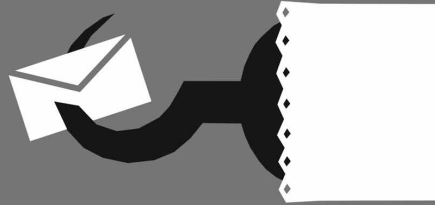


DRAMA QUEENS



By Miriam Weisfeld

Jason Grote's plays, which include *1001* and *This Storm is What We Call Progress*, draw inspiration everywhere from the Arabian Nights to the Kabbalah. His work often manipulates time and space, zigzagging playfully from modern Manhattan to the ancient Middle East, from the mundane to the magical. Grote's imagination resists realism so tenaciously, in fact, that a friend recently dared him to write an old-fashioned

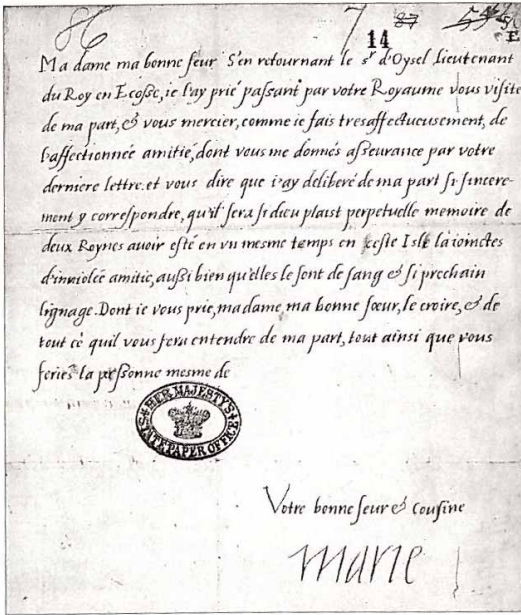
"kitchen-sink family drama."

In his characteristically idiosyncratic style, Grote jump-started his "realistic" American play with a shot of German Romanticism.

In 1800 Friedrich Schiller completed *MARIA STUART*, a play about the 16th century Queen of Scotland, Mary Stuart ("Maria" in German). Schiller's Romantic dramatization explores the



Mary Stuart c. 1560.



A letter written by Mary Stuart in 1554.

rivalry between Mary and her cousin, England's Queen Elizabeth I – both of whom laid claim to the English throne following the death of Henry VIII. For MARIA/STUART, Grote borrowed both Schiller's theme of warring women and his selective departures from realism to create an American family drama on a larger-than-life scale.

The rivalry of Queens Elizabeth and Mary represented the bloody conflict between Protestant England and the Catholic powers of Scotland and

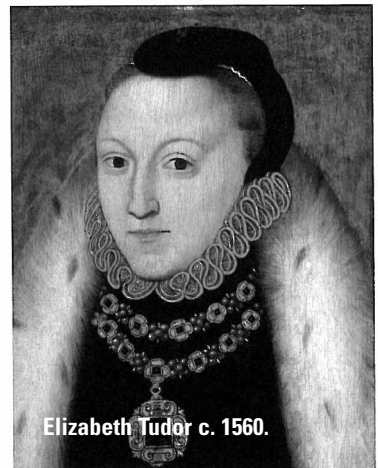
France. Before his death, King Henry VIII willed that, should his own marriages produce no legitimate heir, the English crown would pass to the descendants of his sister, Queen Margaret of Scotland. Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn did in fact produce a child: Elizabeth, born in 1533. But the Catholic powers of Europe objected. Before he had married Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII had divorced his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, under Protestant law. The Catholic Church, which refused to recognize divorce, considered Elizabeth illegitimate. Therefore her sixteen-year-old cousin Mary, who had just married the French Dauphin, was in line to claim the thrones of England, Scotland, and France.

Elizabeth worried that her life and England's peace would never be safe while Mary was alive to pose a threat. The ensuing web of battles, abductions, and assassinations ultimately found Mary imprisoned in England and framed for a plot to kill her rival. After three months of torturous deliberations, Elizabeth signed a death warrant for Mary based on a charge that she knew was false. Mary was beheaded in 1587 at age 44; Elizabeth lived to age 70, but reportedly remained haunted by her cousin's fate.

The two cousins shared ancestors, suitors, and ambitions, yet all of their communications occurred through letters and proxies. Although Elizabeth imprisoned Mary on English soil for some eighteen years, the two women never met in person. In Schiller's play, as in reality, an incriminating letter in French helped Elizabeth justify the innocent Mary's execution. But Schiller's Romantic play invents a harrowing scene which never occurred in life: a face-to-face encounter before one Queen ordered the beheading of the other. The scene reveals the enormous pride and insecurities both women shared. Although Mary is executed, Schiller portrays her as a redeemed martyr whose dignity haunts Elizabeth indefinitely. Elizabeth sacrifices Mary to ensure her own immediate security, but she cannot free herself of her family's sinister legacy.

In both the royal family as imagined by Schiller and the American family invented by Grote, the pride and paranoia of powerful women wreak havoc between their homes. Meanwhile, real threats spread silently like a cancer to devour innocent members of each generation. Ominous letters and shameful secrets accumulate for years, and the women find themselves haunted by threats both real and imagined. They ultimately sacrifice members of their own families in order to maintain the fragile equilibrium of their realms.

Jason Grote began *MARIA/STUART* by outlining the structure of Schiller's play and grafting it onto his own. In the first act of Grote's play, an event in each scene—a secret letter revealed, an oath of loyalty pledged—corresponds to a scene from Schiller. Eventually, actual text from Schiller's play emerges to reveal an unexpected dimension of Grote's. Although Grote has created a new cast of characters from contemporary America, an unnatural wind from the past haunts them with the dramatic force of Schiller's heroines. By transplanting the folly of the Queens of England and Scotland to suburban American kitchens, Grote ignites a conflict that bursts the seams of realism and redefines the "family drama."



Elizabeth Tudor c. 1560.