

MARY STUART: PRESS RESPONSES

Almeida, West End (2016–18)

Schiller in a new adaptation created by Robert Icke

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EVENING STANDARD

Fiona Mountford

★★★★★

The all-conquering Almeida is at it again. This Islington powerhouse has of late become the most dependable purveyor of quality hits to the West End, with the likes of *Ink*, Andrew Scott's *Hamlet* and a reworked *Oresteia*. The latter two plays were directed, as is this, by British theatre's most exciting – and occasionally frustrating – talent Robert Icke, who offers here a fluid and thrilling modern-dress adaptation of the Schiller classic for Juliet Stevenson and Lia Williams to get their teeth into.

Both actresses, astonishingly, play both parts: the roles are decided – how do they bear the uncertainty? – by a filmed coin toss at the start. Last night Williams bagged the showier role of Elizabeth I, but both, clad identically in simple white shirt and black velvet trousers, are outstanding. The modern-day parallels, while never laboured, come thick and fast: a woman such as Elizabeth may be powerful, but all around her are ranks of scheming men whose trustworthiness is doubtful. Popular opinion, too, is the slobbering beast that can never be satisfied.

Icke achieves hurtling dramatic momentum right from the start of a lengthy evening. Mary has already been sentenced to death by a dubiously convened court; all Elizabeth need do now is sign her death warrant. Catholic Mary represents a heavy threat to a Protestant throne that lacks an heir, but Elizabeth remains mired in indecision. With wrenching intensity Williams suggests how Elizabeth, ever more frantic and suspicious, allows the very idea of Mary to assume monstrous proportions. In Schiller's rich irony, Elizabeth is more of a prisoner than the captive queen could ever be.

Stevenson, on the other hand, becomes increasingly calm and transcendent as Mary runs out of options but not of friends; there is outstanding work across the supporting cast in parts both large and small. John Light's simmeringly contained Leicester grapples with his feelings for both queens, while Elliot Levey's Burleigh is a smoothly skilled political operator. The last act, with its chilling closing tableau of loneliness, is devastatingly fine. Magnificent.

TIME OUT

Caroline McGinn

★★★★★

Lust, pride, skulduggery: this riveting drama about Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I is a fight to the death between two killer queens. And it's stunning. On the night I saw it, Lia Williams was Elizabeth and Juliet Stevenson Mary. But they switch. Their roles are cast by a flipped coin at the start of each performance; the winner going on to keep her head; the loser losing it. It's a fine bit of dramatic judgment which is typical of this supremely sexy and intelligent production by renaissance man Robert Icke. Icke not only directs; he also translates and adapts and has stripped down a slightly fusty 200-year-old Schiller play about 400-year-old events and rebuilt it as something modern and timeless: muscular, lucid and thrumming with moral power.

Forget farthingales and folderols. The action erupts on a bare black stage, circled with golden benches for Elizabeth and brick walls for Mary, who is under castle arrest in hostile England and at the centre of a tangled web of Catholic terrorist plots on her cousin's life. The set works as an intensely focused lens on the superb actors and what they do and say; you feel intimately at the heart of what's happening, seeing their blood rise and their tears fall; as tension builds, their impact becomes colossal.

Schiller's play is based on a historical story whose time seems to have come round again, probably because it is – unusually – a face-off between two powerful women.

Caught between the intrigues of her all-star male court, Elizabeth prevaricates about sending her cousin to the block. Their debates about the rights of refugees, the threat of terrorism and the

scope of international law feel freshly relevant. But it's the passion and the violence which powers this – expressed in a stylised dynamic where the actors claw and grope each other like ballet dancers on crack. It's magnetic, but also accurately diagrams the situation of strong women in a brutal male-dominated culture.

At first, Williams's Elizabeth is one of the boys, smoking and bantering in the Tudor boardroom. Later, she's dominated by slimy politician Burleigh (Elliot Levey) and predatory charmer, Leicester (John Light), finally emerging to rule them all but locking up her soul in the process.

