Death in Canterbury

Music and lyrics by
James Sherwood

Book by
James Cary

A new comedy musical

The idea

Death in Canterbury is a comedy musical about Thomas Becket, twelfth century England's biggest name, and top celebrity murder victim.

Created by two award-winning comedy writers, musical comedian James Sherwood, and television and radio sitcom writer James Cary, and with music that ranges from the choral sounds of a cathedral to a 'church v. state' rap battle, *Death in Canterbury* is a constantly entertaining trip through one of the Middle Ages' best tales.

Following the example of *Blackadder* and *Horrible Histories*, this show takes its history as seriously as its comedy. Everything in the show is either true or funny – and very often both.

The story

Thomas Becket is trying to make his start in the world. He thinks he is nothing special, but everyone else disagrees. Rather than work out what it is, they just keep promoting him.

Thomas starts lowly, as a clerk for Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury. But before long, he is head-hunted by the King to help run the country. King Henry and Thomas form a close, but unequal friendship. When Henry decides Thomas should be the next Archbishop, Thomas faces a crisis: does he side with his all-powerful patron, or honour his mentor's memory?

Thomas has to choose one friendship, and reject the other. Who will he choose? And what about the King's habit of murdering opponents – should he let that influence his decision in any way?

The concerts

We presented two successful concert performances in London in early 2026, starring:

Eloise Irving
(*How do you solve a problem like Maria?* BBC1)
as Thomas

Alastair Brookshaw
(*Here We Are*, National Theatre)
as King Henry II

Paul Kemble
(*Hello, Dolly*, London Palladium)
as Archbishop Theobald

and Louisa Green (*Book of Mormon*, *Be More Chill*) as musical director.

We are now looking to develop the show through workshops and public sharings. Our concerts showed us that audiences are willing to engage with this story and these characters, and with our particular mix of music and comedy.

The songs

From choral to hip-hop, contemporary musical theatre to classic-style showtunes – click on any of these song titles to hear a clip:

In *Me-Shaped Gap*, Thomas insists there's really nothing special about him.

If someone hears
Some sudden cheers
I'll never be the cause
I might provoke a
Mediocre
Ripple of applause.

In *Is that too much to ask?* King Henry sets the priorities for his reign:

If you have battle thirst to quench
Direct your hatred towards the French.

In *The Best of Friends*, King Henry outlines his recruitment policy.

I like a courtier
Who's rather naughtier

In *You Need the Latin*, Thomas's old schoolmate John of Salisbury tells him he's out of his depth.

You need the Latin
I remember Latin
It was the class that
you simply fell flat in.

The future

Our aim is a full stage production. We were short-listed for Edge Hill University's "Page to Stage" project; and one song ("Anarchy") featured at the MMD Lionel Bart Masterclass with Felix Hagan (*Operation Mincemeat*). And our concert audiences loved it. We can share our full concert **recording**, and the show's completed **book**.

The themes of loyalty and friendship are topical and universal - what if someone no longer deserves your loyalty? And how can you choose between friends?

There is a cast of five, plus piano. We could add a chorus of four or more, and a small band – bass, drums, guitar, and reed.

We have benefited from the West End experience of MD Louisa Green (*Book of Mormon*, *Be More Chill*), and the guidance of director Nicky Allpress (*Oh What a Lovely War* national tour director; award-nominated *The Shape of Things* director; *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* associate director).

The writers

James Sherwood – music and lyrics

James is a stand-up comedian and choral singer. He took award-winning shows to six Edinburgh Fringes after winning a BBC New Comedy Award in 2005. He wrote for *The News Quiz*, and a Sony Award-winning series of *The Now Show*. And he is a member of the choir of All Saints, Margaret Street. **But now he writes musicals**. He is a member of the BOOK Music & Lyrics (BML) Advanced Group, and of Mercury Musical Developments. *Death in Canterbury* is his first completed musical. He is developing others based on: the history of broadcasting; a Shakespeare play; and a dream.

James Cary – book

James is a BBC comedy writer with 25 years of experience. Having been nominated for Perrier Best Newcomer Award at the Edinburgh Fringe for *Infinite Number of Monkeys*, his first sitcom, *Think the Unthinkable* for BBC Radio 4, won a Silver Sony Award. Since then, he has worked on *Miranda*, *Thanks A Lot Milton Jones*, *My Hero*, *Death in Paradise*, and co-created *Bluestone 42* for BBC Three. He first collaborated with James Sherwood on a touring stage show, *A Monk's Tale*, in 2017, as well as developing a show called *Great Scott!* with James and Richard Hurst.

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