

Queens play out epic game of thrones

THEATRE

MARY STUART

★★★★★

Sydney Theatre Company, Roslyn Packer Theatre, February 9

Reviewed by **JOYCE MORGAN**

Two queens play out a deadly end game: kill or be killed. Each era reinterprets the high-stakes final moves of two of history's most powerful women, Elizabeth I and Mary Stuart, to reflect its own concerns.

They are back in the spotlight – including in a current Hollywood movie – as issues of women and power are under global scrutiny and as Britain itself seems poised to go over a cliff.

This compelling new adaptation by Kate Mulvany presents the monarchs not as rulers manipulated by cunning male courtiers, but as women of flesh and blood – quite a lot of blood – who make their own choices, for good or ill.

Based on Friedrich Schiller's 200-year-old play, it does away with many of the minor characters and much backstory to speak in a language that is contemporary, salty and accessible.

From the instant the theatre is plunged into blackness, leaving imagination to conjure the worst – heads rolling? torture? – this production seizes attention and never lets go.

Witty, bawdy Catholic Mary (Caroline Brazier) is in remarkably high spirits for a woman detained for 19 years by her Protestant cousin Elizabeth (Helen Thomson). With little more than her docile dog and jailer Paulet for company, she banters with the latter. Even the knowledge she's just been found guilty of treason as a rival claimant to the throne barely dents that.

Across at court, a bewigged and bejewelled Elizabeth (Helen Thomson) rules with a sharp eye



Helen Thomson and Caroline Brazier in STC's *Mary Stuart*.

and sharper tongue, disparaging of the “scoliotic frog” who seeks her hand in marriage. Vain and self-pitying with a nagging toothache, she initially appears more comic cut-out than real figure, as though she has stepped out of *Blackadder*. But by the time she uses that eye to powerful effect to uncover the treachery of the double-dealing nobleman Mortimer (an ardent Fayssal Bazzi), she has become far more than that.

The great set piece of the play is the meeting between the two queens. This version gets around the reality that no such meeting occurred by conceiving it in Elizabeth's vivid alcohol-fuelled imagination following a surreal and hilariously choreographed

The balance between personal and political shifts constantly until a line is crossed.

masqued ball, part courtly dance, part *Gangnam Style*.

And what a meeting it is as the two frenemies share wine, confidences and eye-watering invective as Mary heaps scorn on the memory of Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn. The balance between personal and political shifts constantly until a line is crossed.

In the aftermath, as Elizabeth sits dishevelled and blood-spattered, the mask of regal power is vanished. Thomson gives a heart-stopping speech, an anguished cry, and signs her rival's death warrant.

But her own indecision about what to do with the document ultimately hands power to the male world. For while this feminist version removes from Leicester (Andrew McFarlane) and other courtiers their role in orchestrating events, it does not take away the reality that the queens exist in a political and religious world created by men and for the benefit of men. It is a world without room for two powerful women.

These are towering performances by Caroline Brazier as Mary and

Helen Thomson as Elizabeth. Incisively directed by Lee Lewis, the production gives equal weight to both and avoids coming down firmly on “martyred” Mary's side.

A fine supporting cast includes Peter Carroll's quivery Shrewsbury, Tony Cugin's brutal Burleigh, Simon Burke's garrulous Paulet.

Mel Page costumes the couriers in dark contemporary suits combined with white Elizabethan ruffs, saving Elizabethan excess for Gloriana's farthingales.

Elizabeth Gadsby's austere steel-grey set, with high lattice windows, evokes prison and palace. They are symbolically one and the same in this richly satisfying production as two women at times reluctantly battle out a deadly game of thrones.