Williams and Stevenson are truly amazonian in these roles, bringing depth and strength to Mary and tormented charisma to Elizabeth. The made-up scene where they meet in the woods and theatrically knock seven bells out of each other is a treat to behold.

The men are outstanding too, especially the queen's conscience, grizzled Yorkshireman Talbot (Michael Byrne), who stumps around Elizabeth's court like he's Geoff Boycott on 'Test Match Special', saying what no one else can or will. This is so much more than just another bodice-ripper for Little Englanders: it's an unmissable modern drama. A show to lose your head and your heart to.

MAIL ON SUNDAY

Georgina Brown

★★★★★

Two of this country's finest actresses, Juliet Stevenson and Lia Williams, stride on to the stage in velvet trouser suits. Who will play Elizabeth I and who the title role, the deposed Mary, Queen of Scots, imprisoned by Elizabeth? A coin spins. Fate takes its course.

Director Robert Icke's point about duality is immediately and potently made. These two are reflections of one woman, two sides of one coin. One Catholic, one Protestant, both victims of male conspiracy, both isolated, one literally held captive, the other imprisoned by her position. As Elizabeth puts it in Icke's brilliant new version: 'The Crown is prison with jewels.'

The play charts a duel to the death, at the end of which one queen will have her head on a coin, the other will lose hers at the scaffold. Elizabeth wants Mary dead but can't quite bring herself to sign her death warrant.

What proceeds is an electrifying battle, within Elizabeth's soul, between Elizabeth and her courtiers and, ultimately, in the big scene that the original playwright Frederick Schiller made up – when the two women meet and the political gets personal. Who is the rightful heir? More pressing, who is the better woman? And who is the luckier one?

I saw both actresses in both roles and while, of course, there are differences – Stevenson more impassioned, Williams more sensual – both are highly intelligent, matchingly magnificent, equally compelling. More important, whichever part they are playing, the balance of power (and, paradoxically, their sense of their own powerlessness) could not be more taut – or more tragic.

Mary finally goes to her death, smiling, unburdened, free, in a meagre shift dress, having confessed her sins and received absolution. Elizabeth, by contrast, her face a blank, slathered in white make-up, is weighed down by her huge farthingale robe and the heaviness of having paid for her security with her humanity. Utterly alone, horribly afraid, trapped, she spins like a doll in a shop window.

A stunning, gutting study of the sacrifices of leadership.

TIME OUT

Andrzej Lukowski

★★★★★

Juliet Stevenson and Lia Williams toss for the roles of Mary and Elizabeth in Robert Icke's genius Schiller update

A family emergency on press day stopped me seeing both versions of Robert Icke's stunning take on 'Mary Stuart'. Fortunately it was a fairly minor family emergency compared to the one depicted

in Schiller's play, wherein Elizabeth I agonises at length over whether to lop off her cousin Mary's head.

Still, I kind of liked the fact that my viewing really was determined by the coin toss at the start between leads Lia Williams and Juliet Stevenson, a gorgeous piece of stagecraft wherein Williams calls 'heads' on the spin of a coin, with the winner getting to play Elizabeth.

Has she really won, though? This is perhaps the key question in Icke's ferociously good update, a genuinely moving meditation of the burden of power written in seamless blank verse. It's performed on a simple, round wooden set with the cast in chic modern dress, adorned only by constant, kinetic movement and a beautiful, ever-present ambient sound design from Paul Arditti (with an original song from Laura Marling at the end).

As queen at my performance, Williams is smaller, prettier and more brittle, and looks less regal than the calmer Stevenson. She has the insecurity of the new ruler unsure of her place in the world, troubled by the limits and lack of limits on her power – sometimes she blazes with the grandeur of a thousand suns; sometimes she spits malicious bile; occasionally she looks human and frightened. It is a phenomenal turn, a clever, flawed woman in the grip of a disease called power.

