



The Season Book

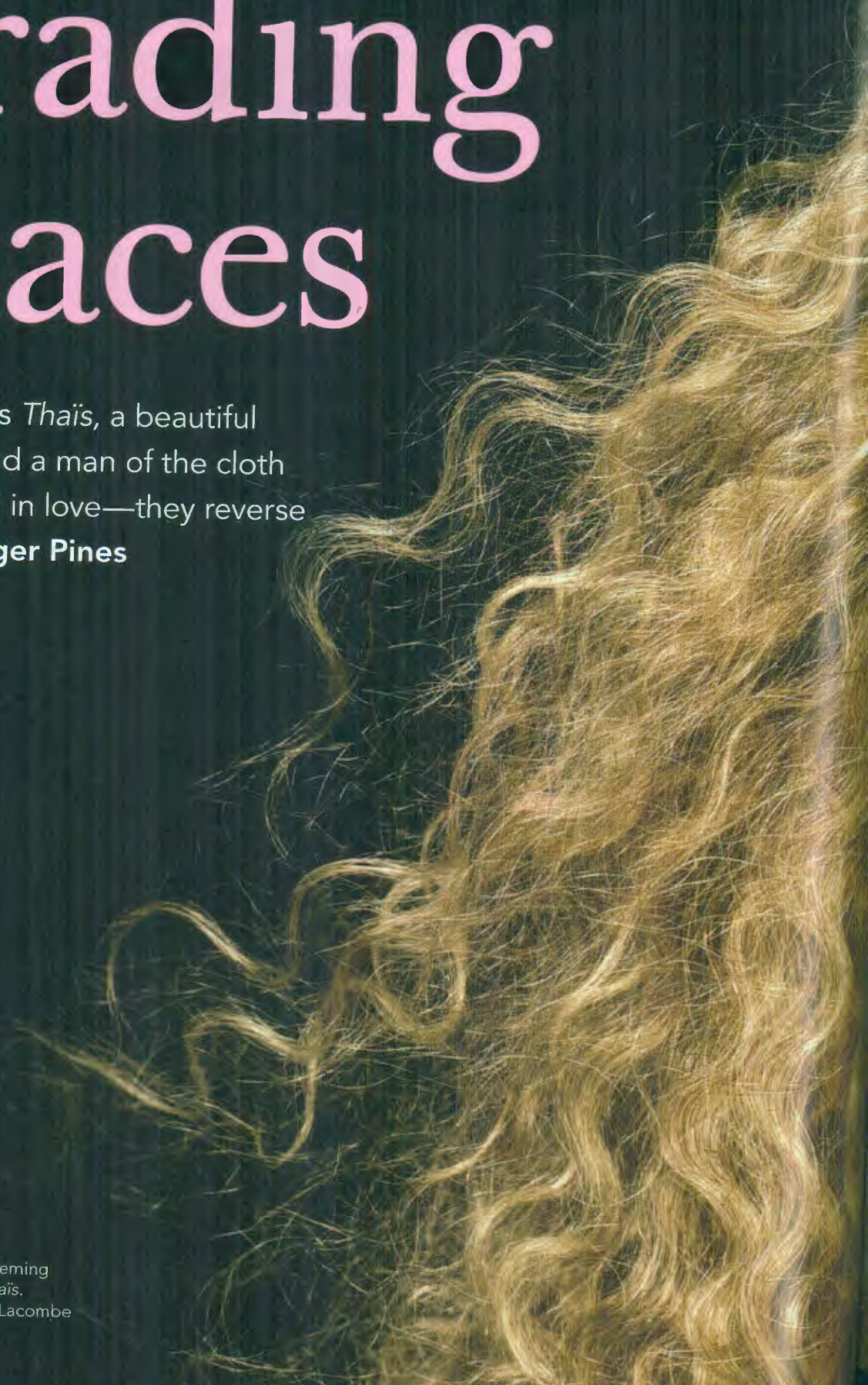
The Metropolitan Opera

The 125th Anniversary Season 2008-09

Trading Places

In Massenet's *Thaïs*, a beautiful courtesan and a man of the cloth don't just fall in love—they reverse roles. **By Roger Pines**

Sex Goddess: Renée Fleming sings the title role of *Thaïs*.
Photograph by Brigitte Lacombe







Troubled Couple: Renée Fleming and Thomas Hampson, pictured here at Lyric Opera of Chicago, play the conflicted couple at the center of *Thaïs*.

Novels, plays, films, and even a few operas have depicted a fanatical man of God who reforms a beautiful sinner and then falls in love with her. But in Jules Massenet's *Thaïs*, the courtesan Thaïs and the monk Athanaël upend the scenario totally, with the heroine actually finding spiritual salvation and the monk tumbling from grace as he succumbs to his carnal impulses. Massenet created two spellbinding characterizations—as well as fabulous gifts for a soprano and baritone with thrilling voices and big, stage-filling personalities.

