



Striking visuals bring ‘Semele’ to life at Pittsburgh Opera



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Much ink has been spilled over whether the 2020s will be as roaring as the 1920s as the pandemic lingers. For Pittsburgh Opera, the 1920s are already back.

In their first ever production of Handel’s “Semele,” the company transformed its chamber opera auditorium in its Strip District headquarters Saturday into an art deco palace.

Combining the traditional flourishes of Baroque music with cutting-edge projections to aid in scene changes, this “Semele” — helmed by conductor Antony Walker and stage director Kristine McIntyre — was a sumptuous and beautiful spectacle that elevated the source material past its musty moralizing.

The character Semele has no interest in her princely fiance, Athamus. She

desires to become a goddess and join the pantheon with her lover, Jove, king of the gods. Meanwhile, Semele's sister, Ino, in love with Athamus, rues her lonely fate.

As Semele ascends to the world of the gods to be with Jove, his wife, Juno, goddess of marriage, schemes to teach Jove a lesson and thwart Semele's dream of immortality.

In this production, Semele is no mere vain figure of tragedy. Rather, her motivations stem from knowing what she wants, discarding societal expectations and making every effort to get it. While her ambitions are her downfall, Semele's agency provides a refreshingly multidimensional character arc. Not an easy feat when the main character is wearing a frilly, pink robe most of the opera.

Projections — created by Lawrence Shea on art deco screens — transport the characters from the icy black and white of earth to the lush, colorful world of the gods to the cave of Somnus, the god of sleep, to Semele's palace apartment, bedecked in blossoms. The projections not only helped with the scene changes and illustrated Jove's power and Semele's ascension, but also made the smaller auditorium seem several times bigger.

Cleverly, Carey Xu used the fixed staircase in the space to make the gods, goddesses and Semele appear to be floating above the action. Given that the plot revolves around lovers and marriage, McIntyre sets a large number of scenes around a bed, which works surprisingly well.

Véronique Filloux made much of her rich role as Semele. Particularly beautiful was her rendition of “Oh Sleep Why Dost Thou Leave Me” when Semele awakens from a dream of being with Jove. Filloux also gave an entertaining performance for the famed “Myself I Shall Adore” aria, which drew some chuckles from the audience as she extolled her good looks.

Similarly, the production played up moments of levity in the otherwise melodramatic opera. For instance, Iris, goddess of the rainbow/Juno's partner in crime, just can't “hence away” despite repeated libretto telling her to do just that in a Juno aria. Somnus' on-stage costume change involves inspired use of a bedspread. And Juno, played to the hilt by Maire Therese Carmack, tries to block out Semele's voice any way she can as she goes on and on about her appearance.

Unfortunately, the subplots involving Ino grind the opera to a halt. But Madeline Ehrlinger as Ino wisely went for the emotion, especially in an early aria bemoaning her sister's betrothal to Athamus.

The orchestra was accompanied by the musicians of period ensemble Chatham Baroque, which grounded the opera in Handel's original score. The music added dramatic flourishes, especially to scenes involving Juno. The viola da gamba and the harpsichord reminded audience members that in addition to the technology on display, this was a Baroque piece through and through.

Costumes from Jason Bray were outstanding examples of 1920s-inspired design. Iris' polychrome dress and especially the peacock ensemble worn by Juno were over the top in all the best ways, suiting the celestial characters and the elegant atmosphere.

Overall, "Semele" — with its striking visuals, talented performers, authentic musicianship and inventive production design — is a highlight of the 2021 season and a memorable addition to Pittsburgh Opera's long history.

Live performances of "Semele" are sold out, but the 7:30 p.m. May 14 performance will be livestreamed free on Pittsburgh Opera's YouTube channel and Facebook page. To register, visit pittsburghopera.org

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