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BRIEF MENTION



BIG WOMEN: MARK ADAMO'S *LYSISTRATA, OR THE NUDE GODDESS* BETWEEN MONTEVERDI AND MUSICAL COMEDY

RALPH HEXTER

WE LIVE IN AN AGE WHEN OPERA COMPANIES ACROSS AMERICA are regularly presenting new operas, and some of them are even making hesitant first steps into repertory status, though it is too soon to tell how long- or short-lived their performance history will be. Opera itself began—Peri's *Dafne* (1597) is commonly regarded as the starting point—as an attempt to recreate Greek tragedy on the stage, and for at least its first two hundred years, plots drawing on classical material, if not always classical literary texts, were staples. Nineteenth-century opera composers were relatively less inclined to turn to the classics for plots and characters, but the twentieth century witnessed renewed activity in classically based operas, from Strauss' *Elektra* (1909) and Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (1927) to Hans Werner Henze's *Venus und Adonis* (1997) and Randolph Peters' *The Golden Ass* (1999), to name but a few significant examples. Mark Adamo's *Lysistrata, or the Nude Goddess*, which premiered in Houston in 2005, is among the first operas in our new century to continue the tradition.

Accompanied by a trio of distinguished distaff classicists, I attended the 2006 revival of *Lysistrata, or the Nude Goddess* at the New York City Opera. Some months later, as word of the outing—any resemblance to this or any other Aristophanic comedy is purely accidental—trickled out, *AJP*'s editor asked me to write this "Brief Mention." The reader will infer, then, that I neither watched nor listened with the idea of writing such a notice. What follows are reflections based partially on recollection of my immediate impressions (especially of the music) but also on subsequent study of the published libretto,¹ Adamo's earlier and quite popular *Little Women* (1998), and stray remarks of the composer in published or online

¹[n.p.]: G. Schirmer, 2005. Page numbers in the text refer to this edition.

interviews. In no sense is it a review of the particular April 2nd matinee performance that I saw. Of that let me say that my impression was almost uniformly positive. The principals, who have very demanding parts (and not only vocally), were strong; several were reprising roles they had taken in the Houston world premiere.

Adamo states on the title page of the libretto that the opera is “[f]reely adapted from the play by Aristophanes,” and this is both true and to the good. Before I turn to the adaptation itself, it might be worth observing that within the reception history of ancient stageworks in opera, the tradition of classical comedies turned into operas is relatively slight. I put it that way because, of course, one might well argue that New Comedy in its Roman form is the ultimate source of all *opera buffa*. I say nothing new when I place Figaro directly in the line of *servi callidi*.²

Greek Old Comedy (i.e., given the state of preservation, Aristophanes) has only infrequently provided fodder for opera. One of the most interesting cases is Walter Braunfels’ setting of Aristophanes *Birds*—*Die Vögel*—premiered in 1920. Braunfels (1882–1954) was fired from his teaching post by the Nazis in 1933—he was half Jewish—and his works were banished from the repertory. *Die Vögel*, his most successful stage-work, has been recently revived, and a recording is available in Decca’s “Entartete [“degenerate”] Musik” series. One must also recall the famous *Frogs* performed in the pool of Yale’s Payne Whitney Gymnasium in 1941, since, a generation later, in 1975, the piece was revived, provided with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and, like so many other shows, transferred from New Haven (if not the Shubert) to Broadway.³

Aristophanes is more at home, I would argue, in American musical comedy than in opera, at least opera as it has come to be received by modern audiences treated almost without exception to post-Gluckian opera, with major houses, until recently, shunning the more interesting hybrids. (Think even of *Carmen* and how long it took for it to lose the recitatives by Guiraud that replaced the original *opéra comique* spoken dialogue.) To modern spectators or readers, Aristophanes, with his wild

²Or even link the source for Mozart and Da Ponte’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Beaumarchais’ *Le mariage de Figaro*, directly with Plautus’ *Casina*. For example, Mary-Kay Gamel, “Slaves, Masters, and the Art of Authority in Plautine Comedy (review),” *AJP* 123 (2002) 297–301, esp. 297.

³Most revivals of Aristophanes involve music of one sort or another. The Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis (1925–) composed stage music for many ancient Greek plays (including Aristophanes *Lysistrata* and *Knights*) before composing his *Lysistrata* opera (world premiere: Athens, 14 April 2002).

plots, dirty jokes, and breaks of both style and the theatrical illusion itself, seems like vaudeville, like farce. He fits more easily in the tradition of burlesque, pantomime, and pastiche, running back (to name works that an opera house will occasionally take up) through Gilbert and Sullivan, Jacques Offenbach's *opérettes* (some playing with classical material, like *La belle Hélène* and *Orfée aux enfers*) to John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. All include contemporary satire, if not quite so vicious as Aristophanes' can be.