"*Thaïs* is a psychological drama about two people who change places with each other," says Renée Fleming, who has made

the title role a calling card and will star in the Met's new production of the opera. "They are both in extreme social strata and extreme moral camps. By the end of the opera, they have completely switched sides, and that's fascinating to me." Thomas Hampson, who plays Athanaël, agrees: "Somewhere in the middle of the desert [in Act III], they have a very brief moment when they look at each other and know that their hearts have become one. But their fates take them in another direction."

Despite a hair-raising drama that unfolds through a glorious score, *Thaïs* has seldom been taken as seriously as it deserves. Instead, it's been regularly and rather unfairly attacked for what critic

and Massenet champion Rodney Milnes has described as "a spurious naughtiness." Fleming and Hampson, passionate advocates for this opera, will star at the Met on December 8, with Michael Schade as Nicias, in the company's first *Thaïs* in three decades. The soprano and baritone first sang the work when the Met's production, directed by John Cox and shared with Lyric Opera of Chicago, debuted there in 2003. The Met performances will be conducted by Jesús López-Cobos.

Experiencing *Thaïs* in the theater, listeners will be struck not just dramatically but also musically by the process through which the central couple move, in effect, into each other's world. Athanaël, obsessed by the idea of leading the sensualist Thaïs to a spiritual awakening, initially expresses himself in music of immense strength and unshakeable conviction. But when Thaïs embraces the idea of salvation, Athanaël responds first with profound tenderness and then—when the full force of his feelings for her overwhelms him—with the passion of a desperate, hopeless lover.

When she's first seen, the heroine's world view could hardly be further removed from Athanaël's. Massenet's music makes clear that, in her first scene, Thaïs is a woman who, rejoicing in her desirability, is chiefly motivated by her devotion to sexual pleasure. The opera presents her harrowing physical, emotional, and spiritual journey, by the end of which a kind of purity has transformed her music. As Athanaël rejects his spiritual life, Thaïs finds hers. The opera's soaring finale vividly demonstrates that she has moved into a realm of unearthly calm that clearly would have been unimaginable to her in her former life.

The opera's protagonists are based on the 4th century's St. Paphnutius and St. Thaïs. An ascetic in the desert, Paphnutius heard about Thaïs, who—though brought up as a Christian—lived a dissolute life as a prostitute. The story of Paphnutius and Thaïs was dramatized by a 10th-century nun, Hroswitha von Gandersheim, whose play attracted one of the 19th century's most distinguished writers, Anatole France. In 1867 France produced his *Legend of St. Thaïs*, following it 23 years later with a serialized novel. When it appeared in book form, *Thaïs* attained great popularity. Despite the church's condemnation of its scathing anticlericalism, France never regretted writing it.

The exoticism of *Thaïs* appealed immensely to the French public, who for decades had been conditioned by Orientalist painters like Ingres, Delacroix, and Fromentin. Operagoers of Massenet's era relished any mingling in the arts of sexual and religious elements within exotic locales. Massenet, attentive to his public's desires, made *Thaïs* to order. He turned to librettist Louis Gallet, also his collaborator on *Le Roi de Lahore*, *Le Cid*, and *Esclarmonde*. The latter had debuted at Paris's Opéra-Comique, whose director counted on presenting the *Thaïs* premiere. He and Massenet reckoned, however, without the fierce ambition of the composer's protégée Sybil Sanderson, the leading lady.

Sanderson had already triumphed at the Opéra-Comique as Massenet's *Manon* and the courtesan heroine of Saint-Saëns's *Phryné*. She didn't tell the company that, rather than renewing her contract with them, she was signing with the grander, more prestigious Opéra, where she'd longed to perform. Unable to imagine *Thaïs* without her, Massenet felt compelled to give the Opéra the premiere.

Sanderson possessed not only vocal and physical beauty, but also remarkable sang-froid: During the *Thaïs* dress rehearsal, at the climax of Act I, a strap of her gown broke, leaving the diva half naked. Unfazed, she simply posed in character against a pillar. Her wardrobe malfunction certainly increased public excitement as all of Paris anticipated the first night.

The Opéra premiered *Thaïs* on March 16, 1894. The *Le Menestrel* critic found it "a little masterpiece": the text was imaginatively and skillfully adapted from France's novel, with the music projecting "a rare felicity and a marvelous elegance of touch." It was "a work of art of new inspiration, and time will only increase its admiration by lovers of refined feeling." The success of the California-born Sanderson led to many other American divas taking on *Thaïs*; the line extends from Mary Garden (born in Scotland, raised in this country), Geraldine Farrar, and Helen Jepson to Leontyne Price, Beverly Sills, and now Renée Fleming.

