



Strong performances anchor Mary Stuart

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When a Queen is counselled by men with their own agendas, and ruling with a bruised ego, nothing good can come from it.

And nothing does for either of her majesty's in East Side Players latest production, *Mary Stuart*, except a story so well told that it's as intriguing and juicy today as it was when it happened in the 16th century.

Mary Stuart, by Friedrich Schiller and translated by Peter Oswald, is based on the tumultuous relationship between Queen Elizabeth I, of England (Kelly Morrison), her cousin Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland (Julie Burris) and those who have allegiance to each.

The story begins with Mary in her prison quarters with her nurse Hannah (Jorie Morrow) at her side, when in walks Mary's guardian, Sir Amius Paulet (Stephen Flatt) to give her the news they've found her guilty.

She is accused of conspiring to murder Queen Elizabeth I to become Queen of both Scotland and England, however, her guilt or innocence seems insignificant as she was improperly tried.

All seems hopeless except that Mary, whose beauty and charm has made several men fiercely loyal to her, are secretly planning to free her. Mortimer (Chris Irving) is one of those men who's posing as her opposition but secretly loves her, and Dudley, Earl of Leicester (Robert Ouellette) who lost his chance at marrying Mary years ago but still adores her.

When we meet Elizabeth in the next scene, it's apparent she's torn with what to do about Mary, a woman she has never met. It's also clear she's being pulled in two directions, like having the devil on one shoulder, Lord Burleigh (Paddy Cardarelli) who wants Mary executed, and an angel on the other, the wise, level-headed Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury (Daryn DeWalt).

In a quest for clarity, Elizabeth agrees to meet Mary, and in this jarring and powerful scene is some of the best "embodying the character" acting I have ever seen. It was like the clash of the opposites, strength versus weakness, guilt versus honour and the mighty versus the meek.

This show was full of powerful and moving scenes, particularly one between Ouellette and Irving as the two men are discussing their beloved's escape, with just as many twists and turns that will leave you wondering

if Mary will die and if Elizabeth will command it, until the very end.

Morrison portrayed the indecisive, cold Queen Elizabeth I so believably, and with just enough strength to still see her vulnerability. Burris as Mary was convincing and moving, and her conviction and bravery through her most dismal hours really portrayed that even though her body was imprisoned, her mind and heart were free.

It was great to see a period piece not bogged down by props and costumes. While the set that doubled as the prison and Elizabeth's chamber were impressive, it, like the costumes, were not overdone or needed to make this story come to life (although both queens's gowns were stunning). It was purely plot driven, coupled with phenomenal acting.

It's often true that the best stories come from true ones, and the battle between these two queens, full of betrayal, trickery and amazing dialogue, beats any reality show on television. And, whether or not a long, historical drama is your cup or tea, what can't be debated are the quality performances in this show, which ended with a well-deserved standing ovation.

n Mary Stuart is on stage until March 6 at the PaperMill Theatre in Todmorden Mills, 67 Pottery Road. Call 416-425-0917 for tickets and more information.

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