

Review: A Baroque Opera Muddies Lines Between Him and Her

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July 14, 2017 MUSIC

The New York Times

Baroque opera explored elements of gender fluidity in a way that now seems prescient. For one thing, female singers frequently performed male roles, establishing a tradition in opera that lingers today. And the superstars of Baroque opera were castratos — boys castrated before puberty to retain their high voices — the best of whom intriguingly combined a feminine range and sound quality with heroic, masculine power.

On Wednesday night at National Sawdust in Brooklyn, the intrepid director Christopher Alden explored gender fluidity in a radical production of a Handel rarity, “Aci, Galatea e Polifemo.” But he did so in a seemingly simple way: by letting the charismatic countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo, who was playing Galatea, a female water nymph, just be his male self. The powerful soprano Ambur Braid played Aci, a male shepherd, and she, too, allowed her female self to come through naturally.

“Aci,” composed in Naples in 1708 when Handel was 23, is a kind of dramatic cantata, commissioned by an Italian duchess to help celebrate her niece’s wedding. (This work is not to be confused with Handel’s later “Acis and Galatea,” a masque in English.) With an Italian libretto, the musically rich “Aci” offers early hints of Handel’s instinctive affinity for Italian opera. The story, adapted from Ovid, tells of

Galatea's consuming love for the shepherd Aci, which is threatened by the jealous monster Polifemo, whose frustrated yearning for Galatea provokes him to crush Aci with a boulder.

Mr. Alden wrings every bit of unsettling darkness from this curious work in an excitingly contemporary production that employs inventive videos and even electronic tweaks of the instruments in the orchestra — here, players from the period ensemble Ruckus. In this staging (a co-production with Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra & Chorale in San Francisco), Aci and Galatea become oppressed servants.

They first appear wearing matching custodians' outfits: drab greenish pants and shirts, yellow latex scrubbing gloves and plastic caps. The unisex look of their costumes somewhat mutes the gender differences between Mr. Costanzo's Galatea and Ms. Braid's Aci, which clearly was the intention. With mops in hand, they listlessly wash the floor of a room lined with incongruously cheerful tiles that depict sea scenes with fish, boats and mythical ocean creatures. (We see the images in video.)

Their first arias come across with alluring ambiguity. There are wistful thoughts of kisses stolen, and poignant descriptions of stars weeping tears over the couple's suffering. Mr. Costanzo's Galatea, full of dread and shame, complains that the monstrous Polifemo, presented as their master, keeps forcing "his vile lips upon me." Soon Polifemo appears, a tall, imposing character sung by Davóne Tines, a robust bass-baritone. Polifemo has come wearing his bathrobe, ready to be sponged in a tub by the distressed couple. Before long, he makes moves on Galatea and threatens to show no mercy if the nymph does not give in.

Casting Mr. Costanzo in the role introduced an overt homoerotic element to Polifemo's sexually aggressive character. But this production digs even deeper. Polifemo seems driven as much by brutal power, by, in a sense, the thrill of humiliating Galatea in Aci's presence. The sexual entitlement of powerful people has become a roiling topic in our national conversation right now. Yet it didn't take all that much tweaking of Handel's work to uncover a timeless theme of bullying.

The most radical adjustments are instrumental. During recitative passages, the sounds of period instruments in the ensemble are enhanced, distorted and layered over with electronic sounds, the work of the sound designer Mark Grey. These collective manipulations lend a creepy element to the recitatives, which were otherwise performed as Handel wrote them. Mr. Grey is also the video designer for this production, in which the wall tiles morph into eerie images, from a menagerie of eyes in close-up to dripping blood and entwining vines.

Clay Zeller-Townson, who led the ensemble, drew a vibrant performance from the musicians, achingly delicate one moment, punchy and incisive the next. Mr. Alden demands much from his three cast members, who have physically violent encounters when the predatory master becomes aroused. These artists gave their all. Ms. Braid, when in despair, allowed her gleaming sound to turn acidic and steely. In this staging, a climactic aria for Aci becomes a veritable mad scene, which Ms. Braid delivered with unhinged intensity. The role of Polifemo has an enormously wide vocal range that took Mr. Tines from chesty low tones to falsetto-like highs. He was terrifying in his blank determination to subjugate Galatea.

And, as usual, Mr. Costanzo — who, it was just announced, has signed a recording contract with Decca Gold — was extraordinary. He sang with plush yet virile sound while merging into his character, holding back nothing. He is also credited as a producer of “Aci.” Now, that’s a comprehensive creative artist.

Aci, Galatea e Polifemo

Continues on July 19 and 20 at National Sawdust, Brooklyn; 646-779-8455, nationalsawdust.org.

A version of this article appears in print on July 15, 2017, on Page C6 of the New York edition with the headline: Gender Proves Fluid in a Bathtub à Trois