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Domingo proves a force of nature in LA Opera's 'Tamerlano.'



Patricia Bardon as Andronico. Photo by Robert Millard.

**GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL
TAMERLANO
LOS ANGELES OPERA
NOVEMBER 21, 2009**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

Plácido Domingo is a force of nature. Most Italianate Latin tenors stick to the standard repertoire, but not Domingo. He has sung every conceivable tenor role imaginable with some baritone roles mixed in. He has ventured into the Wagnerian terrain, and now he has added the baroque "Tamerlano" to the mix, with an adoring audience throwing him flower bouquets as the curtain figuratively fell at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion on

opening night in LA.

Briefly, the Turkish sultan (Bajazet) is defeated by the ruler of the Tartar empire (Tamerlano) who is betrothed to the princess of Trebizond (Irene). But Tamerlano falls in love with Bajazet's daughter Asteria and wants to marry her instead. She, on the other hand, is in love with the Greek prince Andronico who is smitten with her, but Tamerlano wants Andronico to marry Irene. Bajazet kills himself. Tamerlano renews his relationship with Irene, and Andronico is free to marry Asteria.

"Tamerlano" is an 18th-century opera that tells a 15th-century story, yet the director and designer dress the officers so that they remind us of Nazis, with the rest of the cast in modern-day suits. Only Bajazet and his daughter are allowed to diverge from this black-and-white monotony – Domingo in a colorful red-and-gold Turkish robe and his daughter in a variety of period ensembles.

What makes baroque opera so appealing is that if the vision matches the sound, we are exposed to a stylization that meshes everything together. It is precisely this stylization that separates baroque operas from the rest of the standard repertoire. Designer David Zinn and director Chas Rader-Shieber have erased the uniqueness of this "Tamerlano" and created a modernized updated minimalistic production that looks and feels like all the rest.

With the baroque sound of the strings, theorbos and harpsichords laden with vocal recitatives, coloratura and instrumental ornamentation, we expect to see the characters dressed to match the period – to justify the fact that we are hearing countertenors who sing like sopranos but look like men, thus duplicating the castrati experience of the 1700s. And then there are the mezzo-sopranos in trouser roles. It is all a bit daunting, but we accept the confusion if the baroque vision and sound remain pure.

Unfortunately when you update and modernize a baroque opera as the designer and director of this "Tamerlano" have done, we in the audience no longer accept the confusion but question the sexuality of the characters instead. Andronico, a mezzo, seemed like a male impersonator or transsexual with pasted down short hair in a suit. She appeared to be a lesbian who was courting Asteria. I even mistook her for a countertenor, but the countertenor was really Tamerlano.

"Is there a political agenda?" I asked myself. "Is the director a gay rights activist?" A traditional production would have never posed these questions.

The Cast

Aside from the minimalistic set and costumes, I did like Handel's music, the orchestra and the singing. Having previously performed "Tamerlano" in Madrid and with Washington National Opera, some of the singers were reprising their roles in Los Angeles – Domingo being one of them. At almost 69, his voice was vibrant, youthful and Latinate. Stylistically, it was a bit heavy and heroic for this baroque piece and lacked the flexible agility that singers of this genre are known for. The coloratura passages could

have been cleaner, but then Domingo hasn't been spending the last 40 years of his life perfecting his trills and fioriture. That part of his technique was admirable per his "Ciel e terra armi di sdegno," and the rest of his technique was flawless. He projected a well-supported and resonant sound. His death scene enabled us to observe him express feeling through vision and sound that moved from the core of his being into the darkness of the hall where his look, sound and characterization became one.

I especially liked the vocal quality of the two mezzos. Rich and creamy comes to mind. Bel canto expert Patricia Bardon (Andronico) displayed a vocal and physical security that was resolute and unfaltering. Her tones were lush and luxurious, and she executed her stage directions flawlessly which, although admirable, was at times difficult for us in the audience to fathom since her precise movements exuded such masculinity that we were convinced she was a he.

Strangely enough, Jennifer Holloway displayed some masculinity as well when dressed in a black suit with her hair pasted back as Irene, but there was a smartness about her fashion statement although it didn't quite fit in with the genre. Holloway's "Par che mi nasca in seno" sold her full-bodied sound to the audience.

Countertenor Bejun Mehta's "A dispetto d'un volto ingrato" revealed that he had the goods. He was a marvel technically, but determined to stay true to his Fach. At one point he sang a very low tone that was crying out for chest quality, but Mehta fought back the urge and sang the note all head. Even a mezzo or soprano would have allowed a bit of chest to creep in. I wonder what Mehta's sound would have been like had he given in.

Sarah Coburn's Asteria looked and sounded beautiful, especially when singing her newly added Act 3 duet with Domingo; but her high notes were tinny at times. I plead innocent, though. The man sitting next to me said that her voice sounded "metallic." She has a light voice with an attractive timbre. I think that it just needs some bloom.

And finally, Ryan McKinny's bass-baritone as Leone added some robust balance to the production. Conductor William Lacey led the baroque orchestra of about 35 with rhythmic precision. The grace of the instrumental sound was undeniable.

The opera seria style is incomparable when the elements mesh. The director and designer of this "Tamerlano" chose sterility over beauty. Fortunately for them, the singers and orchestra circumvented much of the damage. However without Plácido Domingo's heartfelt portrayal and presence on stage, I doubt that this would have been possible.

Libretto: Nicola Francesco Haym

Conductor: William Lacey

Director: Chas Rader-Shieber

Scenery and Costume Designer: David Zinn

Lighting Designer: Christopher Akerlind

Assistant Director: Trevore Ross

A Washington National Opera production