La Calisto

Mel Cooper 02/08/2019

Venue Longborough Opera Festival Theatre

As always, Longborough's final presentation of the year is a showcase for emerging talent. This time the production is a modernised update by director Mathilde Lopez and Designer Jean Chan of the Cavalli opera, *La Calisto*. The night I attended it was a bit stilted in the first half. I think it might have been opening night nerves that caused a slight stodginess at first. Because in the second half, after a 90-minute break for picnicking, with the appearance of Zita Syme as a pugnacious, intelligent and vocally splendid Juno in a striking red dress, who came with her two peacocks (dancers with peacock heads), the whole thing took off.

During the first half, the audience seemed a bit soporific and unresponsive, but in the second half there was much hilarity and at the end, the audience insisted on extra curtain calls. That is correct! The cast left the stage after one bow and the audience went on and on clamouring until they came back and accepted a real ovation. Perhaps it took the first half and the picnic to get them in the mood and that was the problem all along?

I liked the concept of the production and thought that the old Ovidian story was clearly conveyed with much humour. Tongues were firmly in cheeks and you were clearly being invited to compare the behaviour of the gods and their sense of sexual entitlement to today's politicians or movie moguls.

As you probably know, this is a very early oper (premiered in 1651) and so some of the interest in it is simply to hear what opera sounded like as it was getting going. The period instruments and clean playing helped convey something of what an original audience would have heard. On the other hand, the handling of the mythical story is actually quite contemporary in feel because it does satirise all kinds of an idea about sexual stereotypes and roles.

Felix Kemp as Jove and Neil Balfour as Mercury were sonorous and suitably sinister, macho-thoughtless, and real subjects for a "Me Too" satire. Sophie Goldrick as Diana and also as Jove Disguised as Diana did not, at first, differentiate clearly enough in her acting between the two characters inhabiting one body; but by Act Two she was certainly more in gear and it became clearer when she was which.

Ciara Vinci was lovely as Calisto, someone I would definitely like to hear and see again. Brian McAlea as Endimione, the shepherd in love with the chaste goddess nearly stole the show, especially in the second half, with his comic timing and his balloon sheep and the way he handled them. He was charming throughout and very musical. As the evening developed it became clearer that the concept was a kind of Pythonesque send-up at one level. Instead of a bosky wood, we were in a kind of 1960s brutalist car park or shopping mall. Nature (Emma Charles), Destiny (Lizzi Holmes) and Eternity (Jessie Tse) were the cleaning ladies, pushing around mops and shopping carts and making some really hilarious faces at the audience. The voices were all clear, clean and attractive; and the pit band did an excellent job under the direction of Lesley Anne Sammons.

It was, in the end, a really lovely evening and once again justified the practice at Longborough of giving emerging artists an entertaining and lively showcase. Next year they are doing Janacek's *Cunning Little Vixen* in this slot. It's demanding work but it is also a total delight and should be a perfect fit for young artists. I can hardly wait!

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Opera
Composer Francesco Cavalli
Librettist Giovanni Faustini after Ovid
Conductor Lesely Ann Sammons
Director Mathilde Lopez
Choreographer Amelia Cardwell
Cast Includes: Chiara Vinci, Sophie Goldrick, Zita Syme, Felix Kemp, Neil Balfour, Brian McAlea, Gabriel Seawright
Venue Longborough Opera Festival Theatre
Until 03 August 2019

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mel Cooper

Canadian-born Mel Cooper first came to the UK to study English Literature at Oxford University and stayed. He was captivated by the culture and history of Britain, which he found to be a welcoming and tolerant country. After working in highly illustrated, non-fiction publishing for over a decade, he founded and edited the magazine Opera Now. Since then he has worked as a consultant to the Japanese broadcaster NHK, a broadcaster on British Satellite Broadcasting, a maker of audio shows and arts critic for several airlines, and as one of the team that started Britain's first commercial classical music radio station, Classic FM, on which he was both a classical music DJ and creator and presenter of shows like Classic America and Authentic Performance. Throughout this period, he also lectured in music and literature in London and Oxford and published short stories in Canada. After working with the Genesis Foundation on helping to fund arts projects, he continues to write, review and lecture on music and literature. His first novel has just been published as an e-book. The title is City of Dreams. It is the first volume of a projected saga called The Dream Bearers. You can find the Kindle version of the book on Amazon.

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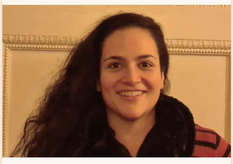

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