"The Massenet roles really want a full lyric voice," Fleming says, "but with lighter, sort of lyrical coloratura elements"—qualities this soprano has in spades. *Thaïs* presents several Massenets: effervescent charmer, communicator of exotically smoldering atmosphere, dramatic barnstormer. As

usual, he's orchestrally persuasive,⁷ and his vocal lines brilliantly serve characterization, especially for the protagonists.

The heroine's first entrance reveals the public figure, the ultra-sensual courtesan, the coquette. What a contrast with the second-act monologue, which shows, Fleming explains, that "she's incredibly lonely, she finds the people that she's dealing with to be cruel and heartless. She sees in her future that once her beauty fades, she will have no value anymore in the society in which she lives, and she's desperately looking for more. That quest for a spiritual life relates to people in all times. So Athanaël is her savior." Immediately following the monologue is *Thaïs*'s devastating confrontation with the monk, in which her initial self-confidence turns to paralyzing fear and doubt. But as Athanaël speaks of salvation, *Thaïs* feels suddenly transported, singing three expansive, high-lying phrases—possibly the most magnificent 30 seconds of music Massenet ever composed for a soprano.

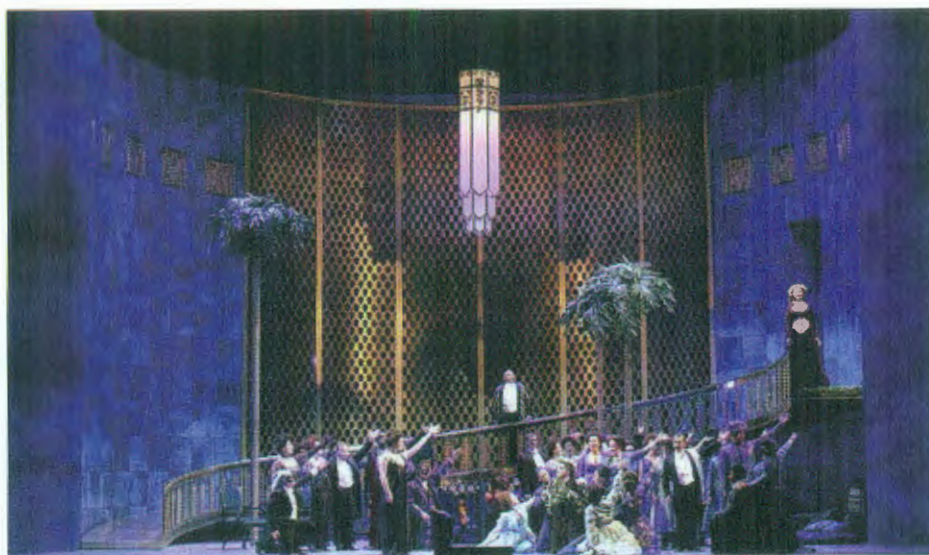
The night *Thaïs* spends pondering Athanaël's words is represented orchestrally by the opera's justly beloved "hit tune," the "Méditation." No less poignant, however, is *Thaïs*'s brief solo that follows, "L'amour est une vertu rare." Having just informed Athanaël that she'll give up every vestige of her past, *Thaïs* asks to keep only a small statue of Eros. Her achingly sincere *ariette* tugs at the heartstrings in its musically exquisite final line, its text taken from Anatole France: "Those who see [the statue] will

turn their hearts towards God, for love leads naturally to heavenly thoughts."

In deciding to move *Thaïs* out of the 4th century and into a more modern era, director John Cox considered "the importance of North Africa's colonization as an element of France's national psyche. All the intelligentsia traveled there to seek a freer life for the senses. Obviously, the warmth, color, and greater sexual freedom had much to do with it. The Islamic religion also exerted a tremendous allure at that time, functioning as a magnet not only to the French, but also to the British (Lawrence of Arabia being one of the last examples). If we'd gone strictly 4th century, I don't think the conflicts— aesthetically and visually, even morally— would have been so sharply delineated."

Thaïs is "a great opera, sorely neglected from the repertoire," asserts the production's leading man, Hampson. For the baritone, Massenet's opera exemplifies "one of the great things about the arts in general: as they reflect various generations and epochs, what is apparent is that the instincts and drives of human beings don't change. Religion, destiny, fate, eroticism, love, celibacy—these are fundamental questions that every human being has to answer. We're looking at a context for them through *Thaïs* that is moving, beautiful, and disturbing." ■

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Feeling Blue: Paul Brown's set design for *Thaïs*