

THEATRE

MICHAEL COVENEY

Enter the fiery queen

Anna Massey's snap-shut Elizabeth meets the impetuosity of Isabelle Huppert in a new production of 'Mary Stuart'

Schiller's *Mary Stuart*, one of the greatest of all romantic tragedies, is the tale of two queens separated by historic destiny but joined in their dramatic isolation. The Royal National Theatre, belatedly joining the 10-year-old Schiller revival sparked by the 1985 Glasgow Citizens' Theatre production of this same play, provides a handsome, though severely imperfect, rendition.

The play was first translated into English in 1800 by Joseph Mellish, almost as Schiller finished writing it. This important poetic text informs Stephen Sponder's 1958 version and prompted modern variations on Schiller's major imaginative invention – the Fotheringhay face-off between two monarchs who never met – by Maxwell Anderson and Robert Bolt. The Citizens' translation, wittily corresponding to Schiller's metres and meanings, was made by Robert David MacDonald; the same version was used at Greenwich for Fiona Shaw's *Mary* in 1986.

Jeremy Sams has provided the RNT with a fluent, sometimes cheeky, text that has more prose than poetry. Inappropriately, it lacks majesty and a sense of sublimity. Schiller's rhythm is sacrificed for speed of exposition in the curious, symbiotic relationship between the Virgin Queen and her imprisoned rival.

Over the last three days of her life in Fotheringhay Castle in 1577, Mary waits for Elizabeth to sign her death warrant in Westminster. Howard Davies's stately, turned production is as much a battle of diction as of will. The snap-shut primness of Anna Massey as Elizabeth, encased in sombre finery and biter as a green lemon, is chillingly contrasted with the untamed impetuosity of Isabelle Huppert, whose slinky Frenchness defines Mary's Gallic origins and sexual history.

Elizabeth arrives with the hunt in the woods to find Mary momentarily released in the fresh air. Huppert twirling in a simple smock, her ginger hair cascading to her waist, Huppert's radiance and beauty, usually qualified on film with a naughty gleam in her eye and a seductive, insouciant swagger, here struggles through a jerky, spasmodic vocal delivery and a puppeteerish set of gesticulations.

But her talent triumphs: she swoons where she should, in the arms of her loyal Scottish attendant (Gillian Barge) and of the besotted Leicester – the slimy villain of the piece, a treacherous lover to both queens and magnificently played by Tim Pigott-Smith – en route to the scaffold.

This *Mary* is a Catholic nationalist on a taut rein of suppression that snaps in the central encounter, her vitriol pouring like molten lava over Elizabeth and sealing her

That heroic quality of single-minded righteousness is memorably projected by Ms Huppert

fact. The Glasgow *Mary* of Ann Mitchell was a devout, marmoreal anchorite in red stockings, while Fiona Shaw's was a futuristic Celtic martyr drenched in defiant tears. Huppert's tears come too, but more slowly, and her frank visage lights up with the free acceptance of her death.

The costumes are more contemporary with Schiller than with the historic period or our own. William Dudley's impressive, but ungainly, design inserts the

Romantic landscapes of Claude Lorraine and Caspar David Friedrich into a framework of architectural line-drawings of receding perspectives. This pleasing flatness is then complicated with chunky walls implying corridors of power.

Where Sams's words fall short of dramatic emphasis, some rather offputting music by the usually reliable Jason Carr drums up squeaky atmospherics. The noisate tines of sunset are distinctly naïf, and there is a collapse of good taste at the end with Leicester ranting in a crassly miked void while the axe falls offstage and rosate bloods fall lilybody red.

The court intrigues are lucidly acted by Paul Jesson as an imposing Burtleigh, Patrick Godfrey as the impatient Paulet and Colin Huxley as the unfortunate Davison – who dithers over his duty with the warrant and is betrayed by his superior, then by his queen. Schiller's invented

Mortimer, derived from the traitor Babington, is flamboyantly played by the excellent Ben Miles as an opportunist whose conversion to Rome is a spur to attempted rape. Everyone, apart from Mary, looks two ways at least in this play, and that heroic quality of single-minded righteousness is memorably projected by the most welcome Ms Huppert.

As a result of local government reorganisation, the superb amenity of the Theatre Cymru in Mold will close this summer unless £1.5 million funding is raised after the abolition of Chwyd County Council on 31 March. The four successor authorities are vacillating. What to do? Write letters, campaign ... and mount a production of *The Government Inspector*. Gogol's satire of – local authority fringing, incompetence and corruption. The timing is either fatuous or inspirationally provocative. Surely the latter, had

Michael Bogdanov's production been a humdinger. But while there is an admirable European-style expansiveness to the staging – smokes, clamour, cascading manuscripts, disproportionately scaled furniture and a finale where the real inspector arrives, astride a cage which sucks in the petty officials – proceedings are generally mirthless and cumbersome.

The wastrel clerk Kheslakov, mistaken by lawning bureaucrats for an inspector from St Petersburg, is played by Ian Hughes as a preening, acrobatic narcissist with a vocal mix of Derek Nimmo and Terry-Thomas. As everyone else, led by Glyn Houston's Mayor ('Wommet! That one word sums 'em up!'), is whining Welsh, the comic situation of political stasis in the sickle desperately fending off central government interference is at least given a lively chance. But the chance the play giveth the performance taketh away.

Brief notes: Gay Sweatshop's twenty-first anniversary is mutedly celebrated with Philip Osment's *The Undertaking* (Northampton, Birmingham and Lacksons Lane, London, in April) – an indifferently performed tragic-comedy of Aids-age bereavement that takes time to achieve Osment's usual standards of complexity and passion. Bryan James Ryder's *The Soldier's Song* is a tepid first play set in a Falls Road Catholic home on the eve of the last ceasefire. Billy Carter is outstanding as an intelligent, gull-ridden IRA recruit with a strong hint of O'Casey's post-gambant, Donal Davoren.

Mary Stuart RNT Lyttelton, London SE1 (0171-326 2252); *The Government Inspector* Theatre Cymru, Mold (01352 755114); *The Undertaking* details, 0171-242 1188; *The Soldier's Tale* Theatre Royal, Stratford East, London E15 (0181-534 0310)



Talent triumphant: Isabelle Huppert – impassioned, volcanic and appropriately Gallic

Photograph by Neil Libbert

Coveney on Mary Stuart

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ianharris

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