

RICHARD BONYNGE

CONDUCTOR

THE STAGE

Roberto Devereux

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Opera Holland Park opens its annual summer operation with a rare production of one of Donizetti's major works. The plot details the rocky course of Elizabeth I's infatuation with Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex, which reached its historical conclusion with his execution in 1601. In Donizetti's bel canto masterpiece, Elizabeth's rival for Essex's affections is Sara, Duchess of Nottingham, whose husband, the Duke, ensures that Essex is for the chop.

Donizetti fleshes out the plot's tensions with music that itself builds to a great final act. Designer Peter McKintosh has the benefit of a fragment of the original, near-contemporary Holland House to base his set upon. Costumes are period and glamorous. Director Lindsay Posner recreates a credible Elizabethan court before our eyes but focuses attention on the principals.

Under leading bel canto expert Richard Bonyng, the score crackles throughout. Julian Hubbard's vocally lightweight Duke needs more experience, but is along the right lines. Yvonne Howard charts the predicament of Sara with skill and security. Leonardo Capalbo cuts a dashing figure as Essex, rising to a moving prison scene. Leading the show is Majella Cullagh, a comprehensively fine Elizabeth, who conquers each and every flamboyant difficulty in the role and gives a riveting interpretation of the pressures that weigh upon a queen trying to balance political realities with her inner feelings and a jealous nature. The result is an outstanding evening and a fine beginning to London's main summer opera season.

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