

GIULIO CESARE – REVIEW – LEEDS GRAND THEATRE

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by Eve Luddington

A tale of dastardly deeds, vengeance and desire, Handel's *Giulio Cesare* (Julius Caesar) is considered one of his finest operas. Loosely based on events of the Roman Civil Wars between 49 and 45 B.C.E. it was highly acclaimed when first performed in 1724 and has regained popularity in the last 40 years or so.

Tim Albery's immaculate production has returned to Opera North under the baton of Baroque music specialist, Christian Curnyn. It omits the chorus and cuts the running time from four hours to just over three, and feels shorter because it is utterly absorbing.

The libretto, by Nicola Haym, is a complex web of plotting and scheming driven by intense passions which are reflected brilliantly in Handel's dramatic score.



“Balance of power”

In brief, Cesare has pursued his enemy, Pompeio, beyond the Roman Empire to Egypt, and beaten him in battle. Pompeio seeks refuge with the Egyptians but is, instead, murdered at the command of Tolomeo, who is joint ruler of Egypt with his sister, Cleopatra.

Pompeio's widow, Cornelia, and her son, Sesto, vow vengeance on Tolomeo. Cleopatra, keen to depose her brother, plots with them and, disguised as a servant, seduces Cesare; she's eager to secure his support and tip the balance of power in her favour.

The plot to murder Tolomeo is foiled and Cornelia and Sesto are arrested, and then Cleopatra too. As evil as they come, Tolomeo forces himself on Cornelia – but eventually gets his comeuppance or, in this production, his come-upside-downance (once dead, he's hanged by

his feet). Meanwhile, rumours that Cesare has drowned prove false when he returns to free his beloved. When he discovers that she is Cleopatra, he sets her on the throne of Egypt.



“Great sensitivity”

Opera North’s production is in modern dress but Leslie Travers’ design references ancient Rome and Egypt. Facing the audience as we enter the auditorium is a dark, imposing fortress shaped like the base of a pyramid, surrounded by walls into which are carved the emblem of the Roman Empire, SPQR. The Romans wear grey and black. Later, the fortress is rotated by slaves to reveal the burnished gold interior of the Egyptian palace. Tolomeo and Cleopatra wear royal blue satin. When the palace is used a prison or a boudoir, **it is Thomas C. Hase’s atmospheric lighting design, using video projection and candlelight, that transforms the setting.**

I’ve never seen an opera by Handel before. The dramatic impact of his music astonished me. The instrumentals and vocals run and trill with rich harmonies, punctured by melancholy or aggression or silence: this score captures perfectly the changing moods of the story and tells us what’s going on inside the characters. At times, the voices seem to be in conversation with the instrumentals. Christian Curnyn conducts with great sensitivity and Opera North’s orchestra plays exquisitely, sometimes with 18th century instruments.



“Justified paranoia”

Tim Albery’s direction uses Handel’s rhythms to shape not just the general action but every gesture, emotion and nuance. His talented international cast communicate his vision superbly with impeccable timing. They are all highly skilled in the special technique needed for Baroque music – a pure clear tone and perfect control of all the trills and runs that Handel uses so expressively, and maintaining that while moving around and up and down stairs. What breath control too.

James Laing relishes his role as cruel Tolomeo, injecting the character with scary yet comic malice. His counter tenor voice, soaring high as he goes low, mauling and groping Pompeo’s widow Cornelia, expresses beautifully the character’s perversity and justified paranoia. Darren Jeffrey, a rich and resonant baritone, gives a strong performance as Achilla, the Egyptian army general, who falls for and is also spurned by Cornelia.



“Perfect sequence”

Catherine Hopper’s characterisation of Pompeo’s wife, Cornelia, is outstanding. Her quiet despair as she lies down beside her husband’s corpse and wraps his arm around her, is heartrending. The persistent dignity she shows in the face of sexual humiliation will remain with me for a long time. Sadly, the outfit she wears, particularly a movement-inhibiting skirt, does nothing to help her portrayal.

As her son, Sesto, Heather Lowe is also very affecting. The tender rapport between the two and their duets, make us identify with their sorrow and their revenge. One of the highlights of this production comes when they pour Pompeo’s ashes from the roof of the Roman fortress, the vocal line of the singing underpinned by a melancholy cello. They move slowly in perfect sequence with the music. Another, created by music, silence and a few sad notes, is when they stand over the body of the newly assassinated Pompeo.



“Bowled over”

The part of Cesare, written originally for an alto castrato, is performed in this production, as in many nowadays, by a contralto. On the first night, Maria Sanner took a while to relax into the role, and didn't convince me as a military leader, but her voice and characterisation are compelling as a lover. In the beautiful aria she sings as she caresses the stockings cast aside by Cleopatra, we know that Cesare has been well and truly seduced. Her voice blends beautifully with Lucie Chartin's as Cleopatra. They are fitting lovers.

And so to Cleopatra herself, perhaps the main character of the piece and certainly the most complex. Soprano, Lucie Chartin makes her UK debut in this production and she's great. All sexual allure at first, using her attractions to taunt her brother and to seduce Cesare, the depth of her love for the Roman leader baffles and delights her. 'When a ship battled by the storm', partly sung as she lies on the floor, conveys these emotions beautifully.

I was bowled over by this opera and this production – and am very pleased Opera North have revived it.

images: Alastair Muir