

RICHARD BONYNGE

CONDUCTOR

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Roberto Devereux at Holland Park, W8

Neil Fisher

You will find French, German and Czech repertoire in Opera Holland Park's ambitious new season, but don't let that obscure the real passions of the company's bullish management. Juicy Italian opera is their true red meat and this season opener, one of Donizetti's four Tudor romps, is particularly raw stuff. "The axe already threatens your loathsome head!" is a choice line, spat out by Elizabeth I to her fickle and doomed lover, Roberto Devereux, Earl of Essex.

The trick, as in all those bel canto dramas, is marrying that soap opera-grade bitchiness with the elegance of Donizetti's sung line. And it's to OHP's considerable credit to have assembled a team who can do just that. Heading the pack, Majella Cullagh's Elizabeth sings with bite and venom, yet never so venomously as to obscure the parched beauty of the Queen's increasingly self-destructive edicts. Leonardo Capalbo's Devereux (*pictured, with Cullagh*) is smaller-scale, but stylishly delivered, and Yvonne Howard's Sara, Duchess of Nottingham — his new squeeze — polished and affecting. Only Julian Hubbard's Nottingham seems too high a hurdle for a young and hard-working baritone. **Conducting, Richard Bonyng shows his decades of experience in his authoritative but understated support for his singers, and a well-crafted blend in the ensemble.**

Yet put this lot in the tights of Tudor Costume Central at your peril: starchy ruffs can breed starchy performances. And, sure enough, Lindsay Posner's production — for all its handsome use of Holland Park Theatre's neoclassical loggia — is worse than weak.

It's odd to find a singer-actress such as Cullagh so muted, but it takes until the final scene for her to show anything like the dramatic fire contained in her singing. And when she does, casting off her red locks and throwing around her sceptre in rage at the loss of that loathsome head, you can't help but think more of Miranda Richardson's Queenie than Bette Davis's Gloriana: the build-up has been so lacking, the opera's confrontations so meekly manoeuvred, that it's just a hissy fit, not a tragic denouement. Elsewhere, there's no chemistry between Sara and Devereux; no opportunity given to Hubbard to express his cuckolded fury. Adam Cooper's choreography, meanwhile, was something of a mystery. The credit is in the programme, but the dancing seems to have gone missing in rehearsal.

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