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Aci, Galatea e Polifemo

BROOKLYN
National Sawdust
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Anthony Roth Costanzo, Ambur Braid and Davóne Tines at National Sawdust
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ON JULY 19, National Sawdust presented the third of four performances of Handel's secular cantata *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo*. The thought-provoking, superbly sung production was directed by Christopher Alden, and co-produced by Anthony Roth Costanzo, Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, Cath Brittan and National Sawdust.

Aci, Galatea e Polifemo, Handel's first setting of the tale of Acis and Galatea, had its premiere in Naples in 1708, when the composer was twenty-three. The story, taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, revolves around the love of the mortal Acis and the nymph Galatea, and the cruel anger of the cyclops Polyphemus, who kills Acis in a jealous rage. In Alden's production, Polyphemus (Polifemo) becomes a power-hungry lord who uses his position to intimidate, threaten and assault two powerless domestic servants, Aci and Galatea. His object of affection is Galatea, here sung by countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo, and his rival for Galatea is Aci, sung by soprano Ambur Braid.

The production began with Aci and Galatea, dressed in green scrubs and hairnets, cleaning Polifemo's bathroom. The opening duet, "Sorge il dì," is bright and optimistic, but the blank, shell-shocked looks on Aci and Galatea's faces revealed their inner terror. When Polifemo, sung by bass Davóne Tines, appeared, the

energy became dark and oppressive; Polifemo's ruthless assertion of power over Aci and Galatea eventually leads Galatea to drown herself in the bathtub that dominates the stage.

Costanzo's performance as Galatea lent a freeing ambiguity to the production and the story, releasing them from the entrapments and baggage of sex, gender identity and sexuality. It didn't matter whether Aci and Galatea were supposed to be two women, or two men, a man and a woman, or if they expressed themselves outside of the gender binary: what mattered was their essential, universal humanity as they struggled for happiness in the face of Polifemo's totalitarian power and oppression.

As Aci, Ambur Braid was both fearless and exquisitely polished. She sang the role's long lines with the same security and concentration of intention with which she sang its coloratura. The round, ethereal quality of Braid's singing complemented Costanzo's earthy, doleful tone, which served to strengthen the emotional and spiritual connection of the characters. Tines sang the fiercely difficult role of Polifemo with egomaniacal intensity, superhuman power and consistently even vocal range.

Costanzo is justly celebrated for the beauty and commitment of his performances, as well as for his versatility as singer, actor and curator. As Galatea, Costanzo achieved a complete characterization, memorably balancing heartbreaking resignation and otherworldly joy to become the voice of outrage against oppression.

Alden's creative team—Terese Wadden (costume design), Paul Tate dePoo III (set design), Jax Messenger (lighting) and Mark Grey (sound designer)—created the production's evocative, haunting and unpredictable world. Led by Clay Zeller-Townson, the superb period ensemble Ruckus, enriched with electronic and pre-recorded sounds, played from house left yet succeeded in striking a seamless balance between pit and stage. —*Steven Jude Tietjen*