

Tolomeo: the Thorn in the Mind

Background

George Frederic Handel was the most inventive and accomplished composer of opera in Britain, and probably the most significant impresario. He not only composed very many operas, but he arranged for their production, engaged singers and theatres, rehearsed and conducted performances.

Tolomeo (1728) belongs to his second period under the umbrella of the Royal Academy (after the almost unbelievably creative seasons of 1724-5, which included *Tamerlano*, *Giulio Cesare* and *Rodelinda*). At this point Handel had lost his theatre, his lead singers, and much of his following to a rival; renting the King's theatre, he had to outdo the competition, so he secured a line-up of the finest Italian singers: the castrato Senesino remained with him, closely followed in fame by the two sopranos Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni, the bass Boschi, and the less accomplished castrato Baldi.

For these singers he wrote **Tolomeo**. Some ink has been spilled over 'the rival queens' who sang the roles of Seleuce and Elisa, and who are reputed to have carried their colourful rivalry off stage. Compelling as this type of story is, it seems likely to me that the rivalry was what we would now call spin, exploited to help ticket sales: there is no evidence of Cuzzoni or Faustina scrapping before or after, though they were frequent colleagues. The Italian opera (written by a Saxon in London) occasionally attracted the same sort of mocking press that Handel opera still gathers from its contemporary fans: for some reason people love to say that its plots are silly, its musical and dramatic language (the *da capo* aria, written with an A statement followed by a B statement, and then a version of the A statement repeated with vocal ornaments showing the musical taste and dramatic sensibility of the artist) 'static', its

characterisation shallow. And these are the opera 'buffs', who titter through performances! One of the happiest discoveries of my career is that, in general, audiences instinctively know better.

The Production

Tolomeo has fascinated me for years. The *Argument* printed with the wordbook (the opera would have been performed in Italian with a printed wordbook available sale in the dimly lit theatre) is stirring:

Cleopatra, who never appears, presides over the action. She is the textbook cruel mother: husband discarded or dead, she raises to her throne (and bed?) her the firstborn son; unsatisfied, she exiles him, sends his wife to slavery, butchers the children, and then raises up the younger son to supplant him (as he supplanted the father, no doubt) and make war on his brother. Those separately shipwrecked souls on Cyprus (**Tolomeo**, his wife Seleuce, his brother Alessandro) are all damaged by the Egyptian queen, and each calls out to her for explanation.

On the island, the head man Araspé and his sister are drawn to **Tolomeo** and Seleuce. Their unrequited loves hurt and pervert them, and as usual this is at first more interesting than the fate of the long suffering heroes. I had to find a way to show the strength and beauty in **Tolomeo** and Seleuce, characters who want the release that death promises, and in his weaker brother: family values!

Tolomeo starts out with a resolution to drown himself in the sea; there under the waves he finds another man struggling to live, and he saves him. Such a struggle – between the instinct to breathe, and the impulse to respect and value another's life – would not be pretty. Recognising his brother, who he supposes a

THE ARGUMENT.

CLEOPATRA in Egypt, thinking herself aggrieved, to have her Son Ptolemy for a Partner of the Crown; raised the People against him, and took from him his Wife Seleuca, with so much the more Rage, because he had already had Two Sons by her; she forced him to go abroad, having call'd home her younger Son Alexander, and made him King in the room of his Brother. She was so far from being contented, with having chased Ptolemy out of the Kingdom, who took a Refuge in Cyprus; that she pursued him with War, and hunted him from thence too; and put to death the General of the Army, for letting him escape out of his Hands alive; altho' Ptolemy left the Island out of meer Shame, because he would not wage War with a Mother: From hence, Alexander being amaz'd, and shock'd at this Cruelty of Cleopatra, left her himself likewise, preferring a Life of Safety and Liberty, to a dangerous Reign: Thus Justin relates this Matter, in his 33d Book. Upon this Historical Foundation the following Fiction is form'd, according to the Rules of Probability; that Ptolemy, depos'd by his Mother, Cleopatra, lived secretly in Cyprus, like a common Shepherd, under the Name of Olmin: That Seleuca his Spouse went to him, and being sent by Cleopatra to Tryphon, Tyrant of Siria, she suffered Shipwreck, and was believ'd, by every Body; to have been left in the Sea; but, in reality, saving her self, and knowing her Husband was in Cyprus, she got over thither, dress'd likewise in a Shepherdess's Habit, under the fictitious Name of Delia, in order to find him out. That Alexander was likewise sent by his Mother into Cyprus, with a powerful Army, in order to get Ptolemy into his Hands, altho' it was really his entire Design to save his Brother, and restore him the Crown: That in the mean Time, Araspes reign'd in Cyprus, who, together with his Sister Elisa, resided in a delightful Village, situated in a Maritime Country of that Island; this King was in Love with the Shepherdess Delia, whose real Name was Seleuca; and just so was his Sister Elisa in love with Ptolemy, the reputed Shepherd Olmin; and this gives Birth to the several Incidents in this Drama.

