

CLASS 3 : RECLAIMING RAMEAU

A. VISITORS TO VERSAILLES

1. Class title 1 (*Indes* productions by Scozzi and Cogitore)

Believe it or not, these are both stagings of the same scene in the same opera, and a baroque opera at that: Rameau's *Les Indes Galantes* (or "The Amorous Indes"). While both productions last week were more or less in period, everything today is updated. The question to explore is why you would want to update, and what point you might make by it. But first a little history.

2. Section title A: Chief Chicagou, Rameau, and Louis XV

In 1725, some French settlers in Illinois returned to Paris, bringing with them **Chief Chicagou** and five other chiefs to be presented to **King Louis XV**. As part of the ceremonies, **Jean-Philippe Rameau** (1683–1764) wrote a harpsichord piece which he called *Les sauvages*, or "The Savages." Here is the beginning:

3. Rameau: *Les sauvages* (Jean Rondeau)

4. Title page of *Les Indes Galantes*, 1736

Ten years after the Chiefs' visit, Rameau wrote an opera, *Les Indes galantes* (The Amorous Indes), and incorporated his 1725 tune into it, as a duet with chorus called "*Forêts paisibles*" or "Peaceable forests." It comes at the end of the final act, and accompanies a peace-pipe ceremony between the Native Americans and the Europeans. But before we go any further, I would like you to compare two relatively recent versions of Rameau's original tune: in a 2003 production at the Paris Opera directed by **Andreï Serban**, and a 2019 production there by French director **Clément Cogitore** (1983–). What do you think?

5. Rameau: *Les sauvages* (Serban)

6. Rameau: *Les sauvages* (Cogitore)

7. Stills from the above

What did you think? When *Les Indes* was new, the American Indians were seen as curiosities, even though they were treated with respect when they actually came to visit. It is only quite recently that we have come to see how patronizing this attitude is. Though the Serban production was a big hit at the time, and is obviously tongue-in-cheek, I must say I find the grinning tom-tom player demeaning. Cogitore auditioned for this production two years earlier by making a short standalone film with the choreographer **Bintou Dembélé** (1975–), a veteran of street dance and something of a pioneer in using hip-hop, break dancing, and **krump** (the type of dance seen here) as a political tool in examining racism and the legacy of colonialism. It seems altogether more honest, facing up to the colonial legacy in a city with housing projects filled with the human fallout from colonialism, yet honoring them by using their own culture and giving them a place on the stage.

8. *Indes* recordings

So what is *Les Indes galantes*? Not so much an opera as a kind of variety show: a prologue, plus four different *opéra-ballets*, each telling a different story in a pretty much equal mixture of singing and dance. The acts (or *entrées*) are all set in foreign climes—**Turkey, Persia, Peru**, and the **Wild West**—and they are all love stories. You could see it as the French King celebrating the wide reach of his colonial explorers. You could also see it as an Enlightenment parable of human values, for “savages” though they may be, most of the foreigners eventually end up doing the noble thing. “Look at all the funny people from around the world,” it seems to be saying; “but hey, at heart they are just like us!” Cultural appropriation? Undoubtedly. Patronizing? Sure. Although the original had no intention to be demeaning, it is very challenging to stage today.

9. Dates of the two productions

It is interesting that the gap between the Serban and the Cogitore productions is only 16 years. What was possible in 2003, when white actors were routinely appearing in colored makeup, had become unthinkable by 2019. Cogitore and Dembélé, as I said, address this by making it a modern multicultural fable, with as diverse a cast and production language as you would ever see in that veteran theatre. But before giving you a little more of it, I want to look briefly at a production in Bordeaux just five years earlier (2014) that used the text to address a number of different contemporary points. It is a glorious jumble, but it is also very funny, and when it works it hits hard.

B. SCOZZI: COLONIALISM AS SATIRE

10. Section title B: Stills from the Laura Scozzi production

Director-choreographer **Laura Scozzi** (1964–), working in Bordeaux in 2014, takes the view that *Les Indes Galantes* is, at heart, a romantic comedy, and treats it as satire throughout. But she seldom if ever laughs at the foreigners in it. Rather, her targets are diverse: environmentalism, consumerism, globalization, feminism, veganism—you name it. Each of the five sections has a completely different setting, linked only by a **trio of female tourists** who blunder in from time to time; you can see them at bottom right.

