



Opera North's inventive *Giulio Cesare* a stirring tribute to Handel

By Richard Wilcocks, 29 September 2019

This was a most satisfying revival of [Tim Albery's](#) 2012 production of *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* by Opera North, with its remarkable rotating set designed by Leslie Travers. First seen as a kind of dark, sawn-off pyramid, it is pushed by slaves in sackcloth to reveal shimmering interiors signifying the luxury and treasure of Ancient Egypt, an irresistible lure for the world power on the opposite side of the Mediterranean. **Lit with subtle skill (by Thomas C Hase), it becomes a location for intimate exchanges and a background for war. So much glitters and gleams in this production: mirror-like walls, spangled clothing, reflections of water, the narrow blades of death-dealing daggers.** Murderous official power is represented by golden, stiletto-like finger attachments.



Lucie Chartin (Cleopatra) and Maria Sanner (Giulio Cesare)

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In 1724, Handel's *Giulio Cesare* was a star vehicle when Italian opera was becoming the height of fashion, for the aristocracy at least. The most famous Italian castrato of the day, Senesino, was booked as Cesare, and popular soprano, Francesca Cuzzoni, as Cleopatra. With parallel themes of love, revenge and colonial conquest, and with principal characters long embedded in the popular imagination by writers and playwrights, it was a great success, lasting four hours. Careful tightening

up by Albery created the current version which makes use of about two thirds of the original. His emphasis is more on the love and less on the military aspects, and contemporary resonances abound: Cesare's great rival Pompeio is glimpsed during the overture as a drunken reveller, stabbed to death in the street, and his head does not end up in a box, as it did in the 18th century, although his ashes do end up in a modern funeral urn, which is emptied onto the stage from a height.



Heather Lowe (Sesto), James Laing (Tolomeo) and Darren Jeffery (Achilla)
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Cleopatra and her evil brother Tolomeo appear in flimsy royal blue costumes, soldiers and slaves are sand-coloured, and Romans are grey, except for Sesto, Pompeio's vengeful son, who wears a black and white cadet's uniform. Swedish contralto Maria Sanner, in a permanently mud-spattered greatcoat, excelled as Cesare. She adopted a credible masculinity and adapted her tones with alacrity, most convincingly when she realises that the flirtatious "Lidia", who claims to be the queen's servant, is actually the queen herself. Coloratura soprano Lucie Chartin is a Cleopatra for the 21st century, dressed in blue shorts, handy with a sword and charmingly seductive. She is a long way from the heavily made-up Hollywood versions and more like a character from an Ingmar Bergman film as she travels from flirt to serious lover, her arias delivered with power and precision and causing the greatest volumes of applause, particularly 'V'adoro, pupille' when Cesare still thinks she is Lidia.

Mezzo [Heather Lowe](#) was terrific in the trouser role of Sesto, with an impressively agile voice and considerable acting ability. Catherine Hopper as Cornelia, Pompeio's widow, delivered some heartbreaking moments when she was grieving, and conveyed a disturbing sense of agitation when she was sexually molested by the predatory Tolomeo. James Laing, a powerful countertenor with great charisma, brought a touch of psychopathy to the character. After his assassination, a quick job by Sesto, his body was spat upon by his subjects and hung upside down.



Giulio Cesare
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Christian Curnyn conducted with sensitivity, members of the Orchestra of Opera North playing early instruments, like the theorbo, a stringed instrument which looks rather like an oversized lute, with much skill. Melancholy emotions were conveyed effectively when appropriate, often described as 'languorous' in association with Baroque music and Handel, misleadingly because of the connection with drowsiness, and drowsy this is not, because full justice is done to the composer in this moving, enlivening evening.

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