traitor, Tolomeo thinks to drown the man in his arms, but he resists the brutal impulse: he will not be dehumanised, however harsh his own sufferings. Bitterly, he rescues him. Again and again he thinks that he has reached the extremest verge – by Elisa's perverse affection, Araspe's cruelty, the fear that his own senses lie to him, and the suspicion that he cannot even remember his own love – and each time his own desire for annihilation is quelled by his need to recall Seleuce, his faith, love and only hope. The key to Tolomeo's strength is his resistance, his inalienable humanity, which the careless observer careless might see as passive. He is a rounded depiction of misery, but as eloquent prisoners have taught us, misery does not efface strength, nuance, even greatness.

As Michael Vale and I worked on this, we were determined that Tolomeo would look really afflicted, so we wanted no beautifully distressed classicism in his costume or attitude. We saw him under a shabby pier, unable to leave the place where the wretched of the earth confront a cruel, refuse-filled sea – unwilling to go inland, unable to go under.

Seleuce is there, though above, out of eyeline. Her wandering, too, could seem passive – until you realise that she has brought herself to this place of meetings, defying Cleopatra, the butcher of her sons, that she resists Araspe's unwanted love, resists Elisa's assassins and assaults, that she lives to find that which was lost. On the one hand, I was conscious of Egyptian imagery of Isis searching for Osiris. But ultimately in her we wanted to find the beauty of the young girl begging at the underground exit, always nervously looking behind her for the new oppressor, then looking eagerly ahead for the little things she collects, reminders of something important. We hoped to shock ourselves and our colleagues into

finding the great beauty in such faces, in such ordinary, casually cruel places.

Even Alessandro, who finds in Elisa a replacement for his mother as soon as he regains consciousness on the shore, resists this compulsion, and takes the risky, nearly hopeless part of his brother. Hardly trusted by Seleuce or Tolomeo, and nearly enslaved by Elisa and outmanoeuvred by Araspe, Alessandro has an uncomfortable but interesting path from the shore, through all his won weakness.

The villains – or at least those who seem to hold power – are complex. Araspe is brutal, but sensitive; he has the bully's knowledge of emptiness. Were he to dominate Seleuce, would he be changed, or would he throw her away with the other toys, and feel still worse? Is he any different to the man of business who visits a passportless young girl in Soho, and fancies that he cares for her? Elisa's yearning for Tolomeo drives her to strange cruelty, to self loathing. What they have in common is that they are ready to dehumanise these who frustrate their will, to think of them as beasts in order to torture them, and in so doing of course they only succeed in dehumanising themselves.

A broken pier in a wooden box – the place where land and sea meet, the thorn in the mind – has its own, pastoral beauty. The powerless are themselves weak. Unbelievably, those who resist the empowered and their ideology may prevail. Such serious thoughts prevailed in preparation and in rehearsal of this production, though we hoped to wear them lightly by the end. We had to be as complex as we could psychologically, to help the music to tell, and strictly simple in visual language. Hence the few tiny props, all thrown up by the sea: the empty picture frame, to which the little family photo is restored; the tiny knitted



cardigan, suggesting to Seleuce her lost children; the milky blue that chokes Alessandro in the sea, and nearly poisons Tolomeo, linked to their mother Cleopatra and to Egypt, and of course to arsenic; the throne of water; the blue paint that indicates memory, fidelity, and another sense of Egypt.

I guess I find that is the struggle and the pleasure with this kind of opera, the music and drama of which is so spacious: to make each moment and each sign mean as densely as it

can, but to wear that simply and lightly, so that the audience can see and feel freely, making an experience of their own. That's what we all tried to do, anyway.

James Conway
General Director