For this devotee of the muse of musical theater, in all her avatars, the complex historical placement of the new *Lysistrata* is revealed at the very outset. I refer not to Adamo's own generic identifier of his libretto—it is not any kind of opera: it is “a tragicomedy for singers and orchestra”—but to the “Invocation” with which the piece begins. “*THE FURIES—TISIPHONE, ALECTO, and MEGAERA—descend from the skies: divas ex machina*” (10). Many an early opera begins with a prologue with allegorical or divine figures, Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1642/3) memorably with Fortuna, Virtù, and Amore. Unlike *Poppea*'s prologue, where there is debate among the figures, Adamo's Furies share a common text, even if they sing “variously.” It is thus that Tisiphone first blurts out the word “strumpet,” which “she affirms.” “Strumpet,” that rhymes with “trumpet,” on the musical stage can only echo Miss Mazepa of the three strippers in *Gypsy* (“if you're gonna bump it, bump it with a trumpet”). And that is where this *Lysistrata* lies: between Monteverdi and the brassiest of musicals, with lyrics by Sondheim.

Musically, *Lysistrata* is quite different from Adamo's *Little Women*, written just a few years earlier. There are, to be sure, some introspective moments, but more often than not, the music is highly energized. For Adamo, this was already the music he “heard” in the Aristophanic *Lysistrata*: “hyperrhythmic, brilliantly colored, now sly and purring, now bursting with energy” (2). This is also a description of the music Adamo would write for his tragicomedy. Texts and melodies are reprised after the fashion of musical comedy, although also often transformed and recombined like operatic motifs. Adamo juxtaposes numerous contrasting styles and includes the occasional spoken ejaculation. But Adamo approached both source texts, different as they are, with a similar aim as dramatist. As the composer said in “Notes on *Little Women*,” he needed to “find a conflict, an *agon*.” He had to invent a conflict and not just between characters but within at least the leading character: “The conflict of *Little Women* is Jo versus the passage of time.”⁴

⁴CD booklet, 8–9 (Helsinki: Ondine, 2001).

In *Lysistrata*, Adamo found plenty of conflict but little coherent character, at least as understood in modern psychological terms. So even as he retains the central plot hinges of the original (the “sex strike,” the occupation of the Acropolis, the cooperation of Spartan and Athenian women), and even as a number of sections follow Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* quite closely,⁵ he has radically reframed the drama and given the title character an entirely new set of motivations—and a “development” curve, which her Aristophanic analogue did not have (and which no one would expect in Aristophanic comedy). Indeed, Adamo’s *prima donna* does not even start out as Lysistrata. Rather, she is Lysia, who has the general Nico as her lover.⁶ There are Athenian women protesting the war, whom she pretends to support, but at the opera’s opening, Lysia would like Nico to resign his commission to make their own private peace. After he tricks her into a quickie (satisfying only him) and then heads back to camp, she decides to join the women’s peace movement to exact a personal erotic revenge. It is with this motivation that she devises her famous stratagem and enlists the other women. Even as she leads them and inspires (and cajoles and coerces) their firmness, she herself wavers when Nico appears. The two have already arranged a capitulation when the women overwhelm Lysia with their praises, giving her the honorific name “Lysistrata”: “She who brings Peace” (100). Lysia cannot now abandon the women who depend on her, and she stands her ground. At the price of Nico’s love; shamed, he bids her farewell.

The final sequence diverges, if possible, even more radically. It is on Lampito’s “nude” body that the disputed territories are mapped. The resolution seems easily effected, but in Adamo’s version, carousing leads to renewed argument. Kinesias and Leonidas get into a row, and even Nico—yes, he returns—cannot quell the growing discord. Kinesias and Leonidas strike each other dead, and the whole cycle of violence is about to begin again when Ares and Aphrodite (both of whom have been frequently evoked in the text before) appear to restore the men to life and tell the assembled that discord in both their realms is everlasting. The most that one can hope for are periods of peace, and when they can

⁵ Adamo even reproduces some of the same jokes (Boeotian eels, Milesian leather, moths, flax) and in the same contexts, though the point of some of these references could only be conveyed to non-classicist audience members by gesture, innuendo, or both. Overall, the bawdry is considerably diminished. The ribald jokes and double entendres scattered through the text might not endanger a PG-13 rating (were this a movie); the few references to homosexuality (Spartan soldiers spooning, Sappho) are at least not homophobic.

