

Balance of doom tilted by casting

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Mary Stuart
Lyttelton

NEVER thought I'd see the day: Schiller at the National Theatre. Long after Greenwich and Glasgow, the South Bank catches up with his famous 1800 romantic tragedy, *Mary Stuart*, in which two worlds, queens and religions collide. Although Howard Davies's production is far from perfect, I commend the evening to anyone who cares about the history of drama or the drama of history.

What is so impressive about Schiller's play is what George Steiner calls "the balance of doom." *Mary Stuart*, fettered in *Fotheringay* and propelled inexorably towards Catholic martyrdom, is a tragic figure. But so is her Protestant persecutor, Elizabeth I, cocooned in power and forced to sacrifice her humanity in order to extinguish her rival. Even if their confrontation is one of history's great imaginary conversations, the play is still that rare thing: a dual tragedy.

It doesn't, however, work quite that way in Davies's production. Seductive on paper,

the casting of Isabelle Huppert and Anna Massey as the rival queens leads to a certain imbalance. Huppert is a volatile, vixenish, and headstrong Mary, who acts with every inch of her expressive body. However, the combination of her verbal speed and heavy accent renders many of her speeches semi-comprehensible. Nothing in her life, however, becomes her like the leaving of it, and in her final exit into martyrdom, Huppert cuts a touching figure.

Anna Massey, however, is a flawless Elizabeth. Even when surrounded by courtiers, she seems steeped in solitude. And even though she is filled with the duplicity of despotism, she makes something overwhelmingly moving out of the scene where she is confronted by an imploratory letter from Mary.

The other plus points in Davies's production include Tim Pigott-Smith's Machiavellian Leicester, James Groux's honourable Talbot, and Jeremy Sams's translation, full of ironic intelligence.

On the minus side, the mix of period costumes for the two queens and 19th-century rig for the chaps produces a bizarre stage-picture and William Dudley's set is a bit of a jumble.

Billington on Mary Stuart

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