

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Mary Queen Of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off

Liz Lochhead

A Royal Lyceum and Dundee Rep Ensemble production

Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh

(2011)

Mary Queen Of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off, despite being written over two decades ago about events that happened over four centuries ago, still stays fresh, funny and relevant to today, though without the play being awkwardly updated. A tale of two queens - well three if you include Mary's secretary Riccio - which is both a very Scottish play and one that doesn't simply side with Mary over Elizabeth or with Scotland over England.

Liz Lochhead sometimes plays fast and loose with the exact details of historical events but the characters owe a lot to history. Mary (Shauna Macdonald) is naive and speaks Scots in a French accent due to her pampered up-bringing at the court of France, while Elizabeth (Emily Winter), who had a far more turbulent childhood and many obstacles to her reaching the throne, is tougher and more determined to hold onto her power.

Macdonald creates a beautifully fragile Queen of Scots while Winter plays Elizabeth like a brazen headgirl at a public school. The costumes really add to the effect with Mary in black velvet making her all the more pale and Elizabeth in gold, very glam, adding to her brash attitude. The doubling of the queens as each other's maids is a great device very simply done by putting hair up or taking it down and also allows the two actors to interact as the two queens themselves never met.

The chorus, Corbie (Ann Louise Ross), adds poetry and humour to the piece with her Scots verse and her coarse take on the action. While Bothwell (Stephen McCole) and Knox (Liam Brennan), as well as being key figures in Mary's life, also represent elements of the Scottish psyche, the macho reveller and the dour puritan. Brennan didn't hold back with Knox and the character is a reminder of religious zealotry that continues to raise its head.

Lewis Hart, a boyish Darnley, Mary's second husband and four years her junior, is suitably pathetic and ends up being used like a pawn by both Elizabeth and then Mary's courtiers. His descent from nice young man corrupted by his new Scottish friends into an aggressive drunk envious of his wife's greater power is well dramatised.

The pace was terrific and the cast get up the energy through a play that is both quite long and contains lots of historical details. More could have been done with Riccio (Kevin Lennon), his skills as a musician for instance were only touched upon, but the use of musician Morna Young was good and really helped to keep the action moving along.

"Mary Queen Of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off" runs until 15th October and then transfers to Dundee Rep from 19th October to 5th November

Reviewer: [Seth Ewin](#)