

**There really IS something about Mary Stuart: QUENTIN LETTS sees
highbrow theatre and top-notch acting**

MailOnline

January 26, 2018 Friday 1:58 AM GMT

Copyright 2018 Associated Newspapers Ltd. All Rights Reserved



Section: TV&SHOWBIZ; Version:1

Length: 743 words

Byline: QUENTIN LETTS FOR THE DAILY MAIL

Body

Mary Stuart (Duke of York's **Theatre**)

Verdict: **Highbrow theatre**, brilliantly done

Rating:

Despite minor irritations from director-adaptor Robert Icke, the West End transfer of Mary Stuart (soon to have a short tour) is complex, **highbrow theatre** with top-notch acting from Juliet Stevenson and Lia Williams.

Its storyline of an England threatened by European rivals is also snortingly topical.

Friedrich Schiller's 200-year-old play is about Tudor political intrigues as Elizabeth I struggles to neutralise the threat of her beguiling captive Mary, Queen of Scots. In real life, the two cousins never met. In Schiller's version, they do and the encounter does not go well.

Spies are everywhere. Even in the Privy Council there are ministers who seem more loyal to the Continent than to England. Elizabeth is insulted by the French as a dreary 'old maid' who is indecisive and bound to be judged harshly by history. Dented by shouty advice from all sides, she may look a lonely, weak head of government. Remind you of anyone?

At the start of each performance, stars Stevenson and Williams decide, on the toss of a coin, which of them will play Mary and which will play Elizabeth. On the night I went, Miss Stevenson was Mary.

The stage is mainly bare, its raised revolve creating a central bull-ring, with bare brickwork at the back. There's modern dress and 21st-century language, with lots of stuff about 'international law' and 'rights'.

Schiller (no Brexiteer, he) plainly sympathises with Mary and Miss Stevenson's emotive gifts perhaps accentuate Mary's victimhood. Even the Cranmerite in me felt moved as this Scottish Queen took leave of her maids before her execution. Yet Elizabeth is a victim, too: of duty to the people (today we might say the electorate) and to stark political imperatives. The final moments show us Elizabeth quite alone, staring at the audience almost like a puzzled clown.

There really IS something about Mary Stuart: QUENTIN LETTS sees highbrow theatre and top-notch acting

Frequently there is more of director Icke than writer Schiller in this production. The original's crispness and poetry has been sacrificed to something more swaggering and modern, Mr Icke indulging his mania for ambient noise and video screens with occasional use of live camera footage.

Despite my personal scepticism about such stunts, they are slickly done and may give the show a modern sheen that will appeal to younger theatregoers.

Elliot Levey, John Light, Michael Byrne and Christopher Colquhoun put in tremendous shifts as the Elizabethan court's various dignitaries. Rudi Dharmalingam is maybe a little less persuasive as the reckless Mortimer. The worst casting (no fault of the actress herself) is the decision to invent a female priest to give Mary her final holy communion.

Savour instead the gravity of the story, the striking similarities between Mary and Elizabeth, the historic resonances. At three hours, Mary Stuart is in no way a short evening, but it makes for a richly intellectual spectacle.

Jennifer's Wilde night of stage-hogging

Lady Windermere's Fan (Vaudeville Theatre)

Verdict: A one-woman show

Rating:

Acting in a scene with Jennifer Saunders must be a nightmare - like sharing a cheese fondue with Eric Pickles. There is only so much to go round and you just know the other party is going to hog it.

Miss Saunders plays one of Oscar Wilde's dragons - the gossipy Duchess of Berwick in Lady Windermere's Fan. This is the Wilde play in which a long-lost mother (exotic Mrs Erlynne) hesitates to identify herself to the daughter (recently married Lady Windermere) whom she abandoned in infancy 20 years ago.

Every scene she is in, Miss Saunders steals. Given that a large percentage of the audience will probably go because of her, such stage-hogging may be excusable. But it unbalances the production.

Director Kathy Burke is not helped by a patchy cast, some of whom do posh-chap accents which reduce Wilde's delicate comedy to the level of Harry Enfield's Mr Cholmondley-Warner. But Samantha Spiro, one of our under-cherished actresses, is excellent as Mrs Erlynne.

With the Duchess of Berwick not in later scenes, the producers make her sing a front-of-curtain comedy song before Act 4 to whip up the audience. I suppose it gives some punters what they came for, but it ruins any chance of Wilde's subtle take on Victorian morality being heard. And that is a pity.

- A version of this review appeared in earlier editions.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Web Publication

Journal Code: WEBDM

Subject: THEATER (90%); BRITISH ROYALTY (90%); BRITISH MONARCHS (89%); THEATER & DRAMA (78%);

There really IS something about Mary Stuart: QUENTIN LETTS sees highbrow theatre and top-notch acting

HEADS OF STATE & GOVERNMENT (75%); INTERNATIONAL LAW (75%); GOVERNMENT ADVISORS & MINISTERS (75%); CLERGY & RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS (73%); WRITERS (60%); POETRY (60%)

Industry: ACTORS & ACTRESSES (78%); WRITERS (60%)

Geographic: ENGLAND (92%); SCOTLAND (79%)

Load-Date: January 26, 2018

End of Document