

Glimmerglass scores with a colorful, sumptuous “Armide”

By Charles T. Downey

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Peggy Kriha Dye in the title role of "Armide" at the Glimmerglass Festival. Photo: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival.

Baroque opera, thankfully, is flourishing at the Glimmerglass Festival. The willingness to stage operas from the century and a half before Mozart — Monteverdi, Handel, Purcell, Gluck, and Cavalli have all been featured since 1994 — is part of what brought the company to greater prominence.

The name of Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687) was added to that list this year, with a sumptuously beautiful staging of *Armide*, heard Sunday afternoon, that was the high point of an otherwise mixed season. The production was imported from Toronto’s Opera Atelier and its fine Baroque ballet company, a smart decision for the realization of the ballet music, so crucial to the Lullian style.

Philippe Quinault drew the libretto from one strand of Torquato Tasso’s immense fantasy epic *La Gerusalemme liberata*. During the First Crusade, the troops of Godefroy de Bouillon are laying siege to the city of Jerusalem, which is protected by the Muslim sorceress Armide and her kinsman Hidraot. Armide traps Godefroy’s strongest soldier, the invincible Renaud, in a spell that makes him fall in love with her and forget his military duty. Aided by magic, two of his

fellow knights manage to break the spell and return Renaud to the Christian camp, leaving a desperate Armide, who has fallen in love with the handsome knight, to destroy her palace in rage.

Armide was one of the most successful and popular French operas of the 17th century, periodically revived in Paris through the 18th century. This staging by Marshall Pynkoski, premiered in 2005, gives this intensely appealing work a form that reveals to modern audiences what Lully accomplished at his best. The sets by Gerard Gauci, with designs based on the Sufic script and Arabesque decoration in Persian illuminated manuscripts, provide a gorgeous backdrop for Atelier Ballet's handsome dancers, in diverting and well-executed choreography by Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg. Dora Rust D'Eye's colorful costumes in a rainbow of bright hues for the Saracen court round out a feast for the eyes. The only misstep in the staging was the icons of Jesus and the Virgin Mary on Hidraot's throne, images that would have been destroyed under Muslim rule, as they were in Hagia Sophia, for example.

None of this would be of much use without the excellent musical performance that animates it. Soprano Peggy Kriha Dye was a compelling Armide, with a tightly coiled vibrato that added punch to an already spicy voice and a vital sense of drama in *Enfin il est en ma puissance*. Colin Ainsworth's flexible high tenor was a perfect match for the role of Renaud, full-bodied and true of intonation but also capable of airy lightness at the top, with good looks to boot.

Both João Fernandes (Hidraot) and Curtis Sullivan (La Haine, the spirit of hatred summoned up by Armide) seemed cast more for physical reasons than vocal ones. Glimmerglass Young Artists did some of their best work of the season, including sopranos Mireille Asselin and Meghan Lindsey as confidantes and spirits of Armide, and tenor Aaron Ferguson as a bumbling Chevalier Danois. With Olivier Laquerre as Ubalde, Ferguson's hapless rescue of Renaud was an unexpected comic highlight.

Conductor David Fallis led a fine rendition of the score, with modern instruments combined with a few historical touches like two recorders, two theorbos, and harpsichord. The performance omitted Lully's prelude, a sycophantic tribute to Louis XIV that was often left out in the 18th century, and cut the fourth scene in Act IV, in which Ubalde faces his own amorous temptation. Fallis and the musicians did well in the multiple dime-turning of Lully's style, which shifts from darting recitative to curling arioso with startling freedom, encountering misalignment issues only with the chorus positioned in a balcony above the audience. For its musical and visual delights, this production is the best reason to make a trip to Glimmerglass this summer.

This production continues through August 23 at the [Glimmerglass Festival](#). The festival's 2013 season will again feature only two operas, Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* and Verdi's *Un Giorno di Regno* (in English), plus Nathan Gunn in *Camelot* and a double-bill of David Lang's *Little Match Girl Passion* and Pergolesi's *Stabat mater*.

