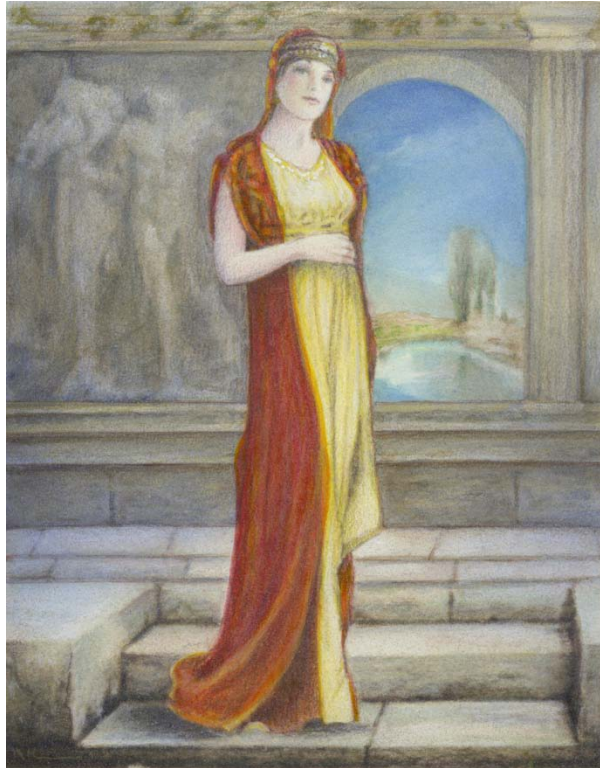


ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
Timothy Vernon

PACIFIC
Opera
VICTORIA

David Shefsiek
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

SEMELE



Music by George Frideric Handel
Based on a Libretto by William Congreve

Study Guide
for Pacific Opera Victoria's Production
February, 2009



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Welcome to Pacific Opera Victoria!

This Study Guide has been created primarily to assist teachers in preparing students for their visit to the opera. It is our hope that teachers will be able to add this to the existing curriculum in order to expand students' understanding of opera, literature, history, and the fine arts.

Materials in the Study Guide may be copied and distributed to students. Some students may wish to go over the information at home if there is not enough time to discuss in class. The opera experience can be made more meaningful and enjoyable when students have the opportunity to learn about the opera before they attend the performance.

Please visit <http://www.pov.bc.ca> to download this study guide or to find more information about *Semele*, including musical selections from POV's Best of YouTube and artist biographies. POV Study Guides for other operas are also available for download.

Teachers: Your comments and suggestions would be greatly appreciated. Please take a few minutes to fill out the questionnaire at the end of this study guide.

Please Note: The Dress Rehearsal is the last opportunity the singers will have on stage to work with the orchestra before Opening Night. Since vocal demands are so great on opera singers, some singers choose not to sing in full voice during the Dress Rehearsal in order to preserve their voice for opening night.

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Semele

Music by George Frideric Handel
Based on a libretto by William Congreve

First Performance February 10, 1744, Covent Garden, London

Dress Rehearsal February 10, 2009, 7:30 pm
Performances February 12, 14, 17, 19, 21, 2009, 8 pm
Royal Theatre, Victoria, BC

Sung in English with English surtitles

The performance is approximately 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ hours, with one intermission.

CAST & CREATIVE TEAM

Cast in order of vocal appearance

| | |
|--|----------------------|
| Cadmus, King of Thebes | Nathaniel Watson |
| Athamas, a Prince of Bœotia, in love with, and design'd to marry Semele | Scott Belluz |
| Semele, Daughter to Cadmus, belov'd by and in love with Jupiter | Nathalie Paulin |
| Ino, Sister to Semele, in love with Athamas | Anita Krause |
| Jupiter | Benjamin Butterfield |
| Juno | Anita Krause |
| Iris | Anne Grimm |
| Cupid | Joseph Avio Pegler |
| Somnus | Nathaniel Watson |
| Apollo | Aaron Ferguson |

Chorus: Priests and Augurs, Loves and Zephyrs, Nymphs and Swains. Attendants

| | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Conductor | Timothy Vernon |
| Director | Wim Trompert |
| Set & Costume Designer | Brian Perchaluk |
| Lighting Designer | Ereca Hassell |
| Resident Stage Manager | Jackie Adamthwaite |
| Assistant Stage Managers | Steve Barker Connie Hosie |
| Chorus Master & Répétiteur | Michael Drislane |

With the Victoria Symphony and the Pacific Opera Victoria Chorus

Cast and programme are subject to change.



