

SYNOPSIS

By Sheridan Harvey

Place: London

Time: 1601, late in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I

ACT 1

Westminster Hall

When Queen Elizabeth's ladies find Sara, Duchess of Nottingham, weeping, Sara pretends that it is because she is reading a sad book. In truth, her pain is because she is in love with Devereux, Earl of Essex, her husband's best friend and Queen Elizabeth's favorite ("All'afflitto è dolce il pianto" / "Crying is sweet to the afflicted"). The Queen enters and tells Sara that her husband has persuaded Elizabeth to meet with Devereux. She then confides that she is more concerned that the Earl loves another woman than that he rebelled. She will pardon him if he still loves her. ("L'amor suo mi fe' beata" / "His love was a blessing to me").

Cecil and Raleigh report that the Council has charged Essex with treason. Elizabeth insists she needs more proof of his guilt. If the Earl still loves her, he is innocent to her ("Ah! ritorna qual ti spero... Vieni, vieni, t'affretta" / "Ah, may you return as I hope you to be... Come, hasten"). The Earl enters and Elizabeth dismisses the courtiers. She reminds Devereux that she gave him a ring as a pledge for his safety, but she remains suspicious that he loves another. She sings of her earlier love for him ("Un tenero core" / "A tender heart"). Devereux again offers her his sword arm, but she wants his heart. She grows increasingly irate when he refuses to admit he loves another ("Un lampo, un lampo, orribile" / "A flash, a terrible flash of lightning"), while he says in an aside that the jewels of the throne hold no allure ("Nascondi, frena i palpiti" / "Hide and check your wild beating").

On the Queen's departure, Nottingham arrives promising to try to save Devereux, while also grieving that his wife Sara seems so sad ("Forse in quel cor sensibile" / "Perhaps in that sensitive heart"). Cecil summons Nottingham to the Council chamber.

Nottingham's apartments

Devereux appears and berates Sara for marrying Nottingham, while he, Devereux, was in Ireland. She explains that the Queen compelled her and that she is miserable. He tears off the ring the Queen gave him, and Sara gives him a blue scarf as proof of her affection. They sing of their misery ("Dacche tornasti, ahi misera" / "Since you returned, ah, miserable me"), and Sara begs him to flee. (Duet: "Ah! questo addio fatale, estremo" / "Ah! this farewell, fatal and final").

ACT 2

Westminster Hall

Lords and ladies discuss the fate of the unfortunate Earl. Cecil enters to tell Elizabeth that despite Nottingham's defense, the Earl was sentenced to death. Raleigh, left alone with the Queen, hands her the blue scarf that he found next to Devereux's heart and had to tear from him. In anguish, Nottingham arrives with the death warrant for the Queen's signature and again pleads for his friend's life. Devereux is brought in and the Queen bitterly accuses him of betrayal, holding out the blue scarf (Trio: "Mi sovrasta il fato estremo" / "My ultimate fate hangs suspended above me"). Nottingham recognizes his wife's scarf and in a rage calls for his sword so he can kill Devereux ("Scellerato... Malvagio" / "Scoundrel... Criminal"). Devereux trembles in fear for Sara. The Queen, in a jealous fury, signs the death warrant (Trio: "Va, la morte sul capo ti pende" / "Go, death hangs over your head").

ACT 3

Sara's apartment

A letter from Devereux is brought to Sara asking her to deliver his ring to the Queen; he is hoping Elizabeth will honor her promise to save his life if she receives it. Before she goes to the Queen, her furious husband arrives and insists on reading Devereux's letter. Sara begs to be allowed to take the ring to the Queen, but her husband locks her up, exclaiming that his honor has been wounded by his wife and his friend and now he wants blood (Duet: "Non sai che un nume vindice" / "Don't you know betrayed husbands").

The Tower of London

In his cell, Devereux awaits word that the Queen has the ring. He wants to live to save Sara's reputation and then he will let Nottingham kill him. Soldiers arrive to take him to his execution. Realizing that the ring has not reached the Queen, he begs God and the angels for pity for Sara ("Come uno spirito angelico... Bagnato il sen di lagrime" / "Like an angelic spirit... With my breast bathed in tears"). Cecil arrives to lead him to his execution.

Westminster Hall

The Queen wonders why Sara is not present to comfort her and has sent Raleigh to get her. She still plans to pardon Devereux as soon as the ring arrives ("Vivi, ingrato" / "Live, ungrateful man"). Released by Raleigh, a distraught Sara rushes in with the ring revealing that she is the Queen's rival. Elizabeth is still willing to save the Earl's life. As she sends a message to stop the execution, a cannon shot is heard announcing his death. Nottingham bursts in, joyful that his betrayer is dead, and he admits that he kept his wife from delivering the ring in time ("Blood I wanted, and blood I got").

Elizabeth blames Devereux's death on the Nottinghams ("Quel sangue versato" / "That spilled blood"), and in her grief, visualizes the executioner's axe and the bloody block and wishes only to be freed from her rule, declaring that James of Scotland should become king. She kisses the ring.