



ELIZABETH 1 - THE QUEEN'S CHAMBERS



by Michele Breeze

So what is it about "Good Queen Bess" or to be precise, Elizabeth 1, that draws countless generations into her persona and legend? Was she actually a Virgin? Did she really possess the guile to manipulate and control the vast waves of male testosterone that was hovering over her every move? She wasn't a raving beauty yet she seemed to inspire a desire to win her favour from men of all ages and titles throughout her lifetime. Was she really that



upset when she "unwittingly" signed Mary, Queen of Scots death warrant, or was she actually relieved to be rid of her troublesome relation? Did she actually prefer the plays of Marlow to those of Shakespeare? So many imponderable questions yet history would have us believe she was indeed, one of the greatest Monarchs to rule over the British Isles. One thing for certain, she was a "lucky" Queen.

Imprisoned in the Tower in her youth by her half - sister Queen Mary, on suspicion of supporting the cause of Protestant rebels against the Catholics yet, upon Mary's death, Elizabeth became Queen and thus began an amazing journey into the unknown for the daughter of the luckless Anne Boleyn and Henry V111. She did indeed establish the English

Protestant Church which later evolved into the Church of England as we know it today. She survived countless plots and assassination attempts and in 1558, against all the odds, achieved what some historians regard as the greatest victory in British history. The Spanish Armada was en - route from Spain to rendezvous with a Spanish land Army under the command of the Duke of Parma. Spain intended to embark these forces onto the great Galleons and invade England from its South Eastern Counties. Luck and the tremendous

resolve, bravery and experience of the outnumbered English Sea Captains was, in the end, to win the day. It wasn't so much a decisive victory, more a combination of bad Spanish decisions, misfortune, the weather and the brilliant stroke of sending British "Fire ships" into a tightly packed Spanish Fleet. This caused havoc among the unfortunate Spaniards and the Armada finally missed its target and

sailed raggedly off into the North East, a beaten force. Some returned to Spain, many to Davy Jones's locker. This effectively stopped any plans King Phillip 11 of Spain had to invade England and thus Elizabeth as the Queen, was triumphant in all her Majesty and was heralded as the Nation's saviour. Her 'Tilbury' speech to the assembled army was indeed momentous in it's sentiment and execution.

" My loving people, we have been persuaded by some that are careful of our safety, to take heed how we commit our self to armed multitudes for fear of treachery; but I assure you, I do not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people....I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a King of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any Prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm".

As I create and write my own One Woman Musical Dramas, the subject of this mighty Monarch was a must for me to portray. Yes, she's been done to death by many famous actresses in plays, television series and blockbuster films. But as far as I am aware, she has never been featured in a solo musical / dramatic performance. Having previously written and played Boudicca in this format, I decided about four years ago to give it my best efforts and create a show based on Elizabeth 1. So where does one start? Unlike Boudicca, the main difficulties are the on-stage costume changes. Whereas Boudicca, whilst not easy, was fairly straightforward once I had worked out a system, Elizabeth was proving to be an untamed beast, mainly due to the size and physical presence of the Costumes. I eventually chose to call the show 'The Queen's Chambers' and write it around Elizabeth's reflection on her past and set not long before her death. This meant I had to create a series of character changes from young to old and perform it all in the clear view of the audience. You can see by some of the photographs that I was fairly successful in achieving this aim. However, her story was much more difficult to define. For a start there was so much of it. She reigned for forty five years and it was predominantly her political manoeuvring (at which she was extraordinarily adept) that was her greatest asset throughout her entire reign and especially when you consider that in the 16th century, a woman's only purpose seemed to be to give birth to men's children! However her personal life and compassion, mixed with duty and honour, are parts of her life that I was most interested in and it is along these lines that I have written this show. At first I was concerned that there may be a lack of workable material, but the more I looked, the more I've found. Here was a woman (normally portrayed as hard) who absolutely overflowed with the ability to love, and had a desperate need to be loved. Even in the history books written by political annalists, the passion is unmistakable, when this Matriarch, fiercely protecting the Church, the Crown and her People, clashes emotionally with a woman's passionate love, forcing lonely decisions which were inevitably racked with guilt. I had also to take into account that I am performing a 'One Woman Show' so it is very



Michele Breeze as Elizabeth 1

important to be completely aware that I could easily bore the audience to death! Fortunately for me, I have the boredom level of a gnat and Paul Brett who writes all the music, gets bored within minuets, so he edits everything I do to stop me rambling on.

strange that his last letter to her was more "matter of fact" than affectionate. She did have a disastrous attraction for Dudley's step son Robert Devereux, the 2nd Earl of Essex. After leading a mini, yet unsuccessful revolt against the Crown, she finally ordered his execution, much to her self dismay.



I am fairly happy with progress to date and am trying to cover all the main aspects of her character and achievements. Her relationship with Francis Walsingham appears to have proved successful in many ways. He was her 'Spy Master', noted these days as the father of espionage. Walsingham set up a network of spies across the country to protect the Queen and the interests of the Realm. He was also adept at using British Maritime

She is said to have preferred the plays of Marlowe to those of Shakespeare, loved dancing and music and was prone to bawdy language. Whilst condemning her Privateers such as Francis Drake as Pirates, she secretly admired him and supported his actions. For Drake's part, he brought much plunder to her coffers which, in no small part, financed the building of her Royal Navy. The Spanish called Drake 'El Draque' which translated means 'The Dragon'. They feared him because he plundered so many of their bullion ships carrying gold from the New World to Spain. Elizabeth publicly condemned such actions as she wished to remain on good terms with Spain, but there is no doubt she profited from such treasures that Drake acquired. Drake was indeed an invaluable asset to the Crown in more ways than providing stolen wealth. In one deed of daring bravado, Drake attacked Cadiz and sank the Spanish Fleet there. This action became known as 'The Singeing of the King's Beard'. It also delayed the Armada's plans for



prowwess by innovating new ideas in exploration and colonisation. One of her main suitors, Sir Robert Dudley, The Earl of Leicester is also a prominent influence in her life. Although he fell out of favour, she remained fond of this long term suitor, friend and perhaps lover? It was

a year, buying valuable time for Britain to build more ships. Returning to the costumes, any bit of old scrap can give me an idea for an outfit. The more outrageous the better and, in particular, I love decorating the costumes using all manner of beads, jewels and studs. I make everything with a view to decorating it, yet I have no idea how it will turn out until it is finished and it's only finished when I can hardly stand up when wearing it! The main reason I wanted to do all the image and costume changes on stage was because when I performed 'Boudicca', everyone remarked on how interesting they found the transition from Queen to Warrior, so with 'Elizabeth' I took this concept all the way and set the show in her private chamber, creating thirteen costume changes plus wigs and make up. It's definitely not a simple stroll in the park, but the art is in making it look like it is, or better still, if the audience hardly notice you're doing it even though it's right in front of their eyes. .

'Good Queen Bess' will soon take to the Theatre Stage again in yet another guise and format. I hope my long and often frustrating efforts to put the jigsaw puzzle together will be acceptable to those who visit a performance and that on the night; Liz 1 doesn't get her rather large 'knickers in a twist!'



Michele with some of her amazing self made costumes