

**Iphigénie en Tauride. By Christoph Willibald Gluck.
Glimmerglass Opera, Cooperstown, New York. 19 August 1997**

Gluck's resolve to counter the florid inventions of baroque opera with a style that would follow the dictates of reason has led him to be described as a quintessential artist of the Enlightenment, and his 1779 *Iphigénie en Tauride* is the culmination of his efforts. The mythic material easily lent itself to treatment by Gluck and his librettist, Nicolas-François Guillard, as an allegory of Enlightenment, as it later would for Goethe. The peaceful resolution of the bloody history of the house of Atreus, the end of Iphigénie's exile among savages, and the end of the institution of human sacrifice, all were ideal grist for the Enlightenment mill, telling as they did of the triumph of European rationalism. Today, however, with thinkers from Jean-François Lyotard to John Gray proclaiming the demise of the Enlightenment, and literary critics laying bare the racist, ethnocentric and sexist undercurrents of the Enlightenment project, it is important for any director of *Iphigénie* to reflect on how the opera's values are to be interpreted to a contemporary audience.

Director Francesca Zambello's approach is both keenly intelligent and theatrically powerful. Seizing on the irrationality and violence at the heart of the story, Zambello's *Iphigénie* (Christine Goerke) is not a serene priestess, but a woman traumatized by the memory of a father who almost killed her, and is now held captive by Thoas (Grant Youngblood), a brutal, jackbooted terrorist who not only threatens her with violence as her father once did, but also forces her to put her captive countrymen to death. Marina Draghici's bunker-like set becomes a space of terror and traumatization, in which the brutality of Thoas was not merely that of a non-European Other, but that of the Atreidae itself. Early in the opera, *Iphigénie* is troubled by a nightmare in which she was forced to kill her brother, and, in Zambello's staging, she climaxes the narration of that dream by driving a sacrificial dagger into the altar, a spare, metallic construction that evokes the surgery of the torture cell more than the temple.

Near the opera's end, when *Iphigénie* has been reunited with her brother Oreste (Nathan Gunn), and Thoas's power suddenly vanishes, the violent gesture appears once more. In a powerful divergence from Guillard's libretto, in which Pylades (William Burden) kills the Scythian tyrant, Zambello has *Iphigénie*'s attendants drag Thoas to the altar where *Iphigénie* kills him, again driving her dagger downward. The priestesses with their bloody hands recall the earlier bloody-handed specters that haunted Oreste's dream of avenging Furies, and not even the appearance of the serene Diana (Isabel Bayrakdarian) and the final



Iphigénie en Tauride by Christoph Willibald Gluck. July 5–August 23, 1997, Conductor: Jane Glover; Director: Francesca Zambello.
Left to right: Margaret Lloyd (Chorus Member), Nathan Gunn (Oreste), and Christine Goerke (Iphigénie)
Courtesy of Glimmerglass Opera

rejoicing of the chorus can dim Iphigénie's awareness that she has entered into the violent history of her family. She who was victim at Aulis has become executioner at Tauris. Her final gaze rests, not on her beloved brother, but on the bloody corpse of Thoas. In this production, the triumph of Enlightenment reason is not absolute; this *Iphigénie en Tauride* is not about the triumph of Greek over Barbarian, but the traumatic effects of a history of barbarism among Greeks.

This is not to say that Zambello merely deflates Enlightenment values by showing them vulnerable to the process of scapegoating the Other. Iphigénie does not attempt to rationalize or flee from the implications of her violent act. Indeed, it is through her confrontation of that action that she attains a nobility beyond that of any other character on stage, even the divine Diana. By moving the death of Thoas from a plot incident instigated by a minor character and quickly forgotten, to the climactic action performed by the protagonist and heavily underscored, Zambello forces us to confront the scapegoating mechanism in the libretto, and contemplate its significance. In this production, it is not that Enlightenment values are proved to be false, but that they are never obtained absolutely. There is always a residuum of savagery.

While Iphigénie moves from troubled innocence to tragic knowledge, her brother pursues an opposite course. Tormented by matricidal guilt, he begins as a man whose recital of his family's violent history leads him to assume a rocking fetal position in a downstage corner of the stage. He identifies himself with the victims, and tells Iphigénie that Oreste is dead. As he witnesses his sister performing a funeral rite for him, he stands, and moves with measured, dreamlike serenity along the upstage wall. Later, stripped to a loincloth and blindfolded, he is tenderly washed by his sister and her attendants, dressed in a white robe, and laid on the altar. Accompanied by Gluck's dignified and lyrical music, Oreste's progression to the altar becomes less one of impending horror than of purification and restoration to life.

By contrasting the stories of Iphigénie and Oreste, Zambello creates a complex emotional and intellectual interplay of violent, tragic repetition on the one hand, and ritual exorcism on the other. Oreste is led beyond the violent heritage of his family, while Iphigénie finds herself at the heart of it. Both movements register equally, allowing the production to do justice both to the cruelty of the story and the nobility of much of Gluck's score. The result is a production that places two visions of the Enlightenment into unresolved tension: the first, a vision of Enlightenment as the attainment of purification from the past; the second, of an Enlightenment deeply disturbed at finding itself reinscribed within the very savagery it sought to transcend.

In this Atreid world, in which fathers threaten their daughters with violent death, and wives kill their husbands, heterosexual desire only appears in

Thoas's sadistic abuse of Iphigénie. Erotic devotion is reserved for the relationship between Oreste and Pylades. Chained back to back, with their double shadow thrown large against the back wall (one of lighting designer Mimi Jordan Sherin's most striking images), they are less frightened by impending death than by the prospect of separation. Later, Oreste tenderly cares for the wounds of his tortured friend. In such sequences as these, the two men, half-naked and passionately concerned for each other's welfare, provided a utopian alternative to the horror-driven history of the Atreidae and the sadism of Thoas. The movement beyond patriarchal violence was accomplished by a reconfiguration of masculinity as non-hierarchical, intimate and vulnerable.

Throughout this production, Zambello works an interesting reversal of the gender stereotypes associated with tragedy. Oreste is passive, both emotionally and physically. Except to defend Pylades, he allows himself to be ministered to, and Nathan Gunn's fine physique is the most eroticized presence on stage. In contrast, Iphigénie is de-eroticized, active, and driven to violence. It is she who assumes the role of tragic protagonist as she confronts her own violent deed. Never the monstress of melodrama, she keenly experiences the consequences inherent in her history of abuse. In re-thinking these gender roles and re-examining the dramaturgical significance of the death of Thoas, Zambello has deepened our understanding of Gluck's Enlightenment masterpiece, and has given us an compelling tragic vision for our own age.

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