

# Three kings, two venues, one ensemble

EOIN CAREY

Edinburgh International Festival, National Theatre of Scotland and London's National Theatre have teamed up for *The James Plays*. Jo Caird finds out about nomadic rehearsals, production meetings via Skype and terrifying three-show days

**“T**he idea that they would do all three at once, while it was a dream, I really didn't hold out much hope,” says playwright Rona Munro of *The James Plays*, her new history cycle about three generations of medieval Scottish kings.

The dream becomes reality later this month when the trilogy premieres at the Edinburgh International Festival in an unprecedented co-production between the EIF, the National Theatre of Scotland and the National Theatre of Great Britain. An eight-week run at London's NT follows in the autumn.

*The James Plays* is the most ambitious project in the history of the NTS, involving a team of around 80 people (including an acting company of 20) and costing more than £1 million. It's also Laurie Sansom's first directing gig since taking over as artistic director and chief executive of the company in March 2013. What made him take on such a daunting task?

“It was all about the plays,” says Sansom. “As soon as I read them I felt that [doing them all at once] was the only way of doing them justice. It hadn't always been the thought in the mind of the company. I think it had been the thought that maybe we'd roll them out over a certain amount of years and we'd do them in different places and work with different theatres.

Scotland's most powerful families; and James III, whose paranoia and poor judgement brings his country to the brink of civil war.

The company has rehearsed all three plays simultaneously, starting with nine weeks on James I and James II in Glasgow and followed by a further five weeks in London, bringing James III into the mix once its leading woman, Danish actor Sofie Grabol, became available. When I caught up with the team in rehearsal at the NT last month, they were just a few days away from upping sticks once again, this time to the Midlands, for a final fortnight of technical rehearsals at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre.

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**Staging all three plays at once was the only way of doing them justice**

Laurie Sansom, director

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"But one of the huge pleasures in reading Rona's plays one after the other was seeing how she's following through characters, following through works of poetic imagery and telling three very distinct and stylistically very different stories in different ways. Having one company of actors who you can live with for a day and watch the unfolding stories was going to be the most resonant way of producing them."

The project would not have been possible without the "really, really generous" support of the EIF and the NT. Sansom is cagey about disclosing the exact figures involved but allows that "it's certainly the most expensive show we've ever put on, in terms of the amount of money we're putting towards it".

The trilogy tells the story of James I, who comes to the throne after years held captive in an English prison; James II, crowned at the age of eight only to become a pawn in a game played by

Though a headache in scheduling terms, everyone I speak to agrees that all these moves have actually benefited the process. "After two months' intensive work on two separate shows, there was something really positive about changing location, changing cities, coming to a completely different location, and yet still having the comfort of being within the same world," says stage manager Michael Dennis. "You could see everybody had a bit of a spring in their step that first week [at the NT]."

Splitting the rehearsal period between Glasgow and London has also ensured that both the NTS and the NT can feel real ownership over the work, observes puppetry director Mervyn Millar.

"Even a well-organised co-production can feel like it's at home in a place and touring to the other place," he says.

That's not the case here. The James Plays company "can genuinely feel that they're part of both organisations. I think that's given them a different sort of confidence, a different sort of style".

Not that this multi-location undertaking hasn't had its challenges. "The production meetings via Skype were quite interesting," says Sansom. "For all that can be achieved technically on stage for a show like this, and then two leading theatre companies couldn't manage to have a Skype chat once a week – that was our biggest downfall."

Working on the three plays all at the same time, however – in some cases all on the same day – was less complex than you might expect. "Because it's the same

## 3 other modern history plays

- Saint Joan, George Bernard Shaw, 1924
- The Lion in Winter, James Goldman, 1966
- Stuff Happens, David Hare, 2004



by James I

### Further reading

- Laurie Sansom: incoming artistic director, National Theatre of Scotland - profile, The Guardian: <http://bit.ly/1s9RYCd>
- The Stewarts, The Official Website of the British Monarchy: <http://bit.ly/1AHKIMU>
- 'Kings for a day', Festival News: <http://bit.ly/1nb3FmS>

acting company and the same creative team across all three and because they're all on the same set, it's just like the single project has maybe grown a little bit," says Dennis. "It's purely that there are more things to fit into the schedule, but not disparate things."

