

Elizabeth I role poses challenges

Jean Topham shaved her head and others assumed the worst

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Jean Topham portrays Queen Elizabeth I in the play Elizabeth Rex.

Photograph by: David Lowes, Art Studio 21

Jean Topham tells neighbours she's not ill — she's merely preparing to play Queen Elizabeth I. For the lead role in Timothy Findley's play, *Elizabeth Rex*, Topham had her head shaved bald (Queen Elizabeth I lost most of her hair after suffering smallpox). When in public, the actor wears a scarf. It's a fashion choice that has led some to assume the worst.

"I'm getting that sort of look. And I say to my neighbours, 'I haven't had chemo,' " Topham said with a smile.

First performed in 2000 at the Stratford Festival, *Elizabeth Rex* is being remounted by the Victoria Theatre Guild at Langham Court Theatre. The drama tells of an acting troupe, The Lord Chamberlain's Men, who perform for Queen Elizabeth in 1601. The queen has attended in order to take her mind off the imminent execution of her lover, the Earl of Essex. With *Elizabeth Rex*, the late Findley (an acclaimed Canadian writer best known for such novels as *The Wars*) created an intricate, multilayered play. Topham saw the original Stratford

production, which starred Diane D'Aquila as the Queen and Brent Carver as a Shakespearean actor who plays female roles.

At the time, Topham was especially impressed by the demands of D'Aquila's ambitious part. "I thought, wow, that woman has courage. Never in my wildest imaginings did I conceive I'd ever do a role like that. It's the role of a lifetime."

In May, she successfully auditioned for director Judy Treloar. Topham confesses her jubilation was followed by a bad case of the nerves. This part is her biggest and most challenging theatre assignment to date.

"For me, there was some terror that set in as to whether you can actually do the role," she said. Treloar says it was Topham's English accent and her "imperious" bearing that made her perfect to play the queen. The director added: "She's totally consumed. I think you have to through yourself right into this — and she has."

Although a late bloomer (she began acting regularly at age 45), Topham is today an experienced actor who's performed many community theatre productions. Yet after one particularly exhausting rehearsal for Elizabeth Rex, she felt she needed advice. So Topham contacted her daughter, Sara Topham, an actress who made her Broadway debut this year and performs regularly at the Stratford Festival.

Sara suggested her mother stop trying to hard to act regal. The best approach, advised the daughter, is to relax and to imagine it's the other characters who give the queen her status.

And this worked.

"It was like somebody had taken the shackles off," Jean Topham said.

She also undertook a ritual she carries out for all of her acting roles. Topham created a paper collage about the play (and specifically her role) using cut-out images. One in particular spoke to her — a photo of a young girl holding her breath underwater. For Topham, this symbolized Queen Elizabeth's plight, in particular, her struggle to survive as a female ruler in a man's world.

It makes sense that Topham turned to collage a part of her artistic process; after all, she's a paper person. She is, by training, an expert paper conservator. Her accomplishments include restoring the letters of composer Felix Mendelssohn, the diary of British prime minister John Russell and artworks by Emily Carr.

Currently, Topham is conserving a giant survey map of Victoria, called the Tiedemann Plan, for the Land Title and Survey Authority of British Columbia.

Topham will never forget restoring 14 of Carr's sketchbooks (each containing 40 drawings) as well her watercolour and oil-on-paper paintings. During this painstaking process, she felt intimately connected with the artist, almost as if she was "channelling her."

She said she's experienced a similar feeling immersing herself deeply into the role of Queen Elizabeth I.

"I feel there's some connection, somewhere, between me and this woman."

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