

CRITIC'S PICK

Mary Said What She Said' Review: A Hypnotic Huppert

In this Robert Wilson production, Isabelle Huppert is everywhere onstage, all at once, reciting a nonstop script that may well touch on everything.



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Mary Said What She Said NYT Critic's Pick

Isabelle Huppert stands upstage center, demurely holding her hands in front of her waist, and starts to speak. She is motionless and in silhouette so we don't see her mouth, creating a sense of dislocation as to where the words we hear are actually coming from. And as we quickly discover, the Robert Wilson production "Mary Said What She Said" interpolates live and recorded lines.

But wait: After a few minutes, Huppert is standing a little closer to the audience. Moments later she is almost downstage. The entire time I could have sworn she wasn't moving. How did she pull off that sleight of hand — or feet?

Huppert is playing Mary Stuart and wearing a 16th-century-style dress, which means she can take tiny steps without the audience seeing them, as if she were on casters. This creates the illusion of stillness in motion, or perhaps freeze-

framed movement — either way a neat encapsulation of Wilson’s art as a theater maker — that contrasts with the simultaneous verbal stream flowing in an almost uninterrupted manner over the course of this 90-minute monologue. (The show is in French with subtitles.)

Written by Darryl Pinckney, who drew from the Queen of Scots’s letters, “Mary Said What She Said,” which is at NYU Skirball through Sunday, is inconceivable without Huppert, and she is the reason to see it.

She gives a performance of rarefied virtuosity and rigor as she seemingly effortlessly handles the precise blocking and light and audio cues, the swings between immobility and fastidiously choreographed movement, the abrupt changes in tempo and pitch — and of course the dense, nonlinear text full of echoing repetitions, which must be a beast to memorize. Even when she’s not moving or speaking, she always needs to be committed to the moment. It is a marvel to behold.

This is Huppert’s third collaboration with Wilson, after “Orlando” (1993) and “Quartett” (seen at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2009), so at least she knows his exacting M.O. She was also familiar with the character, having played her in Schiller’s “Mary Stuart” at the National Theater in London in 1996.

Pinckney’s play, however, is a very different proposition from that classic, dramatic confrontation with Queen Elizabeth I, the rival who had Mary beheaded. Here, Mary is alone with her swirling thoughts as her execution nears; the brilliant costume by Jacques Reynaud features a high collar that creates the optical illusion of a severed head, floating above the torso.

With auburn hair pulled back tightly to frame a face painted white and a mouth like a searing slash of red, Huppert’s Mary stares down death (uncannily, the actress appears to never blink) as past and present mix in chaotic mental fragments that often reoccur obsessively. She keeps bringing up, for example, her four ladies in waiting (“even you, miserable Mary Fleming”) who, in an additional, historically accurate repetition, were all named Mary. We can’t say

we weren't warned of this obsessiveness: Before the show begins, a short video of a small dog chasing its tail plays on repeat inside a small frame in the middle of the red curtain obscuring the stage.

Pinckney has been collaborating with Wilson as a writer and as a dramaturg since the late 1980s (often on monologues and adaptations from literary texts), and he has tailor-made a cryptic script that is hypnotic and maddening. Several times I had no idea what Mary was jabbering on about, yet I was never bored.

Partly it was because I was locked inside the show's hermetic world by the elevated production values, which include Wilson's set and lighting, and Nick Sagar's sound design. (I was a little less enthralled by the original score, by the popular Italian neoclassical artist Ludovico Einaudi, but it is not distractingly objectionable.)

Mostly, of course, the show exerts a grip because of the charismatic Huppert, the rare actress who can straddle not just film and theater, but also — more important — the mainstream (Florian Zeller's "The Mother" at the Atlantic Theater) and the extreme (a recent Romeo Castellucci production of "Bérénice" that baffled even hardened French audiences).

And she shows no signs of slowing down despite being about to turn 72: On Monday, she could be taking a day off after her string of "Mary" performances at Skirball, but instead she is heading uptown to read short stories by Guy de

Maupassant at L'Alliance New York. I'll have what she's having.

Mary Said What She Said

Through March 2 at NYU Skirball, Manhattan; nyuskirball.org. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes.

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