

Mary Stuart

Queens at War by William Cordeiro



Patricia Marie Kelley as Queen Elizabeth I
Photo Credit: Miranda Arden

In most accounts, Elizabeth I, as both a historical and a literary personage, is depicted as a decisive, levelheaded leader with a regal bearing—and a nearly mythic chastity. If anything, she sometimes comes off as a bit cold and calculating. Whether in plays from her own day, such as John Lyly's *Endymion* or Edmund Spenser's epic poem *The Fairie Queen*, or in movies such as *Elizabeth* or *Shakespeare in Love* in our time, she appears as the much-courted virgin monarch, inviolable in her reason and her body alike.

That makes Friedrich Schiller's portrayal of Elizabeth as a weak-willed, hysterical, and indecisive woman in his 1801 play, *Mary Stuart*, now being performed for free in Battery City Park by the New York Classical Theater, an interesting dissenting viewpoint.

Schiller presents Elizabeth, a Protestant, in her conflict with Mary Stuart, the Catholic queen of Scotland, who also claimed divine right and royal lineage to the throne of England. Elizabeth must decide whether to execute her cousin and main rival or set her free, choices that are both fraught with dangers.

If Elizabeth (Patricia Marie Kelley) chooses to execute Mary (Kim Stauffer), who is imprisoned while awaiting her trial for murdering her husband, then she may incur the enmity of Catholic sympathizers, including the powerful French and Spanish.

If she does not, she risks having a rival usurp her position with a deadly plot. The treasonous implications become complicated by a double-dealing courtier (Bryant Mason as the Earl of Leicester), a hotheaded young knight looking to be a hero (James Knight as Mortimer), and a councilor (Don Mayo as Burleigh) who values what's best for the country even when his means of getting it are unscrupulous.

Mary appears as a tragic, nearly saintly figure more concerned with an abstract justice than political expediency, in contrast with Elizabeth, the fickle, headstrong matriarch who wants to have things both ways. Elizabeth's vacillations ultimately prove victorious, but leave her isolated, exiled in her own kingdom.

Kelley's Elizabeth has an appropriately icy edge for this play, but she nonetheless lets us warm to her unsympathetic, worldly character through glimpses of her humor and humanity. Stauffer's Mary, on the other hand, appears sympathetic at first but grows more self-righteous and not-of-this-world as the play goes on. Her religious passion, though, saves her from seeming merely priggish and colors her as a kind of flawed martyr.

Mayo's Burleigh evinces a flippant, haughty spunk that risks stealing the show. Michael Marion, playing Mary's prison warden Paulet, gives a notable and convincing portrayal of a pillar of solid good sense and moral rectitude.

While the production has no set per se, the entire audience must pick up its blankets and move for each scene to a new location in the park. This didn't seem to bother anyone as much as it might sound: chasing the actors around the park made the play more spontaneous and engaging than a traditional interpretation of a tragic period drama would be otherwise.

Director Stephen Burdman chose some beautiful panoramic backdrops, such as a spacious plaza symbolically looking out on the ocean at the Statue of Liberty, flanked by rows of monumental pillars, for the scene in which Elizabeth confronts Mary in person and Mary declares she is Elizabeth's sovereign. Prison scenes are set inside Castle Clinton, while other scenes take advantage of Battery Park's pleasant, tree-filled landscapes.

The play's gloomy political vexations are made much more palatable by the summer weather and scenic views, though the low groan of passing ferry boats or the chugging sounds of an industrial lawn mower going by may cause mild distractions. Nonetheless, the refreshing sea breeze blowing off the ocean and the gaggle of colorful, curious tourists in the background temper the play's pessimistic historical intrigue.