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Review: Hedgepig Ensemble presents “Mary Stuart”

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In a world enraptured equally by Game of Thrones and Fox News politics, female leaders vying for a place in the history books being pitted against each other is nothing new. In this fresh take on perhaps the world’s most iconic sister rivalry of Mary, Queen of Scots vs. Elizabeth I of England, *Mary Stuart* examines female leadership under the eyes of family, politics, and religion in a production fit for a Queen.

A quick summary of events: both Mary, Queen of Scots, and Elizabeth I, Queen of England, have a claim to the throne, but one is imprisoned and the other is in power. This adaptation of these real historical happenings

picks up during Mary’s last days alive, leading up to her execution at the hand of her sister. Or was it?

The genius of this timely production strikes most where you least expect it to the untrained eye: the subtle, powerful lighting design by Charlotte McPherson. Bathed in oceans of blue light, Mary espouses serenity. Juxtaposed with Elizabeth’s harsh hues of red, the lighting design sets Mary up as a gentle protagonist, while giving Elizabeth the iron fist backdrop of a ruler who knows her power. However, as the show progresses and we see each of these women vacillate between their feelings of right and wrong, duty and gut, the lines of “protagonist” begin to blur, and we see them in new light—literally—as each has new moments swathed in both warm and cool colors. No small feat, the lighting expertly tells the complex story of these unruly rulers’ sunrise and sunset of loyalties and longings during this chapter of their lives.

Under deft direction by Emily Lyon, the play gallops through back-room-betrayals, secrets, and professions of the heart in a lively but brisk almost three hours. Mary Candler as Mary Stuart exudes grace and quiet authority with a subtle ferocity bubbling beneath her saintly surface. Queen Elizabeth (Olivia Williamson) is played with the poise and precision reminiscent of another famous Brit, Mary Poppins. Throughout the play, out of her bag of tricks she pulls beguiling beauty and feminine charm, at other times an iron fist and self-assured proclamations, and yet still at other times doubt and misery at her lot in life, never knowing who is her friend and who is giving her sugarcoated falsities to stay in her good graces. But of course, no remedy can erase the pain of sentencing/being sentenced by your half-sister to death, and it is precisely this internal clash between poise and ferocity that both Candler and Williamson skillfully capture with every gesture and syllable. At first glance, Mary is the Saint and Elizabeth has

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the masculine energy of cunning and conniving, but by the end of the show, both women paint devastating portraits of their characters caught between expectation and reality, true self and image.

Lyon's direction weaves these long-examined characters through an unavoidable, modern lens of partisanship where one decision, whether it be to sign an execution, marry a king, or beg for forgiveness, can be seen as an act of manipulative power-grabbing, or well-intentioned concern for image in an ever-watching world for a woman in power. In the first few moments of the play, when Somie Pak's distinguished costumes coil like a snake around imprisoned Mary, the men of the royal court raid Mary's private trunks for remnants of letters she has written that may or may not contain salacious treason, and one can't help but to ask, "But her emails?"

Additional standouts include Greg Carere as the Earl of Leicester and Thomas Valdez as Edward Mortimer, playing excellent ambiguity and all-too-familiar political chessplaying with wit and passion. Jory Murphy, wearing many hats throughout the play, has a particularly funny highlight as a low-level employee to a wavering Elizabeth before Mary's death sentence is carried out either willingly or not by her signature she has just laid on the letter. There's only one problem: she refuses to speak and give clear instruction on what must be done next. To carry out the order based on the implied will of her signature or to hold in safe keeping until her word is given explicitly? Bemoaning needing clear instructions from a sovereign and unable to act alone, Murphy begs for someone to tell him what to do, give any instruction, tell him what the truth is of the situation he has walked in on. It is as if the play was mocking the audience. No, it will not tell us what the "truth" is of these historical events, but instead leave us wondering, whose point of view, whose story are we really hearing in the history books?