

Designing *Iphigénie en Tauride*

By Gerard Gauci

The design you will see in *Iphigénie en Tauride* represent a departure from the ornate baroque backdrops and furnishings audiences have come to expect from an Opera Atelier production. Gone are the rocaille flourishes and grotesquerie of the 17th and early 18th centuries, replaced by a spare classicism so much the rage when Gluck penned his brilliant “reform” opera.

18th century discoveries at Pompeii and Herculaneum introduced Europe to a new design vocabulary and artists in all disciplines quickly took the opportunity to create in a style adapted from ancient frescoes, sculptures and ritual objects. Neither specifically Greek nor Roman these “neoclassical” designs borrowed freely from both cultures and frequently overlaid earlier decorative forms.

In France artists like Fragonard, so popular in the Rococo period, went out of style practically over night and were replaced by others such as Vien who in turn pointed the way to David and Ingres, Neoclassicism’s greatest exponents. In England the cause was taken up by architects and designers like Robert Adam, known for his delicately filigreed interiors and John Flaxman whose elegant designs on Wedgwood “Jasper Ware” have never lost their popularity. In Italy Canova was to sculpt figures that have become icons of the lost style and in Sweden under Gustav the Third it was taken up practically as a national identity.

My designs for this show embrace all these influences. Employing painted forced perspective drops and flats I have set the opera in a temple to the goddess Diana. While in the 18th century this would likely have been coloured in grisaille shades or pastels, I have chosen brilliant clear colours reflecting not only the heightened and sustained emotions of the piece but also a more recent understanding of the use of paint on ancient Greek architecture and sculpture. The priestesses in this red temple seem as if to be engulfed in a sea of blood. Effects like Iphigénie’s dream and the revelation of the Goddess provide an opportunity for a dash of baroque spectacle in an otherwise simplified treatment. The ceremonial opening of the triptych makes a nod to the spectacular and irresistible theatricality of church ritual of the period and the inevitable overlap between the sacred and the secular.