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ON TOUR 2009



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Germaine Greer, *The Guardian*, 2007



TESEO: YOUTHFUL GENIUS



For many years I have been especially drawn to Handel's little known masterpiece, *Teseo* – among his many wonderful operas a unique synthesis of the French *tragédie lyrique* and Italian *opera seria*, created to captivate the new opera audience of London. Its rich, unusual scoring, with virtuoso oboe parts and split violas and bassoons, combined with the delicate poetry of its libretto, were perhaps too original – after its popular (though disaster prone) run of performances in London between January 10 and May 11 1713, it was not revived again for 234 years!

Teseo was Handel's second London opera, written only months after he met the 18 year old Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington, who was the composer's host and patron between 1712 and 1715. Its success recalled the triumph of *Rinaldo* (1711), and effaced the cooler reception accorded to *Il Pastor Fido* (1712), a charming, lighter work, without theatrical sensation. Like *Rinaldo*, it featured a spurned and wrathful enchantress who puts many obstacles in the way of virtuous lovers – but its dramatic construction in five acts, with many short arias and accompanied recitatives, is utterly unlike *Rinaldo*. Remarkably, the major characters each sing two arias in a row when first they appear, and only exceptionally do the characters exit after their arias.

The reason is that the librettist Haym follows closely the tragedy written by Quinault for the French composer Lully (actually the Italian Lulli, but that's another matter). Whether it was a whim of the opera's dedicatee, Lord Burlington, or a commercial hunch of Handel's, *Teseo* is clearly an attempt to bring together the finest qualities of utterly dissimilar genres of opera, French and Italian.

The venture was served in London by fine artists: Elisabetta Pilotto-Schiavonetti, a specialist sorceress, played Medea; the soprano castrato Pellegrini (known to Handel in Venice, where he created the great role of Nero in the composer's *Agrippina*) played Teseo; Agilea was portrayed by one of the leading lights of Italian opera in London, Margherita de l'Epine, and her sister Maria Gallia played Clizia; Egeo was played by London's favourite Italian castrato at the time, Valentini, and Arcane was sung by the English contralto Jane Barbier, who did a particular line in trouser roles. The singers showed their faith when they stayed together on a profit-share basis after the impresario Owen MacSwiney absconded with the takings after the second performance, and they attempted to save the show after the machinery broke down and word quickly spread that there was no spectacle to be seen.

What makes *Teseo* a great opera is the depth and variety of its characterisation in music. The female protagonists are superbly contrasted: Agilea (virtuous, constant, brave, loveable and loving, in no way insipid), who dominates Act 1, is set against Medea (powerful, mercurial, frightening, unloved and yearning for affection, not quite pitiable), who is on stage for every moment of Act 2. Beside Agilea is the slightly shallow Clizia, who admires men of action, and sends her lethargic lover spinning in no very useful direction, but eventually learns to love. The other two high voiced males are the title character, a study in impetuous courage, undeviating affection and trust, and his more complicated father Egeo, fond verging on foolish, perhaps, in his love for a younger woman, a little ineffectual as a king-warrior, less than plain in his dealings with his guest and powerful ally, Medea. Medea is the most interesting figure: the misery of those whose love is not returned is always compelling, and the consequent perversion of their appetites is exciting to watch. This is the same mythic character who helped and married Jason, only to be cast off by him; her revenge on that occasion was to kill his new bride with a poisoned cloak,

and to butcher her own two children by Jason, a certain indication that she wounds herself even more sorely than her intended victims. She is the woman who has power, but has no love; her power, then, is feared and despised. In the world of heroes, women should be more like Agilea, pliant and supportive. Happily, in the opera she is no shrinking violet: her endurance and honesty measures her growth.

Teseo himself may seem slim, and now that prowess in battle is not so much esteemed one may wonder why these two extraordinary women care so much for him, but he too matures to some extent, refined by his contact with the powerful woman, the loyal and beloved woman, and the wavering father. For the first three acts he conceals from everyone the fact that he is the king's son, just so he can see if Agilea will love for his courage, not his rank. He might have been even better matched had he paired off with Medea – she who wants to be loved as a woman, rather than used as a sorceress. I guess it's later on in the story (after another marriage to an Amazon, which produces a son called Hippolytus) that Theseus makes use of the powerful, sensuous Ariadne (as his father did with Medea), then abandons her, then marries her sister Phaedra, then sees the terrible consequences of Phaedra's lust for poor Hippolytus. These heroes have unappealing sides, but they provide great material for opera.

It's tricky, this business of father and son. Egeo sent his son away as a child, so does not know what he looks like. Teseo does return, and as a general he saves his father the king's bacon (with a dose on Medea's magic in the mix) by defeating rebels¹. Curiously, Handel set but then cut before the first performance the one, short passage of recitative in which Teseo confesses to Agilea that he is Egeo's son, and this is overheard by Medea; because we need to know this, and to know that she knows this, to understand her plot to make Egeo kill his own son in the next act and be revenged on them both, we have reinstated this passage of the original libretto – remembering that Handel's audience would have had it in front of them in the word-book. I hope that it goes some way to accounting for her remarkable change of heart between the end of Act 4 (when she repents of her tortures and allows the lovers to unite) and the beginning of Act 5 (when, alone again, she reckons she was foolish to be so generous, and connives to destroy the lot).²

It is touching that before giving up Teseo and Agilea, both Medea and Egeo confess that they truly love them. Neither the insistence of passion nor the generosity of affection are the preserves of the virtuous; actually, many of Handel's most fascinating creations (think of Alcina, of Polinesso and Lurcanio in *Ariodante*, of Elisa in *Tolomeo*), are those who act unreasonably and unkindly because they are rejected in love. All her knowledge of alchemy, and all his regal authority yield them nothing in the stakes of love. Only in resisting these powerful, but ultimately bootless characters, do heroes like Teseo and Agilea and witnesses like Clizia and Arcane find their complexity, and earn their happiness.

JAMES CONWAY

1. Quinault's drama does not seem to allude to the famous black flag – which Theseus unfortunately (or conveniently?) fails to take down as he sails home, causing his father to despair and throw himself off a cliff, paving the hero's way to the throne.

2. A small act of interpretation is the assigning of the role of the deus ex machina (a Priest of Minerva, written in either soprano or bass clef) to the spirits of Medea's children, who, loving her in spite of her desperate violence, seek to put out the destructive fires she has lit. And, as the opera is sung in Italian, we have decided to project a copy of the original word-book alongside.



TOLOMEO