By contrast Stevenson's Mary is almost placid: she believes in her right to rule more the Elizabeth does, but she also believes in the righteousness of her own downfall. It is only in the stunningly choreographed centerpiece confrontation – the two women's one and only meeting, as perfectly measured as De Niro and Pacino squaring off in 'Heat' – that Mary allows her ego to take over, lashing Elizabeth with an kamikaze verbal attack that wins the battle but condemns her to death.

Outside of the tight parameters of this scene, the cousins never meet, but they remain bound. One can only have power if the other loses it. One's faith must trump the other's. Both are women in a world of men, and their fragility is always stressed next to their strength – no more so than the truly disturbing scene in which Rudi Dharmalingam's fanatically devoted Mortimer attempts to assert what he seems to believe to be his right to have sex with the Mary, the woman he claims to be devoted to.

Most striking, though, is its portrait of power as a prison: in the final scene, Mary beatifically accepts that her life is ending, happy to have been finally released on something like her own terms; at the same time Elizabeth is strapped into the dress and makeup and other paraphernalia of monarch of legend. In a way the frock is just a piece of ironic grotesquerie – we've already seen how stuck she is, bound to follow the sentiment of a public she hates (there are more than a couple of Brexit parallels). She has already cursed her people. She has already prayed for death.

Icke has crafted a rich, multilayered, and deeply human political thriller. But let's not get too distracted by him – 'Mary Stuart' was conceived as a vehicle for two of our best actresses and Williams and Stevenson deliver as two lonely stars, drowning in each other's gravity.

OBSERVER

Susannah Clapp

★★★★★

Last year Robert Icke made *Oresteia* the most compelling drama in London. Now he stages *Mary Stuart*, written in 1800, to explosive effect. Schiller's play has been stripped back, rewired. Icke's adaptation is sculptural, rich and incisive. Hildegard Bechtler's bare, round design creates an arena in which characters try to break out of circular arguments. Juliet Stevenson and Lia Williams are mighty.

The dare of these actresses. *Mary Stuart* deals with the relation between Mary and Elizabeth I, and centres on an imaginary meeting between them. Stevenson and Williams go on stage each night not knowing who is to be Mary and who Elizabeth. That is determined in front of the audience by the spin of a coin – presumably a sovereign.

Not a gimmick but an insight. There is nothing logical or inevitable about who ends up in power. And these queens are two sides of one coin: Catholic and Protestant; lover and virgin. Mary is in prison, but the crown is also "a prison cell with jewels": it takes free will from the woman who wears it.

I had expected startling differences in interpretation from these very different actresses, whom I saw play both parts in back-to-back performances. What is riveting is how close they are. Both show uneasy command as Elizabeth and sumptuous composure as Mary. Both deliver Schiller's

corrugated arguments with the passionate fluency of ideal politicians. They are so alike in their velvet trouser suits and white blouses that when they lie down, hands reaching towards each other, they could be an opened-out version of one person.

The differences are tiny but illuminating. Stevenson, naturally fervent, has a tremor in her voice that registers crisis and excitement as if a tide were sweeping through her. Her gestures come as if the result of pent-up feeling. Williams is slyly provocative, her voice even, the inflections coming from variations in pitch and pace. She moves as if through honey. Courtiers sit and rise at the click of Elizabeth's fingers. Stevenson clicks with martial peremptoriness; Williams as if she were trying to get something nasty off the end of her nail.

Both roles are tremendous. But the play is not called *Mary Stuart* for nothing. Mary is the sympathetic heart. And the one who is vindicated. A brilliantly staged last scene shows her in a simple shift going towards death, while Elizabeth is made up for private isolation and public consumption: white mask face; straitjacket bodice; scarlet hoops for her farthingale that look like entrails. She revolves like a wedding cake.

