
Opera Warhorses

An appreciation and analysis of the ‘Standard Repertory’ of opera

Elegant and Engaging, Lully’s “Armide” Glows at Glimmerglass Festival – July 21, 2012

July 22nd, 2012

Glimmerglass Opera Festival audiences have proven responsive to the theatrical judgment of their new general and artistic director, Francesca Zambello. Now in her second season of guiding this premiere Upstate New York operatic festival, she has forged alliances with other theatrical companies with brilliant results.

Emblematic of the attempts to expand the operatic repertory enjoyed by American audiences, she sponsored a revival and renovation of a production of Lully’s French baroque masterpiece, “Armide”, originally conceived by Toronto-based Opera Atelier.

[Below a promotional representation of Armide (left) and Renaud (right); edited image, based on a Karli Cadel photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Opera Festival.]



The Canadian company’s energetic co-founder, Marshall Pynkoski, who, in the outdoor lectures accompanying each performance that are an integral part of the Glimmerglass experience, proved an effective proselytizer for Lully’s mid-17th century operas.

But it was Pynkoski's mesmerizing stage direction that made a convincing case that for this rarely performed opera, brilliantly demonstrating how this gallicized Italian composer had so stylishly integrated vocal (both solo and choral) and instrumental music, dance, and baroque acting styles, the latter with its elaborate incorporation of the "rhetorical gesturing" of classical drama.

[Below: *Armide* (Peggy Kriha Dye, center) is flanked by her companions, *Sidonie* (Meghan Lindsay, left) and *Phenice* (Mireille Asselin, right); edited image, based on a Karli Cadel photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Festival Opera.]



Armide and the Crusaders

For a millenium and a half Europe, North Africa and the Middle East have been aware, often acutely, of the tense relations between lands held by Muslims and lands held by Christians and occasional military efforts to disturb the status quo. In fact, some of the great poetic epics of the last millenium reflect the battles between Charlemagne and the Saracens (*The Song of Roland* and Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*) or Crusaders and Muslims (Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*.)

Both Opera Atelier and Glimmerglass publicists have made reference to contemporary Christian-Muslim conflicts in their descriptions of "Armide", based, as it is, on Tasso's highly imaginative account of the First Crusade.

I, myself, think that "Armide" – which in its entirety is about witches, supernatural figures, and the spells they cast on a specific Crusader – yields no more insights into matters Christian and Muslim than, say, the Bard's *Romeo and Juliet* yields guidance on the underlying causes of the feuds between the Montagues and Capulets in particular and early Renaissance family associations in general.

[Below: the Opera Atelier dancers in an early scene from "Armide", here, seen in Toronto; edited image of a photograph for Opera Atelier.]



Nor does it matter. Its plot is not a complex one. Renaud is Armide's sworn enemy and she intends to destroy him, but finds herself hopelessly in love with him. She conjures the forces of Hate, but Love prevails.

An immersion in choreographed spectacle

But to Lully, it's not so much the outcomes of Armide's dark arts and the Crusaders' defenses against them that matter. It's the sonic and visual spectacles that the characters produce on the way to the opera's resolution.

[Below: the Saracen sorcerer Hidriot (Joao Fernandes, left) confronts the Crusader Renaud (Colin Ainsworth, right); edited image, based on a Karli Cadel photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Opera Festival.]



High spaces in the Glimmerglass Festival's Alice Busch auditorium are utilized to produce a startling ethereal sound from on high for both chorus and principals.

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The Opera Atelier ballet – as accomplished as any I’ve seen on the operatic stage – is fully integrated into the action. One is never surprised when members of the ballet transform themselves into different beings.

[Below: the men of the Opera Atelier ballet appear as the minions of Hatred; edited image, based on a Karli Cadel photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Opera Festival.]



Pynkoski describes the cast, chorus, orchestra, ballet and crew of the Opera Atelier ensemble as a group that “loves to rehearse”, since the contemporary production that is respectful of Lully’s style contains so many elements that are not present in 19th or 20th century operas. To the audience, the most obvious result of the intense rehearsal process is a highly choreographed result.

