Friedrich Schiller was born on November 10, 1759 in the duchy of Württemberg (modern day Germany) to an officer of the military and an innkeeper’s daughter. When Schiller reached the age of 13, he enrolled in the Duke’s private military school. The future playwright began to study law, but switched to medicine after two years. Despite his military and medical education, his interest in the arts became dominant by 1776, when his poetry appeared in a local publication for the first time.

He finished his earliest play, *The Robbers* — a rousing protest against oppressive and corrupt aristocracy — in 1781. In 1782, a theater in Mannheim produced the premiere of *The Robbers* to wild acclaim. Months later, already at work on his second play, *Fiesco* (1784), Schiller left his military post to see another performance of *The Robbers*, but he was caught and sentenced to prison for dereliction of duty. Infuriated by his imprisonment, he immediately began work on a third play, *Intrigue and Love* (1784), which portrayed his duke as a fool. After escaping prison with the help of a friend, Schiller left the military for good, focusing instead on his writing. He went on to write *Don Carlos* (1787) and the Wallenstein trilogy (1798–99). He penned *Mary Stuart* in 1800, less than a decade after the 1792 publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. During a time when prevailing opinion deemed women’s subjugation to men and their exclusion from the public sphere indisputable matters of natural law, *Mary Stuart*, which embodies these subjects in the rivalry of two powerful women, was condemned as indecent by right-wing critics in London. Schiller’s plays earned acclaim at home and abroad, particularly in England, and in 1802, he was elevated to the nobility, giving him the title Herr Hofrat Friedrich von Schiller. In 1805, as he was writing his last great drama, *Demetrius*, he suddenly took ill. He died at 45, leaving behind a family and dozens of unexplored ideas for future theatrical production.

**Synopsis of Mary Stuart**

*Mary Stuart* probes themes of religious fanaticism and political corruption as it dramatizes the struggle of Mary, Queen of Scots, for her freedom from Queen Elizabeth I. Imprisoned for alleged involvement in a plot to murder Elizabeth, Mary (who holds a Catholic claim to the English throne) awaits the decision of her fate. Will Mary renounce her claim to the throne? Can Elizabeth free Mary without jeopardizing her position? As the plot thickens, the lines drawn between them become blurrier and blurrier as the battle to maintain control and loyalty pushes each queen to startling extremes.
About the Adaptor
Peter Oswald is a well-known English playwright. He was Playwright-in-Residence at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre in London from 1996 to 2005. His other adapted plays include Don Carlos (after another play by Friedrich Schiller), Dona Rosita: The Spinster (after a Spanish play by Federico García Lorca), Shakuntala (after a play by Classical Sanskrit writer Kalidasa), Phaedra (after the play by Racine), The Haunted House (after a play by Roman playwright Plautus), The Ramayana (after an Indian legend), and The Storm (after a play by Plautus). He is also a prolific poet.

Where Do They Rank?

The Sovereign
In Elizabethan England kings and queens were believed to rule by “divine right,” in power with the permission and support of God. Everyone in the realm had to answer to the sovereign.

The Lord High Treasurer
The government department responsible for Britain’s finances and economy is the treasury. The treasury was originally an office of only one man, but later in British history, the single lord high treasurer was replaced by a set of commissioners, to avoid giving one person too much authority.

The Peersage
“Peersage” is the word used to describe the members of the various ranks of nobility below the sovereign. The five levels of the peerage, from top to bottom, are: dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts, and barons.

Dukes
First used in the 1300s by Edward III, the title of duke was still relatively new to Elizabethan England. A duke is entitled to sit in the House of Lords, the upper house of the British parliament (the lower being the House of Commons), and therefore to play a part in the government of the nation.

Earls
Long established in England, the title of earl had ranked at the top of the peerage before dukes were formed. An earl was usually a powerful person with extensive lands and important family connections, and the majority of sovereigns thought it wise to encourage the support of his or her earls.

Secretary of State
During the Middle Ages, the sovereign’s principal secretary was a clerk in charge of confidential regal communication. The position gained a leading role in government when William Cecil and Francis Walsingham became royal executive officers and required a permanent workforce.

Barons
At first, barons were in military or other honorable service to the sovereign. The title later came to refer to the barons who attended the king’s great council or (during Henry III’s reign) were summoned to parliament, so the term came to mean a peer, or lord of parliament.

Art Inventing Life
While most of the characters in Mary Stuart were in fact real historical figures, the following were invented by Schiller to aid the story.

Mortimer
Paulet’s Nephew
Mortimer was created by Schiller as a composite of several real conspirators who plotted to set Mary on the English throne and restore the Catholic faith to England. Few of the plots were ever acted out, and the conspirators were known more for having wild imaginations and ideals than realistic plans. Roberto Ridolfi, Francis Throckmorton, William Parry, and Anthony Babington each invented some kind of scheme to free Mary during her many years in captivity, yet all mostly failed and were eventually executed. Mortimer represents the more idealistic aspects of the plotters who pledged their devotion to Mary, yet lost sight of the possible repercussions of their actions.

O’Kelly
Mortimer’s Friend
O’Kelly, like Mortimer, is a fictional character created by Schiller from historic accounts of comparable conspirators. Those plotting to liberate Mary for the Catholic cause were never able to work alone. A vast network of secret agents was needed to get any plan off the ground. In O’Kelly, Schiller presents one of many cohorts Mortimer would have had to consult in developing and executing his plan to free Mary.

Liberties with History
Probably the most significant invention of Schiller’s is the scene where the two queens meet. In actuality, Mary and Elizabeth never met face to face at all!

The Babington Plot
The Babington Plot was the event that most directly led to Mary’s execution. It was named after the chief conspirator Sir Anthony Babington, a Catholic nobleman. In 1584, Mary’s continued imprisonment made the members of Elizabeth’s Privy Council fearful of an uprising of the Catholic community. In response, they signed a “Bond of Association” which stated that any claimant to the throne who would benefit from a plot against Elizabeth could be put to death, even if the claimant knew nothing of it. In 1586, Babington and some of his friends plotted to rescue Mary. Knowing that killing Elizabeth might be necessary to do so, he sent Mary a coded letter asking for her authority for the assassination. Mary’s response to Babington was intercepted by a double agent who forged a copy of the letter and added a postscript telling Babington to go forward with the assassination. While Mary’s original letter was never recovered, there is evidence to suggest that she implied that Babington should make his own decision and she would give neither her approval nor disapproval on the assassination. Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth’s Secretary of State and spymaster, apprehended the letter and finally had the evidence to put Mary on trial.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
• Where does each character’s loyalty lie in the play? How can you tell? When do these loyalties shift, and how can you tell?
• How are Elizabeth and Mary different? How are they the same? How do they change by the end of the play? What do they gain by the end of the play? What do they lose?
• What historical events would you like to see portrayed on stage? Are there events in your own life that would make a good historical drama? How would you change the facts of your life story in making it into a play? Why would you make those changes?