An unexpectedly strong case is made for Catholicism: in Mary's wonderful speech about the physical world; in her peace at death; and in a courtier's memory of how his conversion awakened him to art. As he speaks, a faint thrum begins to sound. Laura Marling's specially composed music sends a vibration through the action, adding rather than emphasising. A beautiful song, played as Mary prepares for execution, has the intimacy of unspoken thoughts.

This is the nearest I've ever come to blubbing over a member of the royal family. Not least because there is irony right up to the end. There is perpetual, intricate – not just stage bellowing – debate. About how to prevent making martyrs. About the division of Scotland from England. About how dextrous the powerful are in shifting responsibility. About how a leader, told that “the public has spoken”, might know whether she really has a majority. On both occasions, a whisper of recognition ran through the audience. As it did many other times in an electrifying production.

THE STAGE

Mark Shenton

★★★★★

The Almeida's big hit, King Charles III, vividly imagined a constitutional crisis that could follow the death of our current monarch. The theatre now rewinds to a very different royal crisis from over five hundred years ago, magnificently dramatised in Friedrich Schiller's *Mary Stuart*.

This astonishing political thriller premiered in 1800 but Robert Icke's stark, intense and riveting production brings it into the here and now. Two women – Protestant Elizabeth I on the English throne and Catholic Mary Queen of Scotland, who fled to England after she was imprisoned by the Scottish nobility only to be incarcerated again by her cousin Elizabeth I for fear that she would usurp her place on the throne – face off against each other in a deadly power struggle.

When the play was last seen in the West End at the Donmar Warehouse in 2005, Janet McTeer played the title role opposite Harriet Walter as Elizabeth I. Now, in an act of extraordinary daring and courage, Lia Williams and Juliet Stevenson arrive on stage together not knowing which role they will be assigned, until a spin of a coin decides it for them.

That gives the performance a real frisson, but also underlines both the chance of random fate (the accident of birth as well as the associations and alliances they both forge), and that the women are two sides of the same coin. Only on certain days are the alternative combination guaranteed to be played with the actors swapping roles in the evening after the matinee is decided by chance, so I saw both actors chillingly play each role.

While only theatre geeks and freaks might feel they need to experience both versions, seeing them on the same day amplified my understanding both of the play and the actors' extraordinary achievements.

Stevenson is tougher, more naturally regal, in both roles, but she will be damned if she does and damned if she doesn't in either guise. There's no winning this deadly battle: she's a prisoner in both, inhabiting either a prison cell that leads to her beheading as Mary or a "prison cell with jewels" as the English monarch. Williams offers a more tentative, vulnerable and troubled Elizabeth I, yet also a fierce independence of spirit as Mary that leads to a doomed stand-off in the other combination.

Robert Icke's own new version of the play pulses with contemporary nuance (as did his *Oresteia*), and is staged with a dramatic sweep and urgency on Hildegard Bechtler's revolving disc of a stage that adds another brick wall in front of the Almeida's existing one.

The two women completely own the space but this is also a rich ensemble show, with superb support all around including Rudi Dharmalingam as Mary's ally Mortimer, Vincent Franklin as her persecutor Burleigh and John Light as Leicester, romantically entangled with both women.

THE TIMES

Sam Marlowe

★★★★

Heads you win. At the beginning of each performance of Robert Icke's nerve-shreddingly intense new version of this 1800 Friedrich Schiller classic, a coin is spun to decide which of the two leading actresses — Lia Williams or Juliet Stevenson — will play the title role and which Elizabeth I. Whatever the outcome, you're guaranteed more than three hours of dense, gripping theatre, as the queens face each other in a savagely elegant endgame, and the politics of the past startlingly reflect the present.

The double-casting underlines a central motif of Schiller's play: Mary Stuart is incarcerated at Fotheringhay Castle, a pawn in plots against Elizabeth's throne; but the English monarch, too, is imprisoned — by her position, the fickle opinion of her people, the constant threat of assassination and the ruthless machinations that surround her.

