



THE
VICTORIAN
Lyric
OPERA
COMPANY

presents

LA BELLE
HÉLÈNE

by Jacques Offenbach

In a new English version by Richard Traubner



Directed by Deborah Grossman
Music Director: Joseph Sorge

February 25, 26, March 4, 5, 2011 at 8 PM

February 27 & March 6, 2011 at 2 PM

Preview Feb. 24 at 8 PM: all tickets \$10

The F. Scott Fitzgerald Theatre
603 Edmonston Dr., Rockville, MD 20849

Box Office: 240-314-8690

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Adults: \$20 · Seniors (65+): \$18 · Students: \$16

Curriculum Guide

About *La Belle Hélène*

Jacques Offenbach's operetta, *La Belle Hélène* was first performed in Paris, France in 1864 and was an instant hit. The plot of the show is loosely based on the story of the beautiful Helen of Troy, but the show also makes fun of the time period that occurred during the decline of Second Empire in France. This era took place from 1852 to 1870, under the rule of Emperor Napoleon III. During this era, France underwent a period of rapid industrialization and rising prosperity. Paris acquired a world-wide reputation for being obsessed with wealth and luxury. In *La Belle Hélène*, Offenbach makes fun of the fancy, party-throwing upper class of the city of Paris.

In the 1920s, this fancy, fun-loving lifestyle returned, especially in North American, London, and Paris. People threw big parties at nightclubs, with jazz music and dancing. Offenbach likely would have felt the same way about these parties in the 1920s, as he did to the ones in Paris during his lifetime. Because of the similarities of these two eras, it seemed fitting to set *La Belle Hélène* in this period.

Who was Jacques Offenbach?

Jacques Offenbach lived from June 20, 1819 to October 5, 1880. He was a French composer and cellist of the Romantic era with German-Jewish descent and one of the originators of the operetta form. He was one of the most influential composers of popular music in Europe in the 19th century, and many of his works remain in the repertory. While his name remains most closely associated with the French operetta and the Second Empire, it is his one fully operatic masterpiece, *Les contes d'Hoffmann* (The Tales of Hoffmann), that has become the most frequently performed of Offenbach's works.

Why is that girl playing a boy?

You may have noticed that the character of Orestes, son of Agamemnon, sounds like a woman. That's because she is one! In opera, any male character that is sung and acted by a female singer, is known as a "pants role", because the actress gets to dress like a guy. Most often the character is an adolescent or a very young man, sung by a mezzo soprano or contralto (the lower female voice parts). It's the audience job to believe that the character is male, even though they know that the actor is not.

Aphrodite, Helen, and the Trojan War

Aphrodite was the exception to the Greek God family tree. Some say her parents were unknown, and that she was born of sea foam. Others, like the poet Homer, said she was a daughter of the mighty Zeus, king of all the gods. No one knows quite where to place her on the Greek God family tree.

However she was born, Aphrodite was the goddess of love and beauty. She was an essential element of many Greek myths.

Aphrodite could be kind or merciless. She wasn't like Ares, the god of war, who loved to cause pain and havoc. She was merciless if you did something that truly angered her. It was Aphrodite's vanity that caused the Trojan War.

The Story of Helen of Troy

Once upon a time, a long time ago, Aphrodite gazed contentedly at her reflection in a stream. "Who's the loveliest in the land?" she asked idly, confident of the answer.

The water rippled nervously. "Paris said he heard that Helen was the loveliest woman in the land. But I think *you* are the fairest!" a steam sprite spoke up bravely.

Aphrodite's magnificent eyes clouded in fury. Ripples appeared all over the stream. The stream sprites vanished. "This," muttered Aphrodite to herself, "will never do. Helen indeed."

"She *is* your half sister," Hera, Queen of all the Gods, pointed out, when Aphrodite came to her for advice.

It was true. Zeus was possibly Aphrodite's father. (No one knew for sure who her parents were.) Zeus was also Helen's father. But Helen's mother was a mortal. Aphrodite's mother was probably a goddess. There really was no comparison.

