

# Director's Note

We have in the 21st century become acclimatized to a specific view of Queen Elizabeth I through film and television, not to mention countless biographies. The consensus is of a remarkable woman who advocated religious tolerance yet was able to guarantee the success of her Protestant faith as the official church in England. She was a woman who bravely survived the vagaries and dangers of her early life to become a major player on the world stage. Her career saw the arts in England blossom as never before. She was renowned and loved for putting her country before her personal happiness and died having presided over a Golden Age.

This Anglocentric view would have been utterly incomprehensible to an Italian of Gaetano Donizetti's time and background: Elizabeth would have been perceived, at best, as an equivocal character. She had kicked Catholicism out of England and was, therefore, a heretic. In the eyes of Catholics, she was illegitimate, as her father Henry VIII had never obtained an annulment from the Pope to end his first marriage to marry his second wife (Elizabeth's mother), Anne Boleyn. Even in her own day, Elizabeth was much mocked in England and across Europe for her virgin status. Sixteenth-century attitudes saw a woman who would not be guided by her husband as unnatural and highly suspect. In fact, there was something positively ungodly about a woman exercising power without a husband's restraint, and the same could be said of early 19th-century attitudes towards women.

Elizabeth's flirtations with Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, and his stepson Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex (among others) opened her to the charge of wantonness. She became the almost comic stereotype of the aging woman: rouged, powdered, and bewigged to hold back the ravages of time; a figure of ridicule, as well as of tragedy. Her death was a cause for rejoicing throughout Catholic Europe.

When I was asked to direct Donizetti's Tudor trilogy of *Anna Bolena*, *Maria Stuarda*, and *Roberto Devereux*, I was attracted by the possibility of creating a chronicle of the life of Elizabeth along the lines of Shakespeare's history cycles. Collectively, they paint a much more complete—if historically inaccurate—portrait. Donizetti's skill in creating a consistent character over the course of the second and third operas is

considerable. The composer creates a character that is, by turns, witty and willful, commanding and vulnerable, politically astute and personally unsure, a woman in charge of the destiny of her country but incapable of ruling her own heart.

Intriguingly, by presenting her loves in both *Maria Stuarda* and *Roberto Devereux* as the two Roberts (Dudley, Earl of Leicester and his stepson Devereux, Earl of Essex), Donizetti creates the idea of a woman trying to recapture the earlier magic of her love for the first Robert with the much less worthy second. By depicting the collapse of the marriage of Elizabeth's parents in *Anna Bolena* to such devastating effect, he also provides a possible motive for Elizabeth's decision never to consent to marriage.

We have set these operas in one performing space, namely the Globe Theatre. The operas mirror the Shakespearean idea of the monarch being like an actor on a stage, each having to perform before an audience and each having both public and private personas. By the end of the Elizabethan era, theater was performed indoors as well as outdoors, with the masque and its spectacular effects beginning to supersede purely textual theater. We have tried to create a narrative between the factual and the fictional, between the 16th and 19th centuries, with the chorus acting as spectators to history. 🌸

*Below: Queen Elizabeth I Being Carried in Procession (Eliza Triumphans), c. 1601, oil on canvas by Robert Peake (fl. 1580–1626).*

*Background: A view from the stage of the reconstructed Globe Theatre.*

