appears topless - as a man. This particular instance of nudity, one of several, is gratuitous in the sense that it furthers neither plot nor characterization. But like the entire piece, it's aggressively confrontational, again forcing the audience outside the action to think about the play *as theater*, and to ponder the director's motives.

Yet it's not immediately clear what all the emotional and intellectual hoopla adds up to. If the point is to condemn homophobia, then *E2* - given Nearly Naked's mostly young, liberal audience - is preaching to the choir.

If it's to deconstruct Marlowe and the conventions of theater, then it succeeds, but without offering any towering insight.

But if the point is to bring out the humanity of the story and the characters, then this cast absolutely succeeds. As Edward, Scott Dillon manages both regal gravitas and emotional fragility. And Matt Damon look-alike David Ojala is wonderful as Gaveston, a prancing satyr reeking of rebellious charisma.

A stagy performance by Andrea Dovner, as chief conspirator Mortimer, at first seems too over the top, but turns out to be perfect for the role - sort of like Katharine Hepburn playing an oily salesman. Heather Harper skillfully evolves her Queen Isabella from fragile flower to cold steel. And Courtney Weir's performance as Edward III really creeps up on you. At first she's lightweight comic relief, pantomiming childhood playfulness, but when the character finally comes into his kingship, restoring order by tearfully arresting his mother, you feel the shattering effect of innocence lost.

Reach the reporter at (602) 444-4896.