In Icke's production, Stevenson and Williams are modern leaders, operating in a male-dominated world in which misogyny is rife. There are glimpses of Hillary Clinton, Theresa May and even Margaret Thatcher in their manoeuvrings; sometimes they tactically deploy their femininity, but it's a weapon also repeatedly used against them.

The queens arrive on Hildegard Bechtler's stark, revolving, disc-shaped set in identical black velvet, Clintonesque pantsuits; once the coin has chosen, Mary is brutally stripped of her jacket and shoes and bundled off to captivity. As played by Stevenson, she is hollow-cheeked and febrile, her voice trembling with suppressed anger and terror. Williams, on the other hand, plays Mary with a smoother self-possession and a sarcastic edge.

Stevenson's Queen of Scots is not above coquetry; Williams goes so far as to lick the bald pate of Vincent Franklin's silkily patronising Lord Burghley, the chief advocate for her execution, eyeing him with a mix of provocation and disdain. As for Elizabeth, both actresses lend her majestic authority, commanding their courtiers with a click of the fingers; Williams' interpretation has sensual swagger while Stevenson's is drily funny, wearier. And both are given to breathtaking outbursts of rage.

Icke's verse is sumptuous and muscular, and the issues under discussion — relations with Europe and Scotland, terrorism and religious fanaticism, policy steered by populism — are bracingly relevant. The drama may be too heftily led by language rather than action for some tastes, and it demands patience and concentration, but here it's visually arresting too. Video screens relay scene titles and the ticking away of time as Elizabeth must decide Mary's fate; the movement — sinuous, graceful, the queens repeatedly mirroring one another — is mesmeric. Their climactic meeting is almost an exquisite courtly dance before diplomacy dissolves into a snarling catfight.

There's an extraordinary sequence in which, to a rippling, haunting song composed by Laura Marling, Mary is prepared for her beheading while Elizabeth is arrayed as Gloriana, her face a grotesque, white-painted death's head, each woman in her way both powerful and powerless, and utterly isolated. It's fascinating theatre — fiercely pertinent, exhilaratingly potent.

THE INDEPENDENT

Paul Taylor

★★★★

Robert Icke has adapted and directed this extraordinarily gripping, edge-of-your-seat version of Schiller's great play. There were moments, during the three-and-a-quarter-hour proceedings, when I caught myself wondering when I last took a conscious breath.

The production stars Juliet Stevenson and Lia Williams and which of them plays Elizabeth I or Mary at a particular performance is decided by the flip of a coin. The actresses, dressed in

identical outfits (black velvet suits and white shirts) and with similar boyish coiffures, make their way like sundered twins down separate aisles to the circular wooden stage where the rest of the cast, in modern grey suits, await them. But this solemn ceremonial is no prelude to a joyous Twelfth Night-like recognition scene. Williams calls heads and we watch the spinning metal in close-up on the overhead monitors. It was tails at the performance I saw and in an instant the courtiers made deep bows to Stevenson's Elizabeth, while Williams's Mary is divested of her jacket and shoes and led off to prison.

But in what sense can one talk of winners and losers in this situation? That's a key question that Icke's account addresses with particular penetration with his strategy of having the actresses play, as it were, both sides of the same coin and his searing emphasis on the paradoxes of the final outcome. I have never seen the mutual obsession of these two monarchs – who only meet once in an encounter invented by Schiller – communicated with such a symbiotic intensity of attraction and repulsion (almost erotic at times).

And that's because Stevenson and Williams, who are exceptional, have been rehearsed to inhabit the nervous system of the rival queen, too, whom they accordingly know from the inside.

