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Giulio Cesare

by Daniel Scheffler

EDGE Contributor

Sunday Apr 7, 2013

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David Daniels sings as Cesare, opposite Natalie Dessay as Cleopatra

The scope of Handel's "**Giulio Cesare**," that opened at the Metropolitan Opera House on Thursday night, is so far reaching that it reminds opera-goers just how the opera experience cannot ever come remotely close to a digital, a televised, a theatrical, a fabricated or even a filmic odyssey.

As much as "Mad Men" will attract a record number of viewers for AMC again, or George Clooney will send the masses to the Regal or Tom Hanks will set the crowds on Broadway down it will always be opera that forgets commercialism and aims to create for the love of the historical craft. Opera, by its sheer essence, goes beyond all those avenues to take its beholders from the head, and all its prejudices and monkey mind thoughts, to the rightful place for artistic expression and experiences -- the heart.

Not only is "Giulio Cesare" all heart, but also so is its host. The Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center, with its hard-to-clean Viennese chandeliers, destabilizing plush carpets, off-gold trims, cone-shaped golf course inspired water cups and Alice in Wonderland staircases is enough reason to see the opera.

The opera is not just for the monied set; the subway stops right outside, a CNN sign winks from

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above and the coffee-for-the-masses Starbucks hides cheekily around the block. Incomparable to Paris's foremost opulent opera house or even the modest opera house in Rome, the New York version feels so much more at ease with itself -- modernized and accessible whether you want to arrive dressed in Lacroix couture or straight from the gym in sneakers and jeans.

The Baroque "Giulio Cesare", first performed in 1724, is set in Egypt in 48 B.C. and expels all the drama (forget "Housewives" at this point) over three acts. In true operatic semblance, the sensations, thrills and of course upsets are never minor as evinced in the cast that includes nobody less than the greats: Natalie Dessay and David Daniels and a host of other greats like violin soloist David Chan.

The story kicks off with Caesar (David Daniels) and his henchmen docking in Alexandria after hunting down their enemy, Pompey. Co-ruled by almost-slutty Cleopatra (Natalie Dessay) and her psychopath brother Ptolemy (Christophe Dumaux) Egypt so marvelously represents the cultural commingle of the time with the Orient dancing on the dunes and across the Nile.

Natalie Dessay, our Lady Macbeth like Cleopatra, manages to exude enough cattiness, enough of a pussy hex and even some curl in her step step step, as she flutters majestically into the arias.

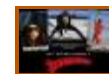
The delightful sight of Pompey's head on a silver platter sets our hero Caesar on his own journey with Cleopatra who woos him with her feline magnetism. Natalie Dessay, our Lady Macbeth like Cleopatra manages to exude enough cattiness, enough of a pussy hex and even some curl in her step step step, as she flutters majestically into the arias. Whilst Cleopatra busies herself with wheedling Caesar, the son of Pompey Sextus (Alice Coote) and his mother Cornelia (Patricia Bardon) are determined to avenge their paternal ruler's horrific head on a platter death.

Over the next four and a half hours, with two intermissions thankfully, Cleopatra, the man-hunting charmer, manages to successfully seduce Caesar and Cornelia, and her son in tow, manages to take enough action to satisfy their aspirations for death and drama.

Natalie Dessay, the great star, manages to dazzle despite her previous vocal problems (last season) but the absolute star of the night surprisingly is the French countertenor Christophe Dumaux who plays Ptolemy. Receiving the biggest clap after the show his performance truly did stand out as most dexterous.

The other thrill of the show is another countertenor Rachid Ben Abdeslam as the eunuch BFF of Cleopatra and Ptolemy Nireus. Adding some well deserved comic relief and overly camp, and dramatic, actions Abdeslam gets a giggle and even a loud belly laugh in his Met debut.

Under the watchful eye of conductor Harry Bicket, noted for his interpretation of baroque and classical repertoire, Handel's music seeps through the seats, the costumes and the vast opens spaces designed for some musical air. Bicket, a British descent veteran, forms part of the new school group of conductors who are "historically aware" which may be dominated by the "right hand and baton



The new play 'how i learned to become a Superhero' tells 3 stories of characters that long to be superheroes, despite not having any super powers. EDGE spoke with playwright Dennis Flanagan about his collaborative work.



Sally Potter Relives Cold War Tensions With 'Ginger & Rosa'

By Jake Mulligan | Apr 7

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technique" but will then be true to period, as the orchestra requires. And so Bicket manages just that -- operatic accuracy.

Opera may have a highfalutin reputation and may attract an Upper West Side over 60 set, but the Met has changed that up and the busy entrance hall filled with youngsters, hipsters (all the way from Brooklyn) and the appreciators of an ancient creative process.

And then during the show infusions of crowd delighting Bollywood-style dancing, naughty winks, extreme costumes that include jodhpurs and rouged military ensembles and fun modernisms (opposed to seeing them as anachronisms), are what makes this specific opera so reachable and brings it down from Europe's awful pedestal and gives itself to the people of New York.

"Giulio Cesare" runs through May 10 at the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center. For information or tickets, call 212-362-6000 or visit metopera.org.

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