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Spirit of the '70s fills a Greek myth in updated 'Semele'

By Matthew Guerrieri, Globe Correspondent

Opera Boston's terrific, ingeniously entertaining new production of George Frideric Handel's "Semele" is a reminder that modern sitcoms are pale retreads of their mythical Greek and Roman forbears. A reluctant bride is a comic staple. The same bride having an affair with Jupiter, king of the gods? Now that's a special guest star.

Semele is the bride, busy stalling a betrothal arranged by her father Cadmus when Jupiter carries her off: consternation ensues. Director Sam Helfrich - updating the action to the golden age of formulaic television, the 1970s - creates the quintessential awkward wedding reception, with a chorus of guests (pastel polyesters and unfortunate bridesmaid dresses courtesy of costumer Nancy Leary) trapped in the antiseptic elegance of a rented hotel ballroom, re-created with loving verisimilitude by scenic designer Andromache Chalfant.

Composed after Handel abandoned opera for the lower financial overhead of oratorio, "Semele" opts less for theatrical dash and more for the extended,



Lisa Saffer (left, with Paula Murrhiy) performed the title role in "Semele." (Clive Grainger)

florid virtuosity of the concert hall - the emotional temperature often seems to be measured in sheer quantity of notes. Judicious cuts advanced the drama, and where the overflowing jewelry-box arias were too exquisite to jettison, Helfrich agreeably occupied the eye with deft stage business: sometimes simple, sometimes deliciously outlandish, as with Jupiter's rakish camcorder capturing Semele's Act I boast "Endless pleasure" - the ruler of Olympus having appropriate access to advanced technology.

The title role is a notorious marathon; soprano Lisa Saffer displayed more depth than agility, but her golden voice and fluent acting made Semele less a vain Barbie doll and more a real person, with a spontaneous sense of fun and delight. As her gawky sister Ino, hopelessly in love with Athamas, mezzo Paula Murrhiy and her polished-marble timbre convincingly negotiated the tightrope between hope and despair. Tai Oney's Athamas caught the self-conscious bearing of dignity under assault; his countertenor was soft-edged but stylish. Baritone David Kravitz took on two roles: his paternal exasperation as Cadmus disrupted his voice, but as Somnus, the god of sleep, his mellifluous legato was both funny and beautiful.

Among the other gods, mezzo Margaret Lattimore unleashed martial high notes and trombonc depths as Jupiter's perennially enraged wife Juno; her showpiece "Iris, hence away" coursed with ruthless precision. Amanda Forsythe poured out an exceptional chrome-bright soprano and made the comedic most of Juno's eagerly devious assistant Iris. Scott Ramsay's sweet, silky tenor was a fascinating match for Jupiter, reimagined as a formidable executive, exercising power through confident charisma; his elegant singing of "Where'er you walk," the opera's greatest hit - staged as a counterpoint to a Semele-Ino reunion - reinvigorated even that warhorse. The production is a collaboration with Boston Baroque, borrowing their orchestra, chorus, and conductor, Martin Pearlman, who led an incisive performance, transparent and sharply accented. The chorus was marvelous: tight, ringing, and theatrically enjoyable.

The comic staging turns decidedly darker in the final scenes, as Semele, goaded by Juno, finally asks too much of Jupiter, and is destroyed; Helfrich's cold-light-of-day ending that would have done Robert Altman proud. But the production's moments of poignancy highlight the connections between sister and sister, father and daughter, or even, in Juno's unexpected longing, wife and unfaithful husband. "Toss'd through the void," the chorus sings, "by some rude shock we're broke" - the disorder Semele unleashes stands in for the chaos of life, the familial relationships the fragile islands of shared stability that make it bearable. Semele's jealousy of immortality - no composer could portray a heroine's pride and fear in the face of time's implacability like Handel - leaves her wanting both worlds, and attaining neither. Pleasure, as it turns out, is never endless.