In Rameau’s Prologue, the free-loving followers of **Hebe**, Goddess of Youth, are interrupted by the Goddess of War, **Bellona**. Hebe calls upon **Cupid**, who appears as an airline hostess and flies with them to distant climes where they think love can flourish more freely. Scozzi interprets this as environmentally, as an idyllic Eden invaded by the same kind of *Conquistadors*, ancient and modern, that raped South America. Being Eden, I have to warn you that you are about to see quite a bit of nudity, involving both sexes; the clip lasts about 5 minutes.

11. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, Prologue clip 1 (Scozzi)

12. Amel Brahim-Djelloul in *Les Indes galantes* (Bordeaux, 2014)

In **Acts I, II, and III**, Rameau takes us in turn to Turkey (where Scozzi looks at the Mediterranean migrant problem), Peru (where the villain is a cocaine grower), and Persia (a satire on the Islamic attitude to women). I've not time for any of these, but I will give you a shortened version **Act IV**, which is set in the American West. In the original, the American Indian princess **Zima** is courted by explorers from both France and Spain, but she rejects the Spaniard because his love is too controlling and the Frenchman because he is too fickle; she prefers to stick with her own Indian lover, **Adario**. Scozzi is not always successful in avoiding ethnic stereotyping—her Persian act would surely cause great offence to Muslims—but she has a brilliant way of finessing the American Indian problem: her characters are not people of color, but **white environmental activists**. In the end, though, they lose their battle to save the forest, and all go off again with Cupid to find a different Eden someplace else!

13. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, Act IV (Scozzi)

14. Class title 2 (still from the above)

C. COGITORE: HEROIC, POETIC, INTERRACIAL

15. Section title C (scene from Act I)

From what have played so far, you might think that staging *Les Indes galantes* is largely a matter of finding the comedy and hitting the targets. But nobody would revive baroque operas just for that reason; they would only do it if they were beautiful and if they gave opportunity for visual and musical spectacle. I think I said that I have five complete video productions of *Les Indes Galantes*. But the one I keep coming back to is the **Clément Cogitore**, for his ability to create again and again a world that is theatrical, fascinating, and downright beautiful. You may not know what it going on here (it is in fact a scene from Act 1), but to see this in a review would send me out to buy a ticket.

16. Opéra-ballet

Look again at the poster for the original production. *Les Indes Galante* is not described as an opera but as a **ballet héroïque**. I think you will find the Cogitore always heroic; he maintains a sense of the mythic; he makes the music seem big and important, as opposed to the Scozzi, where music can seem secondary to the action. And much of his success is his partnership with Bintu Dembélé, creating the perfect fusion of music and movement that redefine the French baroque concept of **opéra-ballet**. Let's investigate this, starting with the most sheerly lovely aria in the score, "*Viens, Hymen*" (Come, god of marriage). Inca princess **Phani** has fallen in love with a Spanish officer, but she first has to escape from the control of the only out-and-out villain in the piece, an Inca priest. Listen to it sung by **Sabine Devieille**. And think how Cogitore and Dembélé (a) give primacy to the music, and (b) make movement an integral part.

17. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, Act II, "*Viens, Hymen*" (Cogitore)

18. — still from the above

Primacy of music? Role of dance? Musically, the aria is extremely simple: just bass line, the voice, and a solo flute. I thought I remembered Cogitore bringing the flute player onstage; he will do this in the next act, as you will see. But here he doesn't. Instead he works with his choreographer and that extraordinary **flex-dancer** (**Calvin Hunt**, an American from Brooklyn) to embody the flute in movement.

19. Cogitore, scene from Act III

You will see a flute player come on stage in the other Cogitore scene I shall play, the last ten minutes of Act III. Indeed, there is a harpsichord and small chamber group onstage from the beginning, for the act is set in a harem, which Cogitore interprets as an upscale brothel with the women on display in vitrines. Never mind the plot; Rameau himself wrote two different versions, both involving gender-switching disguises. Suffice it to say that at the point where I shall begin the misunderstandings have already been resolved, and the two couples settle down for a truly gorgeous quartet. This is real opera. Then follows the ballet section, which is the main point of the act, a series of dances called "Festival of the Flowers." The music is longer than Cogitore and Dembélé can entirely fill, but make a note of the stunning invention they bring to it.

20. Rameau: *Les Indes galantes*, End of Act III (Cogitore)

21. — stills from the above

How many media were at play there? Music, obviously, in the lovely quartet and the beautiful flute solo. Movement, in the vigorous break dancing of the stage hands in the middle. And something that I can't quite define in the business with the kids and the carousel. Which made the biggest impression on you?

22. Class title 2 ("Spoiled for choice")