PRODUCTION SPONSORS

This production is being recorded by CBC Radio Two (92.1 in Victoria) for future broadcast on *Saturday Afternoon at the Opera*, heard weekly beginning at 1 pm with host Bill Richardson



Synopsis

Act I

Semele, daughter of King Cadmus of Thebes, keeps delaying her marriage to Prince Athamas of Boeotia because she is in love with the god Jupiter. She prays to Jupiter for help (*O Jove! In pity teach me which to choose, Incline me to comply, or help me to refuse!*) Meanwhile Semele's sister Ino pines for Athamas (*Turn, hopeless lover, turn thy eyes, And see a maid bemoan, In flowing tears and aching sighs, Thy woes too like her own.*).

The wedding ceremony is interrupted when Jupiter, disguised as a purple eagle, carries Semele off and installs her in a pleasure palace, from which she can be heard singing of *Endless pleasure, endless love*.

Act II

Jupiter's wife Juno is enraged to learn that Semele is Jupiter's latest mistress and threatens to snatch Semele from the palace and toss her down to Hades. Juno's spy Iris warns her that the palace is guarded by dragons. Juno then comes up with a Plan B and departs with Iris (*Hence, Iris, hence away,*) to call on Somnus, the god of sleep, to engineer the destruction of Semele.

Meanwhile, Semele wakes from a dream of her lover (*O sleep, why dost thou leave me, Why thy visionary joys remove? O sleep, again deceive me, To my arms restore my wand'ring love!*)

When Jupiter arrives, Semele expresses her love (*With fond desiring, With bliss expiring*), but tells him she is upset by his frequent absences and by the fact that as a mere mortal she doesn't fit in with the deities around her. She hints that she'd like to be made immortal. Worried by her aspirations to immortality, Jupiter distracts her by fetching her sister Ino for a visit (*I must with speed amuse her*). He then conjures up a soothing Arcadian scene and sings tenderly to Semele (*Where'er you walk, cool gales shall fan the glade*).

Intermission

Act III

Juno arrives at the cave of Somnus and tries to waken him; he peevishly goes back to sleep (*Leave me, loathsome light*) until she promises him the love of the nymph Pasithea. Now that she has his attention, Juno tells Somnus to arouse Jupiter with a dream so erotic that he will promise Semele anything she demands. She also instructs Somnus to put Ino to sleep so that Juno can take her place.

Disguised as Ino, Juno now pays a visit to Semele. Flattering her outrageously, Juno shows her a mirror in which Semele appears even more gorgeous than usual. Semele is transfixed (*Myself I shall adore, If I persist in gazing. No object sure before Was ever half so pleasing.*)

Semele is so taken with her own beauty that she agrees to follow Juno's fatal advice: she will make Jupiter promise to come to her bed, not as a mortal, but in his true godlike glory so that she can attain the immortality she deserves.

Full of desire as a result of his dream, Jupiter tries to embrace Semele (*Come to my arms, my lovely fair, Soothe my uneasy care*). She hesitates (*I ever am granting, You always complain. I always am wanting, Yet never obtain*). Jupiter swears he will give her anything she wants. She demands that he cast off his human shape and appear in his full godly splendour. Dismayed, he urges her to reconsider, but she is adamant: *No, no, I'll take no less, Than all in full excess!*

Jupiter knows that even if he uses his *softest lightning* and *mildest melting bolt*, the situation is hopeless: he must keep his promise, and Semele will die. While Juno gloats (*Above measure Is the pleasure, Which my revenge supplies*), Jupiter approaches, and Semele is incinerated.