"I wear the crown but she holds all the cards/ ... her prison cell's the centre of the state," declares Elizabeth in the fourth act of this adaptation. The Catholic Mary is her cousin once removed and, through her lineage, has a claim on the English throne, posing a dire threat to Protestantism. But Elizabeth, who has kept her under lock and key for 18 years, hesitates to sign her death warrant. It may be even more dangerous to execute her, given her friends and allies in Scotland and France. The play brilliantly dramatises the intrigue and counter-intrigue at court and the factionalism is portrayed with black sardonic humour by Icke's excellent cast. Both protagonists are prisoners – women alone at the top of "man's world" and at the mercy of deeply unreliable male supporters. Rudi Dharmalingam is superb as Mortimer, a hot-headed pro-Mary Catholic convert and aspiring martyr whose reckless zeal turns chillingly ugly here. By contrast, John Light's Leicester is the quintessential cold, calculating operator who deploys his sex appeal to lure and manipulate both monarchs.

Icke's version glints with contemporary parallels (to Brexit, among other things, as when Elizabeth chafes at following the will of a public she despises) without overdoing it or warping the play. What comes across with great persuasive force is how their backgrounds have shaped these women differently. Williams's Mary – warm, humane, wittily seductive – feels that she has a right to rule because it's been dinned into her during her cossetted youth. For all her finger-clicking imperiousness and sudden icy tirades, Stevenson's Elizabeth is riddled with insecurity on this score. The encounter at Fotheringay, during which the two women are reduced to hissing at each other at ground level snakes, is taken to a disastrous pitch when Mary roars out that Elizabeth is a "bastard queen" and that "this honest country is/the victim of a con". Now condemned to the block, Mary is liberated into a beatific freedom as she prepares for death that the pyrrhic victor, Elizabeth, could never know. I don't want to spoil it by disclosing the unforgettable way Icke's production develops this sense of ironic reversal, except to say that the sequence is played out to an original song by Laura Marling. Throughout, the choreography of the women's symbolic proximity to each other has an enforced rightness and the excellent sound design by Paul Arditti unobtrusively ministers to the tense atmosphere. A remarkably satisfying achievement.

THE ARTS DESK

David Nice

★★★★★

Two rich, full December Saturdays of unsurpassable theatre, four great plays that grow more meaningful with passing time, above all supreme female teamwork to crown 2016. So Juliet Stevenson and Lia Williams playing Schiller's Elizabeth I and Mary Stuart – yes, both roles at different performances – may not be part of an all-woman cast like Harriet Walter, first among equals in the stunning Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy. Yet their collaboration is above all with each other, fusing as one person splitting apart into four distinct personalities. Only a matinee and an evening performance on the same day will give you both permutations, but it's a chance not to be missed.

For the majority who will only catch one performance, the good news is that I can't possibly say which is better. That's tantamount to declaring the real winner Schiller's magnificent, harrowingly nuanced 1800 play in director Robert Icke's adaptation, mostly faithful to the original with some trimming and the occasional updating to suit the overwhelmingly contemporary setting. No doubts here such as many had about his skewing of Aeschylus's Oresteia. While previous productions have conceded that, despite the play's title, the honours are equally divided between

the two women, the line has usually been that sympathy lies with the Catholic heroine, not her duplicitous Protestant opponent. True, Harriet Walter's Elizabeth wrestled the complexity away from Janet McTeer's Mary in the last major London production, but Icke's vision is the first to suggest that more connects these strong women in their struggle against the world than separates them in terms of outward position.

The very opening is gripping: the two women come down the two aisles, stylishly dressed in suits and open-necked shirts, and the character who's to be torn between them, sexy opportunist Leicester (John Light), spins a coin. Screens allow us to see which way it lands: unknown to the two main actors until it settles, at every performance except the second of two on the same day. Saturday's matinee gave us Williams as Mary, Stevenson as Elizabeth; the evening went through the same coin-spinning ritual, but only for show, with no-one choosing, and heads as the foregone conclusion.

