

Intrigue, treachery, lust

A bold production of an unknown opera is as outsized as the themes it embraces

OPERA

Antonio Sartorio:
Giulio Cesare in Egitto
Canadian Opera Company
Studio Ensemble
at the Tanenbaum Opera Centre
in Toronto on Monday

REVIEWED BY URJO KAREDA

What can you say about a 325-year-old opera that died? Antonio Sartorio's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* had its premiere in Venice in December, 1677, and hasn't exactly been hanging around the stage door lately. Its libretto, though, by Giacomo Francesco Bussani, was quickly reset by many other composers, including, in a considerably modified form, the great Handel, whose much more brilliant version the COC will produce at the Hummingbird Centre next April.

For the moment, however, the

its Studio Ensemble program to the world of 17th-century music theatre, inspired by the artistic and practical enthusiasms of the late Peter Sandor's Baroque Opera Fund.

Venetians loved historical figures, licentiousness and gossipy intrigue, and so all the famous names — Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, Ptolemy, Pompey — turn up, but in less than documentary form. Love is the rampant subject here: The text must have thousands of references to Cupid the blind archer.

Sartorio's musical response was a seductive mingling of recitative and aria that still managed not to leave one memorable melody behind, but then as now it flattered the fresh young voices singing it. The augmented COC Studio Ensemble singers largely did themselves proud with the score, which was also beguilingly moulded instrumentally by a 10-player ensemble conducted by Gary Thor Wedow.

The COC responded to the

Diamond. The staging looked beautiful: Phillip Silver provided a sand-coloured open playing space, highlighted with simple but evocative gold set pieces; Wendy White's costumes were understated but lovely; and Bonnie Beecher lit the space with her own version of Cleopatra's infinite variety. Diamond moved the action along swiftly, with the help of Paula Thompson's choreography.

As so often happens, it was the singers willing to take the biggest chances who fared best. Krisztina Szabo was a powerful Cleopatra, voluptuous of voice and bearing. Ptolemy, filled with every kind of lust and treachery, was sung by the strong-voiced tenor David Pomeroy, who also seemed to have connected with his inner lecher. Martha Guth, as Pompey's widow, Cornelia, had less to work with, but she created a fiercely proud and dignified Roman matron, and in her trumpet aria hurled out her thrilling top range.

Roger Honeywell sang Caesar. He is a charismatic and intelligent singing actor making an interesting transition into an operatic tenor. This music didn't really suit him;

Others also didn't quite go the distance. Peter Collins, whose tenor was among the most promising voices heard in the show, is a blank on-stage, though he found something touching when he discovered his own happiness in the finale. The dark-voiced Olivier Laquerre as an Egyptian general seemed more dumb than dangerous, and he'll need to practise that trick with the dagger some more.

There were a couple of gender-bender surprises. I was well into the second act, and only with the help of the surtitles, before I realized that Andrea Ludwig's girlish prancing was meant to represent an adolescent boy. But that was nothing compared to the cumulative shock that soprano Shannon Mercer was meant to be Cornelia's son when she acted just like somebody's grandmother. The COC's superb character tenor John Kriter was naturally in his element in this Venetian sunset haze of pansexual prurience, playing I'm not sure exactly what but being, truly, the life of the party.

Giulio Cesare in Egitto continues in Toronto tonight and Friday at 8.