



Maria Stuarda: Synopsis

ACT I

1567 In the palace of Westminster:

The Queen of England, Elisabetta, contemplates a recent marriage proposal from the King of France, a proposal she is considering for political gain. However, Elisabetta is secretly in love with Roberto, the Earl of Leicester.

Elisabetta suspects that he is in love with her political prisoner, Maria Stuarda, Queen of Scotland. Elisabetta tests his feelings when she summons Roberto to deliver a ring to the King of France as an acceptance of his proposal. Roberto responds indifferently with a simple, "I obey you," confirming Elisabetta's suspicions.

Roberto receives a letter from Maria in which she expresses her wish to meet with Elisabetta in hopes of reconciliation. Roberto delivers the letter to Elisabetta and pleads for her to accept Maria's request. Elisabetta reluctantly agrees to meet her rival.

ACT II

The grounds at Fotheringhay

Maria, accompanied by her nurse Anna, walks around the grounds recalling the happy days of her youth. The horns sound the approach of Elisabetta. In fear, Maria regrets her request of a meeting but Roberto arrives before the rest of the hunt and convinces her to stay.

Elisabetta arrives with Lord Guglielmo Cecil who leads the rally for Maria's execution. Maria takes Roberto's advice and kneels before Elisabetta, in submission, asking for forgiveness. Elisabetta responds with mixed feelings: on one hand rejecting Cecil's urging for Maria's head and on the other hand raging with anger at Roberto for coming to her rival's defense.

After receiving an earful of insults from Elisabetta, Maria accuses her of being an illegitimate child and therefore an imposter to the throne. This final insult outrages Elisabetta who tells Maria to prepare for execution.

ACT III

In her apartments in Westminster, Elisabetta agonizes and hesitates to sign the death warrant in fear that this decision will damage her reputation. Cecil tries to convince her that her peace and the safety of the throne depend on Maria's death. Roberto's entrance arouses intense feelings of jealousy in Elisabetta and she quickly signs the death warrant and maliciously orders Roberto to witness the execution.

Giorgio Talbot and Cecil arrive at Maria's quarters at the castle at Fotheringhay with the sorrowful news. Cecil tells her that she has been condemned to death. Maria confesses her sins to Talbot.

Maria approaches the block in the presence of Roberto, Talbot, Cecil and anguished supporters. She extends her love to Roberto and pleads with God to have mercy on Elisabetta and protect England. At the sound of the third cannon Maria walks toward the executioner.



*Majella Cullagh in the title role of Maria Stuarda (Dallas Opera, 2007).
Photo: Karen Almond*