"Here's what we'll do," Hera decided. "First, we'll trick Paris into declaring *you* the fairest." Hera's eyes filled with mirth. "Then, we'll trick him into taking Helen back with him to Troy where she'll cause him no end of trouble. We'll get Athena to help us."

Aphrodite smiled. "I knew you were the one to ask."

The rest is legend. A wedding was soon happening in the Greek god world. Eris, the spirit of disagreement, had not been invited. Hera paid her a visit.

"Eris," said Hera, sounding most upset. "I can't believe they didn't invite you. I think you should give them a golden apple for a present - an apple of discord - and tell them the apple is for whomever is the fairest in the land. That should cause trouble!"

"You're right, Hera, as always," agreed Eris.

And so it happened. Eris made a surprise and most unwelcome visit to the wedding reception. She threw a golden apple of discord on the feasting table. "This apple is for whomever is the fairest," Eris proclaimed haughtily.

Instantly, Hera, Aphrodite, and Athena all grabbed for the apple. "It's mine," insisted all three goddesses.

Zeus thundered, "Enough. Paris will decide who is the fairest. Hermes, go tell Paris he has a job to do."

Soon, Paris was faced with three of the most powerful goddesses in the world, all clamoring for his attention. "Paris will decide! Which one of us is the loveliest, Paris?" they demanded to know.

Someone with more sense than Paris would have wondered why Zeus had appointed him to decide such a thing. (Hera had planted the idea in Zeus' head, but Paris did not know that.) If he had any sense at all, he would have wondered why three such powerful goddesses would *allow* him to decide such a thing. He could have tried to squirm out of things by saying they were *all* the most beautiful. But Paris was as foolish as he was handsome. (And he was very handsome!) Each goddess offered him a bribe. But it was Aphrodite who offered the best deal (of course.)

On Hera's advice, Aphrodite promised Paris that if he would proclaim Aphrodite as the fairest of all, she would introduce him to her (maybe) half-sister, the oh so beautiful Helen of Sparta, and make Helen fall madly in love with him. Helen would eagerly return to Troy with Paris to live as his wife. As Aphrodite was quick to point out, not only would Helen be deserting her husband, the king of Sparta - and wouldn't that be embarrassing for Sparta! - but Paris would gain a wife of incredible beauty. His brothers would be so jealous! Paris took the deal.

The minute Paris saw Helen, he fell in love. Some say Paris had to kidnap Helen, as Helen loved her husband, the king of Sparta, and did not leave willingly. Others say she fell in love with Paris the minute she saw him. (Eros, after all, was Aphrodite's son.) However it happened, Paris and Helen traveled back to Troy together.

When the king of Sparta discovered his beautiful wife had been kidnapped by a prince of Troy, he called on the other kings of Greece, asking for their help. The other city-states, including Athens, rallied to his side. A huge navy of Greek warriors set sail for Troy to rescue Helen. That was the beginning of the Trojan War.

As for Helen, she could not seem to make up her mind which side she favored. During the Trojan War, she helped first one side and then the other, which did not make either of her husbands especially happy with her.

As it is well known, the Greeks won that war. Still, and for all time, Helen was no longer known as Helen, Queen of Sparta. She was simply known as Helen of Troy.

References and Resources to Check Out

On the Web:

Classics for Kids (Web site hosted by Cincinnati Public Radio)

<http://www.classicsforkids.com>

Many Myths, Greek Mythology - Ancient Greece for Kids

<http://greece.mrdonn.org/myths.html>

The San Francisco Orchestra's Kid Site

<http://www.sfskids.org>

Books:

Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology*. Boston: Back Bay Books, 1998.

Parker, Roger. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Opera*. Oxford England ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Rosenberg, Jane, and Metropolitan Opera (New York N.Y.). *Sing Me a Story : The Metropolitan Opera's Book of Opera Stories for Children*. New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, 1989.

Fun and Games

Who's in this operetta? Can you find their names?

