

# L'ORMINDO – PASSION, PREDICAMENTS AND POSSIBILITIES

First-time Pinchgut director Talya Masel and mezzo-soprano Fiona Campbell are captivated by the romance of this Venetian baroque extravaganza. **Sarah Noble** talks with them about the work and its contemporary audience appeal.



**S**OMETHING IS AFOOT IN Western Australia. Operatic talent seems to be emerging from within its borders at a disproportionate rate. Star sopranos such as Emma Matthews, Sara Macliver and Rachelle Durkin are just a few of Perth's recent gifts to the opera world, and its generosity certainly hasn't stopped there. Just ask the folk at Pinchgut Opera. The company's annual productions might be a Sydney specialty, but this year sees not one but three proud Perth women on the roster, as director Talya Masel and singers Fiona Campbell and Taryn Fiebig join forces with a merry band of locals and imports to bring Francesco Cavalli's madcap comedy *L'Ormindo* to life in true Pinchgut style.

What is it about Perth, then, that makes it such a mainspring of artistic talent? Talya Masel, who graduated from WAAPA and now works in theatres throughout Australia and abroad, thinks she has the answer. 'It really is something in the water!' she exclaims. 'Not the water we drink, but the water we swim in. There's something about the ocean. It feeds the spirit.' Masel finds inspiration, she says, in the 'magnificence and freedom' of Perth's beautiful beaches. 'I stare at the ocean and stuff comes to me.' Mezzo-soprano Fiona Campbell, who will take the role of the young queen Erisbe, echoes Masel's sentiments about the freedom Perth affords. 'Perhaps Perth gives people the space to develop their technique,' she suggests. 'There aren't so many distractions!' Campbell also sees advantages in the city's smaller size. 'There are opportunities for the young performer in Perth, if you are prepared to work hard, that are not so easy to come by in the bigger cities. Perhaps that gives us an early sense of possibilities!'

A similar sense of possibilities permeates Masel's vision of *L'Ormindo*, whose web of amorous intrigues is complicated even by baroque standards. Masel's task has been to make some meaningful sense of the opera's endless plot twists without discarding its exoticism. Deciding where to locate her production was, she says, 'a long process', but she eventually determined upon creating what she describes as 'a version of the place it's written – a version of Fez'. The key, Masel explains, was to 'think about what the qualities are which make it magical, somewhere where everything is possible' and then to create a world which is 'immensely recognisable in one way and also wonderfully romantic'.

Identifying the recognisable within the exotic has been a vital part of Masel's approach to this piece. Early publicity for this

production claimed that *L'Ormindo* was 'not one of those operas that provide insights into the human condition', and described it as 'a melodrama with broad brushstrokes of comedy'. Masel doesn't entirely agree. 'I think it does touch on the human condition. There are comic and absurd elements, but fundamentally it's about love, which is a *major* part of the human condition!' The situations might be outlandish, she says, but the characters and relationships depicted within those situations are not. 'They happen all the time. Everyone has made bizarre choices for love. We've all had the folly of love thrust upon us.' In fact, Masel adds, 'that's what makes it funny – we know how they feel! These things don't just happen on stage or in magazines, they happen in real life.'



Taryn Fiebig

Melodrama or not, the heart of *L'Ormindo* is Cavalli's music, a fact of which Masel is intensely and enthusiastically aware. 'Opera is always driven first and foremost by the music. The first thing I say in the rehearsal room is that we must never presume that we are cleverer than the composer or the music.' Her goal in directing opera, she says, is to 'show and support the music in the best possible way. We must never try to out-gimmick or outsmart the opera – especially in a baroque piece, that would be very cheeky.' Campbell elaborates further on the links between the opera's compositional style and the drama it depicts. 'It is a very free flowing, almost chatty kind of style,' she says. 'It is very attractive music that has a mostly naturalistic narrative, rather than the very formalised structure of the da capo arias, say, of Handel.' That style has its challenges, she says – 'you can't rely so much on lyrical beauty' – but also brings a dramatic edge to the piece: 'you can approach it with great thespian flare!'

