

East Side Players put a new spin on old classic

By Alicia Baird

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Imagine that you're watching the sequel to a film you haven't yet seen. You may very well decide to get up and leave, having no previous knowledge of the storyline that came before. Or, despite your misgivings, you may decide to remain seated, intrigued by the unknown and enticed by powerful acting. This scenario is akin to my experience watching the play *Mary Stuart* during the East Side Players' dress rehearsal. Although embarrassingly unaware of the classic story, I chose the latter approach — to stay and watch the show. I'm glad I did.

Mary Stuart, a play by Friedrich Schiller and directed by Jan Francies, details the struggle between Queen Elizabeth I and her cousin, Mary Queen of Scots. *Mary Stuart*, played brilliantly by Julie Burris, spent years imprisoned in England for the murder of her husband. However, the underlying reason for her imprisonment is Queen Elizabeth's awareness of *Mary Stuart's* claim to the throne of England.

Several requests and agonizing years later, she is finally granted the chance to meet Queen Elizabeth I, played remarkably by Kelly Morrison. Although this meeting never happened historically, the play's encounter is filled with rage, anger, hatred and jealousy, ending in -an argument caused by Mary's unwillingness to submit to Elizabeth's wishes. As a result, what follows is death, remorse and forgiveness.

This adaptation of *Mary Stuart* is full of powerful monologues, performed with conviction and filled with gut-wrenching emotion and passion. The actors immersed themselves in their roles, making it difficult to see where they ended and their characters began.

Francies believes the production of the play and the performance of the actors helped make *Mary Stuart* the best experience she's had in years.

"I've been directing for about 30 years and this has been the best experience ever. I do genuinely believe that it was the power of the play," she said. "I have never had a cast so committed."

From the set design to the music to the excellent lighting and unique costume choices, it's clear that hard work, research and diligence by everyone involved went into making this play work.

"The biggest thing is that I had a vision for this and I was blessed with the best support team ever," Francies said. *Mary Stuart* will make you laugh and it may make you cry, but most strikingly it will make you think. Filled with matters of power and politics, this play will prompt you to dig further into Elizabethan times.

Mary Stuart, which opened last night, will run until March 6 at the Papermill Theatre, 67 Pottery Rd. General admission is \$20 and \$15 for students. For tickets, go to <http://www.totix.ca/> or call 416-425-0917.



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THE END IS NEAR: Julie Burris, as Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland, receives a blessing from Melville, Mary's house steward, played by David Nicholson, during her last confessional, in the East Side Players' production of Mary Stuart.