

Isaac Nathan's *Don John of Austria* - synopsis

It is the time of the Spanish Inquisition. Don John, bastard son of Emperor Charles V, has been brought up since infancy by the emperor's former prime minister, Don Quexada. Now, days after the emperor's abdication, John is about to be admitted to a monastery, in accordance with his father's wishes. The new king, Philip II, disguised as the Count de Santa Fiore, arrives at Quexada's house to see to Don John's removal, but John tells both Quexada and 'the Count' that he is not cut out for a religious life. He yearns for action and was merely feigning piety. Moreover he is in love.

Philip, who also knows something of young love, is sympathetic to John's enthusiasm, and is relieved that at least his more valorous half-brother doesn't covet his kingdom. But the course of Don John's love cannot run smooth. At this time of religious intolerance, his sweetheart, Donna Agnes has a secret: she is a Jew. Don John is prepared to defy the inquisition's strictures against Jews to marry her, and believes he has even won the consent of the Count de Santa Fiore, but lo and behold, what a shock when the 'Count' discovers that the object of Don John's attention is the young woman who caught *his* eye on the Prado in Madrid. He cannot, he *will not* allow this marriage to take place. He determines to frighten Donna Agnes with a demonstration of the capricious terror of his inquisition and orders Quexada to take Don John immediately to a monastery.

But Quexada has become aware of Don John's unsuitedness to religious life. He takes Don John to the monastery of St. Justinian, the retirement abode of Charles V, who, in his new guise as Brother Carlos, becomes familiar with the son he has never known and promises to get him out of a religious confinement. After her brush with the inquisition, Agnes is still defiant. She has learned that the Count de Santa Fiore is actually Philip II in disguise but cannot love him. To finally put him off, she reveals that she is a Jew, knowing that those words could spell her death in Philippine Spain. Don John returns, thinking he is still rescuing Agnes from the Count, but he is overpowered and both are taken into custody. But what's this? The sword Don John raised against Philip once belonged to Charles V. It was given to him by that kindly monk in the monastery.

Philip questions Don Quexada to ascertain how much Don John has discovered of Brother Carlos' royal identity. He is still disposed to kill his rival but, begged by Quexada, finally agrees to spare his brother on one condition: that Don John spend the rest of his days in a cloister.

One final time, Don John and Agnes are brought before Philip who makes it clear that Agnes will burn if Don John refuses to become a monk. Just then, Charles V arrives. He confirms that John is destined for a military life and orders that Agnes be spared – he takes her under his continuing protection. Agnes understands that the lot of a Jew in this world means accepting the unsatisfactory. Don John is distraught to be losing Agnes, but reconciles himself to being diverted into a life more suited to his heroic nature – one of service to an empire stretching as far as Austria.