

Caesar Salad

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Photo: Mike Amundsen

Georg Friedrich Handel's "Giulio Cesare" at Estonian National Opera, January 28.

I've always been taken with the 'sword and sandal' genre. It reached its zenith with the lavish films of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Who can forget Sir Larry Olivier encouraging Tony Curtis to "abase himself before the might and power of Rome" as he received a sponge bath, or Kirk Douglas battling Woody Strode for the amusement of flabby, decadent wine-sotted ne'er-do-wells in the epic "Spartacus"? Or for that matter all the other works featuring the likes of Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor, Charlton Heston, Jean Simmons and Steve Reeves in tunics and classical footwear? So it was with heightened anticipation that I watched the curtain rise for the Estonian National Opera's production of Georg Friedrich Handel's "Julius Caesar" on Saturday night. What followed was anything but traditional. However, an eclectic, somewhat weird and frequently funny "Julius Caesar" made for very entertaining fare.

It was obvious from the beginning of Act I that the production would take some liberties from its Baroque origins: a mini remote-controlled helicopter bearing a Roman standard and a lurking rubber snake weren't, I believe, in the original. In fact this "Julius Caesar" pulled out a host of post-modern tropes from dissolving the barrier between the audience and the stage, using goofy modern props, synecdoche in set design and flamboyant and decidedly non-period costumes. All, save the music, was a madcap tossed salad of multifarious ingredients that somehow pleased the palate.

It is worth mentioning that "Julius Caesar" is a very old opera, well preceding the heyday of 19th century productions that dominate the standard repertoire. The music very much reflects its vintage. The original Italian libretto goes all the way back to Giacomo Francesco Bussani's "Giulio Cesare in Egitto" from 1676. It was adapted by Nicola Francesco Haym for Handel's "Julius Caesar" which premiered in 1724 at London's King's Theater. It took another 288 years to find its way to Tallinn, with its Estonian premiere on January 27th of this year.

The story of Caesar's expedition to Egypt, romance with Cleopatra and the political intrigues which nearly spell doom for the principals took a backseat to Handel's beautiful score as played by the Estonian National Opera's Orchestra. It was lead by renowned Baroque specialist and all-around bon vivant Andres Mustonen. Mustonen is a showman and enjoys himself at the podium. He is best known as leader and violinist for early music group Hortus Musicus, so the right man held the baton on Saturday night.

There was great and interesting singing throughout the show. To those unaware of the history of the opera, it surely came as a surprise that a woman was cast in the role of Caesar. Caesar was originally cast for a castrato and the part fell to mezzo-soprano Teele Jõks who handled all of that difficult Baroque stylizing wonderfully. A clear crowd favorite was Monika-Evelin Liiv as Cornelia who sung some stirring arias as did Katrin Targo as Cleopatra.

On the humorous side of the ledger, bass Mart Laur as Cleopatra's brother Ptolemy, was decked out like an inner-city pimp with furs, gold chains and a bevy of scantily clad girls with guns to do his bidding. Rene Soom's Achilles brought some gangster menace with a flamboyant do-rag, shades and sidearm. Achilles keeps Cornelia as a concubine until she is freed by her son Sesto (Andres Köster) at the opera's conclusion. For some reason Sesto is a preppy with an Izod shirt and sweater vest.

As we're all told in school, Cleopatra died from a self-induced snakebite. In this "Julius Caesar", the rubber snake, an ever-present danger, is thwarted and JC and Cleopatra enjoy romantic bliss. All is well, if a bit quirky, in the land of the pharaohs.