

September 22, 2011

Graham's Iphigenia a wonder to behold

By Richard Ouzounian Theatre Critic

Iphigenia in Tauris

★★★★(out of 4)

Some boast of having seen the Grand Canyon at dawn or the Taj Mahal by moonlight.

After Thursday night, I prefer to exult in the fact that I have seen Susan Graham play Iphigenia, a performance that evokes the same awe as any natural or man-made wonder.

In fact, the entire production of *Iphigenia in Tauris* that launched the Canadian Opera Company's current season is one to make you thankful that artists like these are here to share their gifts with us.



John Currid Photo/John Currid Photo
Susan Graham as Iphigenia in Iphigenia in Tauris. (Sept. 22, 2011)

The text is based on Euripides' play in which the demons of the House of Atreus are finally laid to rest. King Agamemnon's willingness to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, had set in motion a great tragic machine, which caused wife to slay husband, son to slay mother and everyone to suffer loss past the bonds of human endurance.

Iphigenia escaped the blade her father had meant for her, but now she lives in vestal servitude on a remote island, destined by the gods to kill anyone who lands there.

After years of mind-numbing loneliness, her brother, Orestes, appears and the will of the gods seems intent on forcing things to a horrible conclusion.

To this pitiless story, Christoph Willibald Gluck adds redemption in the form of his score, marked with the crystalline beauty of all his work and somehow that makes the grim happenings easier to assimilate. His sound provides the human note through which these creatures struggle against their destiny.

Director Robert Carsen stages things in as bold a manner as one could imagine, putting all the action inside a giant black box, while Tobias Hoheisel (who designed the set and costumes) puts everyone in black, leaving us only their hands and faces to look at, so we judge the deeds that have been done and the people who have done them.

A superb dancing chorus, representing numerous carbon copies of our leading players, executes the savage choreography of Philippe Giraudeau with passion, while the invariably brilliant COC Chorus, under the direction of Sandra Horst, sings from the orchestra pit.

Conductor Pablo Heras-Casado has the firm yet delicate touch required to allow the music to be heard in all its complexity, while allowing all the singers to take pride of place.

The exquisite Graham not only is totally believable as the driven-to-madness Iphigenia, but the way she gives voice to those feelings is almost frightening. Like the giant sword she brandishes, her voice can catch the light one moment and cut through your heart the next.

Russell Braun brings all the driven passion of Orestes to life, while providing the burnished tones the role calls for and Joseph Kaiser was thrilling as his good friend, Pylades, his true young tenor matching the ardour of his sacrificial friendship.

Iphigenia in Tauris may have the random cruelty of the gods as one of its themes, but this unforgettable production proves that they can be kind as well.

By Christoph Willibald Gluck. Directed by Robert Carsen. Conducted by Pablo Heras-Casado. Until Oct. 15 at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, 145 Queen St. W. 416-363-8231.