Even at the first of the two performances, I could hear inflections personal to each actor in the other's voice, showing how close they had come in this unique synthesis; but only the second highlighted the differences, which are to be treasured rather than used against either performer. Williams is lithe and sensual; her Mary uses the power of seduction – clearly the real-life Queen of Scots's strongest asset from her pampered French youth, though not a necessity at the end of her long imprisonment – to try and score points off the men who hold her fate and the keys to her imprisonment. Williams's Elizabeth is far more kitten-into-tiger with the men of her court; Stevenson's English Queen starts with monumental fixity, but stalks like a caged animal within the ring of male courtiers who in another sense hold her captive. Her Mary sears the soul with delirious poetic celebration of her brief time outdoors at Kenilworth.

The difference, in short, is between a potential Cleopatra (Williams) and the eloquence of Portia (or Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, one of Stevenson's most compelling roles at the RSC over 30 years ago). Stevenson is arguably the finest verse-speaker of the English language – "arguably" meaning I think so – with the widest range, but Williams is different in her soft-spoken beauty and perhaps more real in her extreme rage.

If Stevenson is more theatrical and Williams more actorish, that's not a negative criticism either. The crucial confrontation at Kenilworth Castle which never happened in real life (pictured above with Williams as Elizabeth, Stevenson as Mary), Schiller using dramatic supremacy to seal essential truths, has the women on different sides in each version (symmetries which will only be recognised by anyone who sees both casts). Stevenson's Queen is terrifying in her stony implacability; Williams's allows the vulnerability to show sooner. It's Schiller's genius not to let the action fall off after this point – after the interval, in this production. In both versions, the true-to-life prevarication of Elizabeth over signing Mary's death warrant makes us hold our collective breath, and Mary's dignity and victory in accepting the outcome moves us to tears.

Are there weaknesses? Only in the two women's scenes with some of the men (Schiller in his concern for psychological truth across the board has given everybody something interesting to do or be). Rudi Dharmalingam's young conspirator Mortimer is the weakest link: too staccato and short-winded in some of his speeches to be credible. I was prepared to declare Elizabeth's first scene with Leicester unconvincingly sexed-up by Icke until I saw it played out between Light and Williams, a more supple physical performer than Stevenson. Vincent Franklin's inexorable figure of anti-Catholic vengeance Burleigh (aka Cecil, pictured below on the left with Light, Daniel Rabin as Kent and Stevenson as Elizabeth) was stronger in the evening performance. Utterly consistent, on the other hand, were Sule Rimi's incorruptible jailer Paulet, Alan Williams's father-figure Talbot and the deftly-suggested cameos of tragicomic fall-guy Davison (David Jonsson) and French ambassador Aubespine (huge promise from Alexander Cobb).

Mary's lifelong nurse Hannah Kennedy gets the most dignified, touching of portrayals from Carmen Munroe (no passive servant, this one) and Mary's last scene is enriched both by the rosy-cheeked RADA student handmaidens and by true Scot Eileen Nicholas as Melville. If you don't know the play you wonder whether there really was a break with precedence in a female Catholic priest, and even if you do the uneasy question of how impossible it is now intrudes. But point taken: Icke wants Mary's spiritual victory to be flanked only by women.

The honours of the final goings-beyond are shared by Schiller on the one hand – his genius is to show us Elizabeth in final, total isolation – and Icke along with his production team on the other. Designer doyenne Hildegard Bechtler has found virtue in simplicity until the one design coup, which I won't spoil, culmination to a sound-and-movement wonder which substitutes for the final soliloquy Schiller gives to Leicester. And if the ever-present soundscape, peerlessly executed as ever by Paul Arditti, mildly irritated me on the first viewing, and seemed more admirable on the second, Laura Marling's climactic song is just beautiful; the silent background thereafter is all the more devastating.

So yes, towering performances from the leading ladies, discombobulating to the point of feverish obsession when you see each take on both queens (and when it comes to awards, they'd have to share it), but this is definitely not just star performers' theatre in the usual British style. The whole is so much more than the sum of its parts, and a shattering experience.