⁶ Marriage is not a central theme as it is in the original. The women pine variously for husbands and lovers, and vice versa: this is modern America, not fifth-century Athens.

be attained, they should be relished and cherished. The Greeks—Athenians and Spartans alike—determine to be at peace in a world of eternal conflict.

This is a very different piece from Aristophanes', and why should it not be? The long history of reception has always been one of adaptation. Adamo can only write opera today, when our expectations for character include psychological realism and, for drama, include conflict, development, and resolution. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of his *Lysistrata* is that Adamo goes back to the earliest phases of opera (and Greek tragedy rather than comedy) to frame his work with gods appearing in a prologue and in the final scene.⁷ For the psychology of his major characters, one has to turn to more modern musical dramas. One knows from Adamo's notes on *Little Women* that Strauss/von Hofmannsthal's *Der Rosenkavalier* is dear to him, and, while Jo may have more Marschallin in her than does Lysia (though Lysia does steel herself for renunciation), there are in Lysia elements of several Puccini heroines as well (e.g., Tosca, Minnie, even Turandot).

Still, it is more often the psychology of twentieth-century American musical comedy that seems to provide the ambient background. Part of this may stem from the particular blend of "show," of ribald comedy based on the "inevitable" war of sexes that is Adamo's *Lysistrata*. Think *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946) and *Kiss Me Kate* (1953) among decades of musical comedies and movies. Adamo (or his audiences) may draw on this as the one creates, the others receive his piece, but he manipulates the tropes on his own terms. If, when Nico (Nicky?) walks out, he plays Herbie to Lysia's Momma Rose—in both cases, one might note, prefatory to the introduction of a "nude goddess"—Lysia is not Rose by nature. She belongs to the type of the Reluctant Hero, and if Lysia starts out as shallow, cynical, and not a little hypocritical, she becomes a real peacemaker. This might be the piece's enduring insight, a shaft of light to counter what appears dark at the finale. To once again wax operatic: a Leonora in spite of herself.

It is inevitable that, during a time of war, revivals or adaptations of *Lysistrata* are interpreted in light of current events. Adamo set to work on his piece before September 11, 2001, but its destiny was to premier after the United States was at war in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Being confronted with Aristophanes is always valuable at such times. Any opportunity to

⁷We even have the *lieto fine* ("happy end") of opera seria. The demise of two characters, unanticipated on the Aristophanic horizon, is but a *Scheintod*. So in many versions (if not Monteverdi's) Eurydice is restored to her Orpheus, contrary to the classical myth.

reflect on wars prior to those experienced by living Americans is welcome, and the idea that it might be worth thinking about the Peloponnesian War, reading Thucydides, and pondering the outcome for Athens of its Sicilian Expedition, is particularly precious. Confronting Aristophanes can also make us mindful of the limits of freedom even in the type of modern democracy some wish so fervently to export. In a course on Thucydides I taught in fall, 2002, my students and I came to the conclusion that it would be impossible to stage the modern equivalent of Aristophanes's *Acharnians* in contemporary America, given its unbuttoned language and its political frankness. Adamo had many reasons to want to freely adapt Aristophanes into a different form and different context, but students might find it enlightening to track the changes and see how much modern sensibilities demand the curbing of obscenity.

One question remains. Why bother adapting Aristophanes at all? Why not write a fully contemporary opera, with characters named, say, Mark, Jennifer, Mel, and Denise (to take examples almost at random from Tippett's operas *The Midsummer Marriage* and *The Knot Garden*)? "A tragicomedy for singers and orchestra": by using music and having his figures sing, Adamo shifts the drama away from the strictest demands of realism. By retaining even a modicum of the zaniness of Aristophanic comedy, Adamo can dodge many of the challenges of verisimilitude. His tragicomedy is still a romp. He can be as outrageous as he likes, avoid the spectre of documentary realism, even have an ending that is "both-and." The Athenian setting makes the work timeless, whereas Old Comedy was anything but; it is as if Adamo were saying, "It is Aristophanes, his Lysistrata and her female companions, who are the pacifists and anti-war protesters, not I." As so often over the long history of classical reception, emulating the "glory that was Greece" is the ultimate cover. Even in its most unrespectable forms, it lends respectability to positions that might be very uncomfortable to occupy today.

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