



Glimmerglass's 'Armide' a lavish courtship of music and ballet fit for a king

But French Baroque opera is an acquired taste that can tickle your sensibilities — or test your patience

By David Abrams

7/21/12

“It’s good to be the king,” says a smug Mel Brooks famously while dressed as Louis XVI in the 1981 film comedy, *History of the World, Part I*. But for listeners brought up on a steady diet of *da capo* and *bel canto* arias from 18th and 19th-century operas, the seemingly endless drone of *récitatifs* and *airs* endemic to 17th-century French Baroque opera may not turn out to be an entirely “royal” experience.

Credit Glimmerglass Festival for staging its first-ever production of an opera from the French Baroque era, in keeping with its mission to produce new and little-known works. Its production of Jean-Baptiste Lully’s last completed opera, *Armide* (1686), shined impressively both visually and aurally, particularly in its charming choral and dance numbers. Still, French Baroque opera, like French *Vieux Boulogne*, is an acquired taste that may take some warming up to. And while Saturday’s audience at the opening premiere of *Armide* included a large number of enthusiastic champions of the *tragédie-lyrique* (Lully’s term for opera), there were plenty of empty seats to be found in the Alice Busch Opera Theater. And more following intermission.

The current production is a joint collaboration with the Toronto-based *Opera Atelier*, whose co-directors Marshall Pynkoski and Jeanette Lajeunesse Zingg directed and choreographed the present Glimmerglass effort, respectively.

The plot, a convoluted story set to a libretto by Phillippe Quinault (after Torquato Tasso’s epic poem, *Gerusalemme liberata*), is set against the backdrop of the early Crusades and centers on two principal characters: the Muslim sorceress-princess, Armide, and the undefeated Christian warrior-knight, Renaud. Although sworn enemies, these two are swept into a stormy relationship that pits love against duty and wisdom.

The often-stagnant drama is livened considerably by frequent *divertissements* — stylized ballet-dance episodes that were required fare for composers serving the dance-happy French monarchy. Far from superfluous interruptions to the action, these “diversions” were designed to enhance the mission of the actors and actresses.

In his lively and informative pre-concert talk, Pynkoski likened the actors to *storytellers* and the audience to *participants* — which was an agreeable arrangement to the aristocratic circles of the absolute monarchy during the reigns of Louis XIV to XIV. Still, ballet-operas found only limited acceptance outside of France, and up until recently were largely ignored by mainstream opera companies.

Opera Atelier is largely responsible for the renewed interest in *Armide*, and was recently invited to reprise its Toronto performances at the *Opera Royal of Versailles*. Heading the cast of singer-actresses in those performances was Peggy Kriha Dye as the title character — who is cast in that role for this Glimmerglass production. Dye’s character proved a fireball of unrelenting hate, anger, scorn and frustration. And this *after* she falls in love.

Dye captured the listener’s attention early on, beginning with the Act One *Je ne triomphe pas du plus vaillant de tous*, in which she reveals the mighty range of her fury and frustration. And when she sang the dramatic recitative *Enfin, il est en ma puissance*, as she hovers — dagger in hand — over the sleeping Renaud, one can see how deeply she reaches into the core of the her character’s agonizing ambivalence between feelings of love and hate.

As a singer, Dye’s supple soprano is rich in nuance of expression and she uses her entire body in bringing her troubled character to life — inviting the audience to feel, and not just hear, *Armide*’s agony.

Still, the character of *Armide* does not invite any appreciable degree of sympathy. By the time this sorceress gets to her last number, *Le perfide Renaud me fuit*, I had already lost all patience with the non-stop agonizing and lugubrious self-pity. By the fifth act I seriously contemplated rising from my seat and shouting, “get over it, witch!” Or something to that effect.

As the mighty warrior Renaud, Colin Ainsworth captured the persona of the mighty Crusader who ultimately chooses honor and duty over love and self-indulgence.

Ainsworth has a pleasant tenor that maintains its luster in the higher registers — although on this occasion his voice seemed a bit raspy at times, as if singing through a cold. One of the bright spots of his vocal efforts was the second-act air *Plus j’observe ces lieux*, an exquisite sicilienne sung as the warrior prepares for a lengthy sleep, that Ainsworth delivered with lavish expression, buoyed by the tender gestures of his hands, arms and body.

Next to Dye, Canadian soprano Meghan Lindsay is the production’s standout singer in the dual role of Sidonie and the Water Nymph. Although minor characters in this opera, Lindsay’s roles delighted the crowd with her sweet and sinuously expressive vocal delivery, made all the more meaningful through the enhanced movement of her hands — which generally resembled those of a ballerina. The fact that she is a Glimmerglass Young Artists speaks volumes about the depth of this program.

