

The Stage Reviews

Giulio Cesare

Published **Monday 16 January 2012** at **11:16** by **George Hall**

Handel's most popular opera, focusing on Julius Caesar's adventures in Egypt - not least his conquest of (or by?) Cleopatra - joins Opera North's repertoire in Tim Albery's new production.

Leslie Travers' adaptable set first suggests a cut-off pyramid, and then reconfigures throughout the evening to represent various interiors and exteriors peopled by characters dressed in the costumes of later periods.

Modern conflict is regularly referenced.

After his defeat and murder in the ongoing battle with his wife and sister, Cleopatra, for the Egyptian throne, Ptolemy's body is robbed of the golden finger extensions that symbolise his power, which his triumphant former consort/opponent immediately dons.

Visually, it's an often handsome show, enhanced by the variety and subtlety of Thomas C Hase's lighting; and throughout, director Albery conveys the narrative with assurance.

Musically, Robert Howarth's conducting provides impetus if not quite enough emphasis or character. The singing is never less than solid but rarely more than that.

Yet Sarah Tynan's highly physical Cleopatra offers genuine sparkle, her sequence of arias the highlights of the evening.

Pamela Helen Stephen impresses as a pensive, amorous Caesar, though is less successful at suggesting the Roman dictator's military bearing. Kathryn Rudge is feisty as Sesto, the determined son of Caesar's murdered rival Pompey. Ann Taylor is less striking as Pompey's ever-grieving widow, Cornelia.

James Laing offers a keenly etched portrayal of the treacherous, feline Ptolemy and Jonathan Best blusters effectively as the bullying Egyptian general Achilla.

Production information

Grand, Leeds, January 14, 25, February 7, 10, 16, then touring until March 16

Composer:

Handel

Director:

Tim Albery

Conductor:

Robert Howarth

Producer:

Opera North

Cast:

Pamela Helen Stephen, Sarah Tynan, Ann Taylor, Kathryn Rudge, James Laing, Jonathan Best

Running time:

3hrs

Production information can change over the run of the show.