

Glimmerglass Presents *Armide*, a Beautiful Baroque Opera

Monday, July 23

By Jane Dieckmann

In keeping with its tradition of presenting early operas, the Glimmerglass Festival is mounting a work dating from 1686, *Armide* by Jean-Baptiste Lully. The first French Baroque opera to appear at Glimmerglass, the production is a collaboration with Toronto-based Opera Atelier, which specializes in Baroque opera and ballet. All the dancers, plus the conductor and director, some principals, the sets, and the costumes come from Canada. This special production, in the works for several years, opened in Toronto, and then 80 performers including Opera Atelier's resident orchestral ensemble, the world-famous Baroque group Tafelmusik, presented *Armide* in the Royal Opera House at Versailles, built to celebrate the marriage of the Austrian Marie-Antoinette and the French dauphin who was to become Louis XVI, king of France. Now we have performances at Glimmerglass, truly a special occasion for opera lovers. The opera in two acts is performed in French with projected titles by Opera Atelier.

Jean-Baptiste Lully was the leading composer of 17th-century France, serving in the court of the great Sun King Louis XIV from the age of 20. Until his death in 1687 he produced new operas for the court and played the leading role in gaining international acceptance of French opera at the time. The form he developed with his librettist Philippe Quinault, called "tragédie en music," was adopted by many prominent composers, including Rameau. *Armide* is the last "tragédie" that Lully and Quinault created, and, with its exceptional musical expressiveness and spectacular tragic ending, it is considered to be their best.

The story of *Armide* comes from that treasure trove for opera plots and dramatic cantatas, the 16th-century Italian epic poem, Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, adapted here by librettist Quinault. Best known later operatic creations of this story are by Gluck and, most famously, Rossini, whose version featuring soprano Renée Fleming and six tenors, has recently been produced at the Met. The story is set during the First Crusade, so we have Christians and Muslims in conflict, a subject that has resonated through European history and still speaks strongly today. The Saracen sorceress Armide has managed to bewitch the Christian warrior Renaud, and while she has him in her power (this moment is captured in the opera's most celebrated aria, "Enfin il est en ma puissance"), she prepares to kill him. So taken with his beauty and nobility, she cannot do it. They fall hopelessly in love, but in the end he awakes to his duty and departs, while Armide, now without magical power, collapses and dies, destroying everything around her.

The opening performance of *Armide*, directed by the co-artistic director of Opera Atelier Marshall Pynkoski, was superb. On the podium was Opera Atelier conductor David Fallis, clearly popular with the members of the mixed early/modern instruments orchestra that gave him their own ovation when he appeared. He gave the contrasting small and large ensembles careful attention and often turned to lead the offstage chorus with great sensitivity. American soprano Peggy Krihe Dye, who sang the role at Versailles, was brilliant as Armide. She sang clearly and forcefully, and with clean and sweet tones poignantly portrayed the vulnerability of the sorceress. Her French diction was outstanding and her delivery of her famous aria highly dramatic. Her two confidants were played by sopranos Mireille Asselin and Meghan Lindsay, both "Young American Artists" from Ottawa.

As Renaud, American tenor Colin Ainsworth, in his second appearance at Glimmerglass, looked the perfect handsome and appealing hero, somewhat helpless under the charms of Armide, and struggling mightily between love and duty (although, somewhat ironically, it is La Gloire that requires him to leave). He has a beautiful, lyric tone, and his brief duet with Armide (one of just two duets in the entire opera) was very well done.

Canadian bass-baritone Curtis Sullivan looked strong and muscular as Hatred, and his assertive role was portrayed with energy. The two knights who arrive to rescue Renaud were played by bass-baritone Olivier Laquerre and tenor Aaron Ferguson, both Canadians from the two previous Opera Atelier productions. They were charmingly funny and provided some welcome comic relief to the tragic story.

Also among the major players in the opera is the ballet, and these artists, well trained in Baroque gesture and dance movements, made the show come to life in the different scenes and with a variety of steps and dance forms. The dancer who portrayed Love – he moved so expressively and with such magnificent angelic wings – was not identified in the program,

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though the ballet group was listed with the ensembles. He really deserved special mention. Choreographer Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg, who did a splendid job, also danced with the ensemble. Sadly the members of the outstanding chorus, which also had a principal role in the opera, were also not identified, though a general listing of chorus members for all four productions was given.

The costumes and sets came from the Opera Atelier. The costumes, by Dora Rust D'Eye, were perfectly beautiful, especially in the early scenes with women dancers in sweeping gowns and the men in black tights with tops that matched the gorgeous bright jewel tones of the dresses. The principal women, also in flowing gowns, wore equally beautiful colors. The demons who accompanied Hatred were made up in red and green with almost naked coloring—makeup designer Anne Ford-Coates has a busy time in this opera.

The setting was also beautiful – before the show the stage screen showed a graceful Arabic design with the names of the opera, composer, and librettist in Arabic lettering. This lettering was used also in the palace scene with its many colors and intricate designs on the walls. One wondered however about the Russian (Cyrillic) icons (certainly not Muslim and clearly from a later period) on the back wall. The enchanted forest, with its stylized trees and gold background, was splendid.

What a stunning show this is! Hats off to all involved in this special event. For more information consult www.glimmerglass.org