SUNDAY TIMES

Patricia Nicol

★★★★

You take your seat not knowing who will play the title part. As the lights dim, two proudly upright middle-aged women, both dressed fashionably in identical black velvet trouser suits and white silk shirts, lead the cast onto the stage. A coin is tossed. "Tails, you lose," a man declares. Mary Stuart (Lia Williams at this performance) crumples physically as she is stripped of her jacket, shoes and jewels, and bundled away roughly. The remaining cast turn to pay obsequious obeisance to the winning other woman, Elizabeth I (Juliet Stevenson).

It may sound gimmicky, but this role reversal decided by fate broadens and illuminates Schiller's play, and the duality of these queen's parts. It also showcases the theatrical cojones of Williams and Stevenson, gutsy enough to learn two lead parts and let the toss of a coin decide which role they must immediately inhabit.

The play is an exploration on power, politics and the fickleness of fate. What a staggering fall Mary Stuart had: from queen of Scotland at six days old to the drawn-out, desperate end of the woman depicted here. Elizabeth, at least in Stevenson's interpretation, is not an unthinking despot but a vexed, empathetic woman whose paranoid understanding of the threat Mary poses is fuelled by her own memories of being the powerless one.

Robert Icke's lithe, vital adaptation, with its talk of self-determining nationhood, terrorism, refugees and religious martyrdom, feels striking in its contemporary relevance. Mary presents herself as a political asylum seeker, challenging the legality of the English parliament's rulings against her — the Supreme Court judges should have a works outing.

There is no letup in the tension, right up to the extraordinarily meditative, cathartic scene in which Mary being prepared for the scaffold is contrasted with Gloriana's construction, as Elizabeth is trussed up in a farthingale, her face painted spectre white.

Icke — as we have seen in his *Red Barn* at the National — is a boldly visual director. Here, he makes some use of screens and soundscape, but his aces are this pair of queens: the triumph of this thrilling show lies in their execution.

CITY AM

Steve Dinneen

★★★★★

The British pop-culture landscape is dominated by kings and queens, from Henry VIII in *Wolf Hall* to Elizabeth II in *The Crown*, so the time is ripe for a revival of this lyrical tale of political intrigue and regicide.

Juliet Stevenson and Lia Williams are Elizabeth I and Mary Stuart, with a coin-toss deciding which Queen each will play. This is more than a gimmick – it represents the tiny sliver of light between these two women, whose circumstances could so easily have been reversed. Identically clad in androgynous white shirts and black trousers, the royal court gathers to watch the coin fall, bowing low to the winner (Stevenson when I attended) and stripping the loser of her jacket and shoes.

Frederick Schiller's play was written in the dying days of the 18th century, but this reworking shows no signs of age. It isn't a history so much as a rollicking political drama (the meeting between the two that lies at its heart is fictitious).

The Machiavellian workings of the royal court are given the rhythmic momentum of *The West Wing*'s "walk-and-talks". It punchily debates the role of women in positions of power, how religion can be used to incite hatred (with lots of talk of "cells" and "networks" of religious extremists, albeit Catholic rather than Islamic), and, most of all, the fickleness of public opinion. Elizabeth's withering "A majority does not prove a thing is right" sounds like the mantra of the so-called

liberal elite, with Stuart's death warrant becoming an analogue for Article 50, a hopeless Catch-22 whereby the Queen is damned if she signs it and damned if she doesn't.

Shiller's prose is marbled with a deliciously dry wit, and lines like "There is no prince in Europe I would less reluctantly surrender to" are laugh-out-loud moments.

But it's the tension that will stay with you; between Elizabeth and her court, between Stuart and her jailers, but mostly between the women themselves. Stevenson is imperious as the virgin Queen, at once forceful and fragile, while Williamson is pixieish in her charms but unwavering in her belief in her divine right to rule. It's a testament to their performances that I can't imagine either in the opposite role; this production is strong enough to justify a second or third outing until you have seen both versions.