

# WHAT'S ON THEATRE

MARY STUART

## The Tudor thriller with echoes of Isis and Brexit

**H**ow a 19th century verse play about Tudor politics can have contemporary echoes of religious

fundamentalism and Brexit is perhaps a question for Robert Icke.

But then the dynamic director is known for making Aeschylus' 2,500-year-old *Oresteia* feel newly minted, and creating a radically reworked version of Orwell's 1984.

Both those shows were at The Almeida where in addition to adapting German playwright Friedrich Schiller's *Mary Stuart*, Icke has added a frisson by deciding who plays Elizabeth and Mary each night on a coin toss.

Either Highgate actress Juliet Stevenson will put her head on the block, or Lia Williams, currently tearing up TV screens as Wallis Simpson in *The Crown* and butcher's wife Nadia in *The Missing*.

The device has led to the press night being delayed by a week according to Rudi Dharmalingam, who plays Mortimer: "We are in a good position but the creative team and actors have made the decision after becoming aware that we are essentially creating two different versions of the show with two different queens. We underestimated how much work that was going to entail."

How the head-swapping regime affect the rest of the cast is definitely a good question for Dharmalingam, whose past theatre work includes *The History Boys* and *The Events*.

"The heart of our performances is essentially the same. But all actors

**BRIDGET GALTON** talks to Rudi Dharmalingam about playing a radicalised 16th Century fanatic

have their own aura and essence. Any actor is going to give something different and working with two actors on the same scene will have variants. One will stay still on a line where the other one moves. We have to be open minded about how it's going to change from night to night."

Dharmalingam says the cast which also includes *Thick of It* and *Cucumber* actor Vincent Franklin took just "twenty minutes" to start talking about Brexit on the first day of rehearsals.

"It's not the same, but that feeling of isolation has echoes with the feeling post referendum. A new religion has been established in England with Catholicism branded a criminal offence. England is about to be ex-communicated by the Pope which means cutting ties with the Catholic Church and the majority of Europe. Who knows what the future holds? Brexit was a multigenerational choice that we have made who's to say what it's going to bring?"

Focusing on the last days of Mary Queen of Scots as Elizabeth I dithers over signing her death warrant, Icke intensifies the thriller by compressing the action into one day. As the nephew of Mary's jailer, Mortimer offers Mary hope of being sprung from jail as an increasingly paranoid Elizabeth gets wind of plots to supplant her

with Mary.

"Elizabeth is a target of murderous Catholic radicals out to install the religion back into England. Mortimer is a fictional role created by Schiller but as a young man who has grown up Protestant and become radicalised during a gap year, he's representative of many Catholic missionaries who wanted to assassinate Elizabeth I and free Mary from prison.

"They were often young men trained or indoctrinated by priests in Europe. He feels he has a mission. In his zeal he's prepared to sacrifice himself for the greater good. It's that sense of something bigger than yourself. He thinks this is his destiny God has asked him to do it. It has given him great focus, self-assurance but there's also naivety."

As for the verse, he insists it's "very accessible" and "pertinent to the essence of the piece".

"It gives added momentum to the plot and as with Shakespeare it fuels our thoughts and gives an underlying pulse. The stakes are very high for all involved."

It's safe to say he loves working with Icke: "He likes reworking classics and making them relevant for a modern audience. The whole process is really free and open. Some directors have a pre-ordained idea of staging but with him we



■ Rudi Dharmalingam in *Mary Stuart* at the Almeida.

discover it for ourselves and he tweaks it. I didn't go into this job to act in soaps. I am interested in telling multi-layered stories with multi-dimensional characters and

I've been very lucky so far."

■ **Mary Stuart is at the Almeida Theatre Islington from December 2 until January 21.**

### REVIEW

## All female trilogy is immersive and thrilling

SHAKESPEARE TRILOGY

King's Cross Theatre

★★★★☆

Phyllida Lloyd has completed her all-female trilogy, begun in 2012 at Donmar Warehouse, by staging *The Tempest* alongside previous hits *Julius Caesar* and *Henry IV* at a specially built King's Cross theatre. Strong individually, they're particularly rewarding viewed together, with recurring themes: self-expression through role-playing; jostling for position and territory; loyalty and factionalism; and, most resonantly given the setting, captivity and freedom.

That setting is a women's prison, with the inmates sometimes breaking character or interrupted by guards. It justifies the all-female casting, but

since that's no longer a radical idea, and as the performances are so convincing, it can feel unnecessary, especially when we're wrenched out of the drama or when amusing props or contemporary gags make the work too comic.

Harriet Walter plays a real life-sentenced political prisoner separated from her daughter, and that parental grief and weary authority infuses her roles. She's an anguished Brutus, desperately searching for the honourable path; a King Henry steely and manspreading on the throne, but lonely and insomniac; and a watchful, isolated Prospero who fears abandonment. Mesmerising and androgynous, she anchors all three plays.

But it's a strong, refreshingly diverse company, with standout performances including Jackie

Clune's swaggering Caesar; Jade Anouka's prizefighter Hotspur, lethal Antony and buoyant Ariel; Sophie Stanton's buffoonish but damaging Falstaff and self-pitying Caliban; Clare Dunne's fiery Portia and laddish Hal; Leah Harvey's open-hearted Miranda; Sheila Antim's stirring Lady Percy; and Martina Laird's eloquent Cassius.

Bunny Christie and Chloe Lamford's institutional design encloses us with a chain-link fence, and there are vivid projections from Duncan McLean, propulsive movement from Ann Ye and Kate Waters, otherworldly island music from Joan Armatrading, and expressive lighting from James Farncombe. Immersive, kinetic and a thrilling portrait of wide-ranging humanity.

Marianka Swain



■ Martina Laird (Cassius) and Harriet Walter (Brutus) in *Julius Caesar*.

Picture: HELEN MAYBANKS