“Choreographed” is a term that we associate with dance, and dance permeates the opera. But it’s not just the dancers whose every movement must be coordinated with every other dancer on stage. Each principal at virtually every moment also has a series of movements – rhetorical gesturing with his or her hands and physical body movements, often interacting with the dancers.

[Below: Armide (Peggy Kriha Dye, front center, comes under the spell of the personification of Love (Jack Rennie, front left) as the personification of Hatred (Curtis Sullivan, rear) looks on; edited image, based on a Karli Cadel photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Opera Festival.]



(Although some readers may take this as a curious remark, perhaps the contemporary analogy to this style of performing would be the “big production numbers” in concert tours of rap artists, who are integrating rhythmic speech, continuous hand movements, and intense physical interactions with highly choreographed and impressively massed dancers.)

Thus, the two principals, Peggy Kriha Dye (Armide) and Colin Ainsworth (Renaud) are not only accomplished vocalists who have mastered the French baroque style of singing, but must constantly integrate their body positions and hand gestures into their performances.

Every member of the cast is engaged in this performance style, including the two “comic relief” characters, the Chevalier d'Annois (Aaron Ferguson) and Ubalde (Olivier Laquerre), who manage to effect the release of the Crusader Renaud from the spell into which Armide has cast him.

[Below: Aaron Ferguson is the Danish Knight, left, and Olivier Laquerre is Ubalde; edited image, based on a Karli Cader photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Opera Festival.]

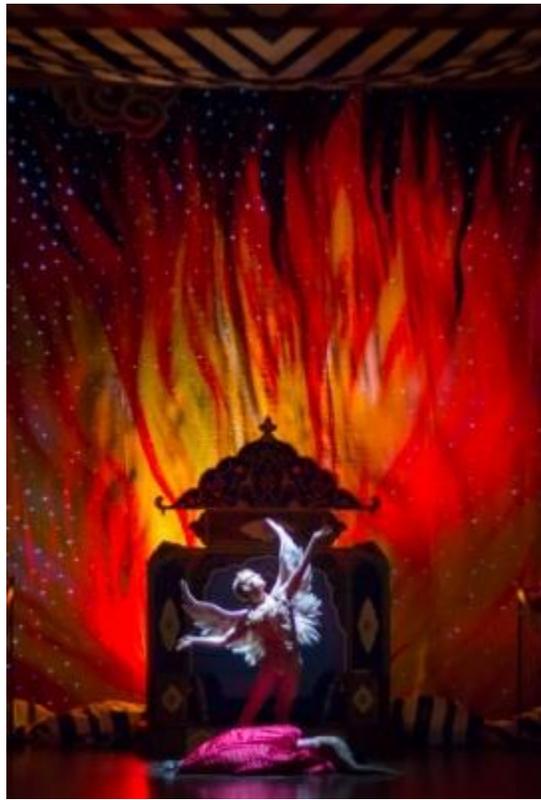


Every performer's contribution was praiseworthy. The Glimmerglass Young Artists' program provided Michelle Asselin, in the roles of Phenice and Lucinde; Meghan Lindsay as Sidonie and the Water Nymph, Vasil Garvantiev as Arante, as well as the arresting performance of Aaron Ferguson as the Danish Knight. Joao Fernandes was Hidraot and Curtis Sullivan was Hatred.

David Fallis stylishly conducted the orchestra of period instruments (with boasted two theorbos but no violins), supplemented by additional violas and cellos from the modern Glimmerglass Orchestra. Its continuo sections, so integrally important to the opera's dramatic pace, consisted of Ruth Berry, Christopher Devlin, Richard Kolb, Michael Leopold, Borys Medicky and Craig Trompeter.

The dance choreography by Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg is so engaging that it is worth the price of admission alone. Gerard Gauci designed the sets, Dora Rust D'Eye the costumes, and Bonnie Beecher the lighting.

[Below: Love (Jack Rennie) hovers over Armide (Peggy Kriha Dye, on stage floor); edited image, based on a William M. Brown photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Opera.]



Although a departure from what we regard as the current core repertory of opera companies, I recommend the Opera Atelier's production of Lully's "Armide" at the 2012 Glimmerglass Opera Festival unreservedly.