

FROM THE DIRECTOR

Kings and Queens

To promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion, or empire above any realm, nation, or city, is repugnant to nature; it is an insult to God, a thing most contrary to his revealed will and approved ordinance; and finally, it is the subversion of good order, of all equity and justice.

-John Knox, "The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women" (1558)

*She shall be, to the happiness of England
An aged Princess... But she must die
She must, the Saints must have her; yet a Virgin,
A most unspotted lily shall she pass
To th'ground and all the world shall mourn her.*

-Shakespeare, *Henry VIII* or *All is True*

Marlene: ...*She's a tough lady, Maggie. I'd give her a job... First woman Prime Minister. Terrific. Aces. Right on. You must admit. Certainly gets my vote.*

Joyce: *What's good first woman if it's her? I suppose you'd have liked Hitler if he was a woman. Ms. Hitler. Got a lot done, Hitlerina...*

-Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls* (1980)

Friedrich Schiller's *Mary Stuart* tells of the epic battle between two 16th-century queens, England's Elizabeth I and her cousin Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. It is a treatise on the nature of power and its intersection with gender, and a thrilling case study in Machiavellian politics. Above all, it's riveting drama—character-driven, surprisingly plotted with one of the great set-piece scenes in all of dramatic literature.

Historian Jane Dunn has remarked: "That these two Queens never met was the black hole at the heart of their relationship." Schiller's genius was to fill that hole with a great ol' fashioned knock-down-drag-out brawl. All royal trapping and symbol is stripped bare. The women beneath emerge in all their breathtaking, desperate, proud and shocking complexity, proving again that "based on a true story" can make for the most superlative fiction. History offers the skeleton. Art winds the sinew and births the tissue, blood and guts.

Why reinvent this 300-year-old play about Tudor-era politics? Timing, of course, is everything. Over a year ago, two things occurred to me: 1. The odds seemed to be telling us that the United States was on the verge of electing its first female president 2. I had what I thought was a perfect title, *King Elizabeth*. The juxtaposition of those two simple words seemed to give focus and justify a re-thinking of *Mary Stuart* for the 21st century.

The great strength of the original is Schiller's deft balancing of the two queens—seeming opposites in temperament but somehow mirroring each other's deeper natures, longings and vulnerabilities. In other words, they are human: frail bundles of contradictions fighting to shake off the weight of leadership and assert their independence as individuals. But in the end Schiller's post-enlightenment Romanticism gets the better of him. He could not resist siding emotionally with his title character, Mary, ignoring some

inconvenient historical truths to create a smoother narrative arc from sinner to holy penitent. Her demise in Schiller's original is a kind of martyrdom. The secular earthy queen gets right with God and her past as the demands of power corrupt Elizabeth, her vanquisher. And if Mary is a martyr, then Elizabeth ends the play as what Shakespeare might call an "equivocator," a "hollow crown" atop her head and "barren scepter in her gripe."

Maybe we live in a more cynical age but I found Elizabeth's complexity just as compelling and as entirely moving as Mary's. I hoped we could edge away from Schiller's melodrama and navigate that treacherous ground where human frailty collides with the ruthless demands of power. This seemed especially resonant as our country, in the tempest of a historically divisive election, was tearing itself apart debating candidates as symbols: "Making America great again" versus "breaking the glass ceiling" and the hope of scrapping into the dustbin of history its "million pieces." Meanwhile power itself kept on slithering its way through the whole business, stealthy, quiet, implacable and, whichever way the election would turn out, poised to bite.

Kings and queens, presidents, prime ministers...Does the nature of absolute power (or close enough) change according to gender? Or is it its own kind of evolutionary force, a distinct species adapting endlessly to survive, ultimately neutral to nature or nurture? Wrestling with history to give us some perspective on the present and attempting to exhume the human out from under the symbolic seemed a really good idea a year ago. It is perhaps even a better and more instructive one today. Yes, the events depicted here occurred in the 16th century, but *King Elizabeth* is happening right now. Enjoy. ■

- Tony Estrella