

July 22, 2012

COOPERSTOWN – There's about as much dancing as there is singing in Lully's "Armide," which opened on Saturday night at the Glimmerglass Festival. And it's real dancing, too – not those perfunctory turns and courtly bows that usually appear as necessary afterthoughts in opera.

The company of sixteen dancers first appear in the palace of Armide, the Muslim princess, with ladies wearing ball gowns in brilliant jewel tones, the gentlemen in dark velvet tights. After that, the males show up frequently, embodying the emotional desires and spiritual forces at play in the story. There are lots of balletic passages, some sword dances and pantomimes, and plenty of bare flesh. Choreography was by Jeanette Lajeunesse Zingg.

It's an opulent staging in most every way, a coproduction with Opera Atelier of Toronto, directed by Marshall Pynkoski and conducted by David Fallis. The backdrops are modeled after Persian illuminated manuscripts in tones of gold and olive. Adding to the sensory experience, the offstage chorus is placed in the upper gallery stage left.

The vocal terrain of Baroque opera is demanding and less overtly showy than the familiar romantic models. So it took the accumulation of emotion through the course of the story for all the vocal luster of the leads to show through fully.

Soprano Peggy Kriha Dye in the lead was terrific from the start and goodness did she have a lot to do. Yet it was her climactic rage and frustration near the end that seared the ears and stays in the memory.

Tenor Colin Ainsworth played her love interest, the Christian knight Renaud. His voice was vibrant and attractive, just not sweet. Also, he seemed almost unable to sing without striking a pose, with one hip slightly extended. Didn't someone tell him that there was another blond male beauty already playing cupid? He was the one with the wings.

Sopranos Mireille Asselin and Meghan Lindsay, of the Glimmerglass Young Artists Program, were excellent if somewhat anonymous as ladies in waiting. But the secondary male cast was vocally weak, starting with the bass Joao Fernandes as Armide's uncle Hidraot. Baritone Curtis Sullivan as the spirit of hatred had more physical presence than vocal command. And the scene with two knights in the second act was overlong and unsatisfying from the perspectives of comedy or singing.

But these are weaknesses made apparent because of the over all high quality of the evening. "Armide" may be the most reverent and well integrated of Baroque operas Glimmerglass has ever mounted – something not to be missed.