Lindsay was paired with fellow Young Artist Mireille Asselin (in the dual smaller of Phènice and Lucinde) who also possesses a lovely voice, although I wished she had projected a little more strongly early on.

The competing themes of love and hatred in this drama are personified respectively by a winged dancer resembling Cupid (Love) and a fiery character resembling the Devil (Hatred).

As Love, Rennie proved a first-rate dancer and gifted athlete whose character sports a large (and I imagine somewhat heavy) pair of wings upon his back at all times. When the sorceress Armide places Renaud into a magical state of unconsciousness, Love hovers over the sleeping warrior's body performing gentle, ceremonial-like hand gestures that looked like an ancient version of a Reiki treatment.

But when fighting the demons unleashed by Love's nemesis, Hatred, Rennie twisted and turned his way across stage in a series of acrobatic gyrations — charging his body, wings and all, through the crowded troupe of dancers onstage like a bull in china shop. Had he been dancing like this on the Thruway, Rennie would surely have gotten pulled over. As Hatred, Curtis Sullivan cuts a menacing (if not somewhat campy) figure, standing in front of a “ring of fire” intended to intimidate but looking hardly more menacing than a hoop through which animals jump at the circus.

Aaron Ferguson and Olivier Laguerre, as the goofy pair of knights dispatched to break Armide's spell over Renaud, provided a much-welcome dose of comic relief to the otherwise solemn dramatic action in the final act. The pair worked well together with respect to the timing and execution of their moves onstage. Still, Young Artist Ferguson's tentative tenor still has a way to go — as does his French diction.

As Hidraot, João Fernandes (listed in the program as a bass but leaning a bit closer to the timbre of a baritone) began singing slightly under-pitch early in the first act but soon warmed up and delivered a worthy performance as Armide's nefarious uncle.

The troupe of dancers (which included choreographer Zingg) looked spectacular onstage in their colorful attire and moved about the stage with grace, poise and a finely tuned ensemble of movement. I enjoyed the ballet *divertissements* at least as much as the singing, and had it not been for this visual phantasmagoria I don't know if I could have lasted through some two and one-half hours of *récitatifs and airs*.

The Glimmerglass Festival Orchestra, while hardly what may properly be labeled a “period ensemble,” responded willingly to the urging of conductor David Fallis. The instrumentalists faithfully executed the highly stylized writing of the French Baroque — from the over-dotted rhythmic figures of the overture to the deeply ornamented melodic lines figures in the airs, and finally to the fury of the relentless ostinato rhythms during the title character's angstful *Venez, venez, Haine implacable*.

Fallis, director of Toronto's acclaimed *Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra*, used a wide arsenal of hand motions to mold the sound he wanted from the singers, instrumentalists and chorus, while the *continuo* (consisting here of harpsichord, cello, bassoon and a pair of theorbos) conducted the lion's share of the accompanying responsibilities.

The orchestra pit was raised rather high in this production (it's important to maintain a firm sighting of the singers and dancers in such dramatic works), and this afforded listeners a birds-eye view of Fallis's shapely cues. His delicate hand gestures in the choral numbers in particular drew some incredibly lovely singing from an ensemble clearly eager to please him. Since precious little of Lully's original choreography has survived, Zingg had to fashion a series of stylized Baroque dances that remained faithful to the performance practice and the spirit of late 16th-century France. Her graceful, tasteful and often athletic dance numbers were among the highlights of this performance.

David Moody's magnificent Glimmerglass Festival Chorus — perched high stage right in the third-tier loft — provided some of the most emotionally convincing and musically engaging moments of this production.

The opulent, multicolored removable pastel flats by set designer Gerard Gauci were visually alluring, resembling something of a cross between the Met's *The Enchanted Island* and a Disney fantasy film.

Dora Rust D'Eye's richly colored costumes channeled all eyes squarely on the dancers during the handsome ballet numbers, although I felt the full-length Renaissance dresses robbed the audience of the opportunity to see what I imagine was some fine legwork on the part of the female dancers. Curiously, Armide wore the identical red gown throughout the entire opera — a decision possibly intended to underscore the sorceress's unwavering sense of fiery anger and frustration.

Glimmerglass's production of *Armide* will either transport you to a time of opulence, elegance and polish — or have you looking impatiently at your watch. But if you agree that it's good to be the king, you ought to do what Mel Brooks did and see for yourself.