



Following her recovery from breast cancer, *The Killing* star Sofie Gråbøl talks about treading the boards at the Edinburgh Festival, in a play about Scotland's murky royal past

Words Jo Caird

From cop to queen



'I HAD ALL THESE WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITIES BUT WASN'T ABLE TO TAKE THEM ON'

It's usually the sheer variety and cutting edge cool of the Edinburgh Fringe that steals the limelight from the high culture presented at the Edinburgh International Festival (EIF). However, a trilogy of new plays about medieval Scottish kings is creating a triple-whammy buzz as one of the August event's more unlikely cultural highlights.

First, *The James Plays* are the first ever co-production between the National Theatre of Scotland and the National Theatre of Great Britain. Second, they're premiering in the Scottish capital one month before the referendum on Scottish independence. And third, Sofie Gråbøl, star of the hit Danish television drama *The Killing*, makes her UK stage debut in the final episode of playwright Rona Munro's epic series.

Two years after saying goodbye to emotionally-remote TV detective Sarah Lund, Gråbøl is once again taking on a role that challenges gender stereotypes. She plays Margaret of Denmark, a young woman who brings much needed stability to the chaotic house of James III following her marriage to the boy king in 1469. Just a teenager when she arrived in Scotland, Margaret bore James three children and ended up playing a surprisingly significant role during his reign.

Gråbøl was tempted away from working in Copenhagen, where she lives with her two children, because *James III: The True Mirror* was an offer she couldn't refuse. 'It's not often as an actor that you are offered this kind of role,' she says.

Gråbøl's attraction to the project is all the more appreciated as she's spent the last year off work while receiving treatment for breast cancer. The timing of her illness was particularly frustrating because the success of *The Killing* in the UK led to her being inundated with offers of work.

'It was like this door that opened and all these wonderful opportunities, and I wasn't really able to take them on,' she says. Thankfully healthy again, Gråbøl had never heard of Queen Margaret before *James III* landed on her doormat, but found herself immediately fascinated by the story of the woman that playwright Munro calls 'a uniting force in Scotland'.



The Killing's
Sofie Gråbøl
(above and left)
appears at
the Edinburgh
Festival (top)
alongside
The James Plays
co-stars (above
right), James
McArdle, Andrew
Rothney and
Jamie Sives

The trilogy, which is directed by new National Theatre of Scotland artistic director Laurie Sansom, has its world premiere at the Edinburgh Festival Theatre in August before transferring to London for a seven-week run at the National Theatre.

'Normally I find when you read stories that take place that long ago it has this dusty feeling. It's like you don't really dare to touch it because there's this distance,' says Gråbøl. 'But Rona [Munro] just makes it all flesh and blood and very present somehow.'

Queen Margaret is the first English-language stage role the actor has taken on. 'It's going to be a huge challenge for me, one of my life challenges I think,' she says. 'It reminds me a bit of when you do Shakespeare in Danish. The language is so lifted that you have to be familiar with it.'

'At first you feel like it's putting on a straightjacket, but then you reach a point where the language lifts you, and I think it's the same with this project: because it's not my mother tongue I have to get so much more

on top of it so that I will be able to be lifted by the language.'

Gråbøl admits to a degree of nervousness about making her UK stage debut, adding, 'The minute you're not scared anymore it doesn't really matter, does it?' But more than anything else, she's excited about the project. Having spent her entire working life in Denmark after being cast in a film about the painter Paul Gauguin at the age of 17 (she's now 45), Gråbøl is thrilled to be immersed in a new professional and creative environment.

'It's just been so mind-blowing to go somewhere and have this freedom of people not expecting something particular from you, and you not expecting anything particular from anyone,' she says. 'There's something that awakens – a curiosity – and I'm just high on that this year. I can't wait to enter that ensemble.'

The James Plays are performed at the Edinburgh Festival Theatre, 10-20 August (eif.co.uk) and at the National Theatre, London, 10 September-28 October (nationaltheatre.org.uk)