Cavalli's music, like that of many of his contemporaries, has enjoyed a moderate upswing in popularity in recent years, but his operas will nevertheless be unfamiliar territory for many audience members. But unfamiliar territory is what Pinchgut is all about. Coming after Vivaldi's *Juditha Triumphans* and Charpentier's *David et Jonathas*, this staging of *L'Ormindo* constitutes the company's third consecutive Australian premiere. Does that make things easier or harder for Masel? 'Easier,' she says. 'Definitely easier. There are no expectations. You don't have audiences coming in saying "this is how I like my *Traviata*" and so on.' There are, she hastens to add 'preconceived ideas about the sound — because Pinchgut audiences are intelligent — and of the standard. But not about the show... which is a good thing!'

The season doesn't only mark *L'Ormindo's* Australian debut — it's also Masel's first time working with Pinchgut. She's effusive about the experience, and especially about the concentra-

tion which comes of Pinchgut's producing only one opera per year. 'It means all energies are focused on your show: for that year, you're it. I've never had that before; I've always worked with companies which were doing multiple shows at a time or in one year.' Now, she says, she has 'all the attention', and she loves it. There is, she says, 'a definite spirit that is Pinchgut. It's like a great big family. Really lovely.'

Fiona Campbell, who has sung in two previous Pinchgut productions, agrees about that unique spirit. '[The company] has been created and developed by individuals who are passionate about making good music,' she says. 'They pour all of their love and energy into this annual production, achieving art and music making at its highest level, which translates into a palpable "buzz" in the auditorium and in the performances.' Campbell is also excited about being the romantic heroine for once. As

for the first time. The season will also see one notable absence: since Cavalli had the audacity to write an opera without a chorus, this is the first Pinchgut production not to feature the acclaimed choir Cantillation.

Amongst all these debuting artists, however, there are some familiar faces as well. American countertenor David Walker, who enjoyed great acclaim as *Holofernes* in Pinchgut's 2007 production of *Juditha Triumphans*, returns to sing the title role, while Jane Sheldon and Anna Fraser join Campbell among the contingent of Pinchgut habituées. Other aspects also remain unchanged: the opera will, as ever, be staged in Sydney's City Recital Hall ('an extraordinary building,' says Talya Masel) and will be recorded by ABC Classics for future CD release, thus doubling this little-known opera's representation on disc. Above all, Pinchgut's proudest tradition is set to continue: that of op-



Photos: Fiona Campbell in *Juditha Triumphans* by Sarah Puttock, Taryn Fiebig by Steven Godbee

a mezzo-soprano, a lot of her core repertoire is in pants roles, but this time she will be playing a queen. 'I am sooo happy to be playing a girl and the main love interest for a change,' she enthuses. 'It will be quite a challenge, I'm sure!'

Not that *L'Ormino* is entirely without a bit of gender-swapping: the role of the elderly nurse Erice will be taken by tenor Kanen Breen who, like Masel, is making his Pinchgut début. Indeed, this is a season full of firsts. Soprano Taryn Fiebig, who had her beginning in early music but has lately expanded her repertoire to encompass a wide variety of operatic roles – and even Eliza Doolittle – is also making her first Pinchgut appearance: yet another addition to a dance card so full that even pinning Fiebig down for this article proved impossible. There's also a début of sorts by Erin Helyard, the company's longtime co-artistic director, who now also takes on conducting duties with the company

era produced at the polished, professional level audiences have come to expect from a company which is one of Sydney's finest musical assets — with just a little help this time from their friends in Perth. □

**PINCHGUT OPERA PRESENTS L'ORMINDO**

Wednesday 2 December 7.30pm  
 Saturday 5 December 7.30pm  
 Sunday 6 December 5pm  
 Monday 7 December 7.30pm  
 City Recital Hall Angel Place  
 Tickets: \$30-\$115  
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