Even so, says Sansom, the process has had its tricky moments. "Sometimes it's been a real head-fuck. There have been times when I've been giving a note to an actor and been calling the actor by the wrong character name: 'Oh no, that's who you are in James I!'"

It's been made easier, says actor Gordon Kennedy, who appears in all three episodes of the drama, "by the fact that the style of each play is demonstrably different". Munro and Sansom, along with movement director Neil Bettles and the design team, have worked hard to create a distinct theatrical mood for each of the works. While James I will feel like a piece of political drama, James II is a "Pan's Labyrinth-style child's nightmare". The trilogy finishes with what Sansom calls "a kind of bittersweet relationship comedy".

This was partly about creating three works with the dramatic integrity to stand on their own, but it also guarantees the audiences seeing all three plays in one day a surprisingly rich and varied theatrical experience - albeit a long one. Three-show days will stretch from midday to nearly 11pm.

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Cameron Barnes and Gordon Kennedy in rehearsals for The James Plays



Laurie Sansom and Sofie Grabol in rehearsals

## The James Plays

August 10-22 (Edinburgh Festival Theatre, Edinburgh)  
September 10-October 29 (Olivier Theatre, National Theatre, London)

**Author:** Rona Munro  
**Director:** Laurie Sansom  
**Movement director:** Neil Bettles  
**Associate director:** Amanda Gaughan  
**Designer:** Jon Bausor  
**Associate designer:** Jean Chan  
**Lighting designer:** Phillip Gladwell  
**Associate lighting designer:** Rob Casey  
**Sound designer:** Christopher Shutt  
**Associate sound designer:** Nick Sagar  
**Puppet director:** Mervyn Millar  
**Fight director:** Rachel Bown-Williams  
**Casting director:** Laura Donnelly (NTS), Charlotte Bevan (NT)  
**Cast:** Cameron Barnes, Daniel Cahill, Ali Craig, Blythe Duff, Nick Elliott, Peter Forbes, Andrew Fraser, Sofie Grabol, Sarah Higgins, Stephanie Hyam, Gordon Kennedy, David Mara, Beth Marshall, James McArdle, Alasdair Macrae, Rona Morison, Andrew Rothney, Mark Rowley, Jamie Sives, Fiona Wood  
**Production budget:** £1 million plus  
**Technical suppliers:** Stage Sound Services, SSE Audio, White Light  
**Rehearsal period:** 16 weeks (nine in Glasgow, five in London, two in Birmingham)  
**Ticket prices:** £12-£35 (EIF), £15-£35 (NT)  
**Running time:** 2hrs 30mins (each play)

But if three-show days will be a marathon for the audience, what will they be like for the performers and technical team? There will be no dress rehearsal for this experience, says Dennis. "The first time we do it will be the first time we do it."

That's not to say that the company is leaving it up to chance. Bettles describes the work done during the weeks of rehearsal in Glasgow to build up the stamina of the 20-strong ensemble.

"We knew we were going to make these three massive plays so they have to be ready to do that," he says.

Watching a run-through of *James II*, which begins with a fast-paced football match involving nearly the entire cast, I get a sense of how physically demanding this production will be.

The movement director has worked with the actors to find "points within the plays where they can have a breather", but there's no getting around it – three-show days are going to be "massively tiring," he says.

"I think probably everybody is looking forward to being able to say they've done it," says Dennis, whose concern on those marathon days will be making sure that everyone's fed and watered and has what they need to relax between shows.

"There's going to be a real sense of achievement. It's one of those things, we might all go out and get a tattoo at the end of it."