D S A A O V L P N O M S H V M
M H E F J S H O N A E I E S G
D F L T I A N B C F N H L U J
F Z A R S M X H S H E C E D N
U D A N E E I B U B L C N K V
P P Z M Z L R U M L A A D Y C
G A A P L E Q O O I U B S G S
J G R E X X F Q C Y S F A H B
A Y S T X U I E O P U I G C C
H Z H X H E U R L A J A X A L
I C Q R G E C R I P B Q Q E T
W Z H X B R N V H Z G A O F O
S A H C L A C I P H W N C U I
Z I U L O F P C S I A Q C J O
E U T H Y C L È S Z E Y M Q M

ACHILLES
AGAMEMNON
AJAX A
AJAX B
BACCHIS
CALCHAS
EUTHYCLÈS
HELEN
LEONA
MENELAUS
ORESTES
PARIS
PARTHENIS
PHILOCOMUS

The Royal Game of Goose

Number of players : 2 or more

Equipment : Game board, 2 dice, and 1 counter per player

The game board pattern is a spiral of 63 fields, from the outside to the inside. Many fields have special hazards or benefits for players who land on them. The object of the game is to travel along the spiral from field 1 to field 63, and the first player who successfully lands exactly on field 63, called "the Garden of the Goose", wins and takes the pot.

Rules

- To start : Each player rolls the two dice. The highest roll determines who plays first and chooses a distinct color of playing piece. Turns move clockwise.
- On each turn, a player rolls the two dice and advances the counter along the spiral by as many fields as the sum of the two dice. The player must deal with any situation on the space landed on, be they hazards or benefits, as described below.
- It is not necessary to roll any particular number to enter a counter onto the fields.
- Two playing pieces may not occupy the same field at the same time. Whenever you land on an occupied field, that player's counter goes back to the space you came from.
- Whenever you land on a field with a goose, you double your move and advance again the sum of the dice you just rolled. If that puts you on yet another goose, advance again, until you no longer land on a goose. (*ALTERNATE RULE*: If you want to play the way the characters play in *La Belle Hélène*, you can instead play that whenever you land on a field with a goose, you lose a turn).
- You must arrive on field 63 by an exact count and may use the number of either of your two dice. If you overthrow the required number, you must step forward into 63 and then move backwards the surplus number of points. If this lands you on a goose, continue moving backwards the same count again.
- The spacing of the goose fields is such that a roll of 9 on a first turn would send a player directly home, so a special provision is made for a roll of 9 on the first turn : If the roll is a 6 and 3, move directly to field 26; if the roll is a 4 and 5, advance all the way to 53. This rule applies only to a player's very first roll of the game. Rolling doubles does not count extra and has no special benefit.

The Special Fields

6 - The Bridge

If you land on 6, pay for easement and advance immediately to field 12.

19 - The Inn

The good food and drink makes you sleepy. You pay for the service and lose 1 turn. (Exception: if another player lands at the Inn within the same turn, you change places and you go back to the space that player just came from).

31 - The Well

If you fall in the Well, lose 2 turns, unless another player landing there saves you sooner. You pay for being saved and go back to the field that player just arrived from.

42 - The Maze

You get lost, pay for finding your way and yourself back at field 30.

52 - The Prison

If you land in prison, you pay a token every turn, stay until another player landing there relieves you and you go back to that player's last field.

58 - Death

Go back to the beginning and start all over.

If a player lands on another player's field, both pay one token and change places each other.

Rules for the Team Variation of the Goose Game

Number of players: Two or more

Equipment : Game board, 2 dice, 4 counters per player for up to four players, or 2 counters per player for five or more players.

- Start and play as for the classical game, with these exceptions : When you roll the two dice, you may use each of the two numbers separately. You can use one number for one of your counters and the other number for another of your counters. A little strategy will let you keep your counters out of the major pitfalls.
- When one of your counters lands in the Prison, only that counter is stuck. You are free to move the others. However, when trapped at the Inn or the Well, you lose those turns and cannot move any of your counters for the duration.
- You may reach field 63 with an exact count on either die. When one of your counters reaches field 63 by an exact count, bear it off the board. The first player to bear off all four counters wins.