As the people mourn (*Oh, terror and astonishment!*), Ino recounts a vision in which Hermes told her of her sister's fate and of Jupiter's wish that she marry Athamas, who is perfectly happy to oblige. Apollo appears to announce that a new god will rise from Semele's ashes: Bacchus (the god of wine), who will be *more mighty than Love*. All rejoice.

Happy, happy shall we be, Free from care, from sorrow free.

Staging *Semele*

Part of the fun of opera is finding new ways to tell a story, shifting the focus just enough to reveal it in a new light.

The story of *Semele* – a pretty girl with ambitions, who infiltrates the bastions of power and privilege – is the oldest of stories and the most contemporary. It's ripe for all kinds of adaptations: as a romance, a bawdy farce, a soap opera, a melodrama, political satire, or social commentary.

An ancient myth from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *Semele* was given a subversive new edge with William Congreve's witty 1705 libretto. Congreve, the poster child for the satirical sexual comedies of the late 17th century, wrote the libretto for *Semele* around 1705 for an opera by John Eccles. The political satire in Congreve's retelling of the myth would have been clear to the English public at the time: the romantic, but dangerous Stuarts (Jupiter), were trying to stage a comeback and wrest back the throne (*Semele*) from the safe but staid House of Hanover (Athamas).

By the time Handel set Congreve's libretto to music nearly 40 years later, the political landscape had changed. King George II, like Jupiter, was known for his many mistresses; after the death of his wife, George set up his mistress, Amalie von Wallmoden, with a title and a large income. The possibility that she might aspire to become queen was not lost on the British public, and *Semele* could now be read as a warning that such ambitions would only end badly.

Semele's story still makes for a delicious *roman à clef*. Audiences of any time can speculate on the model for the jealous wife or the social-climbing mistress.

New York City Opera recently brought *Semele* into the 20th century, transporting Mount Olympus to the Kennedy White House, with a Marilyn Monroe sex kitten in the role of *Semele*, JFK as Jupiter, and Jackie Kennedy as the calculating Juno in a production complete with pillbox hat, paparazzi, and dancing secret servicemen.

Another recent production went the Sopranos route, with the gods as mafia bosses, Jupiter as the heir to the dynasty, *Semele* as his mistress, and Juno as the long-suffering Mob wife.

A production by internationally known Canadian director Robert Carsen had the goddess Juno channeling Queen Elizabeth (*All that's missing are the corgis*, according to one reviewer) with, in earlier stagings, a hint of Princess Diana in the character of *Semele*. (Incidentally, Robert Carsen made his Canadian mainstage opera debut with POV, directing *Il Trovatore* (1986) and returning in 1988 for *Fidelio*, a production with Michael Schade that was broadcast by PBS.)

For POV's production of *Semele*, director Wim Trompert looks at the story through the lens of an Upstairs/Downstairs sensibility, and not just because mortals aspiring to be gods may play closer to home if we show upper class toffs trying to keep out the lower orders.

Mr. Trompert's choice arises from a profound empathy with *Semele*, as he explains in his Director's Notes.

Director's Notes

Semele's Secret

One of Handel's most beloved arias sparkles in the centre of *Semele*. It is one of the best love songs ever:

*Where'er you walk, cool gales shall fan the glade;
Trees, where you sit, shall crowd into a shade.
Where'er you tread, the blushing flow'rs shall
rise,
and all things flourish where'er you turn your
eyes.*

The Roman god Jupiter sings these poetic phrases while observing the young princess Semele. It is an expression of sincere attachment: let the world be good to you. Apparently Jupiter is deeply in love. And so is Semele. But while Jupiter's dreams are filled with pink clouds and frolicking cupids, Semele is aware of how vulnerable she is in their relationship. At first she is extremely happy when Jupiter abducts her and saves her from a marriage with Prince Athamas. But later on – left alone in her new palace – she starts worrying. She realises there is only one way to protect herself: ask Jupiter to make her immortal.

Semele has good reason to feel vulnerable. Jupiter is so much in love he doesn't pay any attention to the consequences of their relationship. The god even ignores the fact he is already married. His wife Juno, goddess of marriage and protectress of marital fidelity, is not the person to take her husband's new love affair lightly.

There is one key element that in the libretto is not expressed before the final scene, but that surely has an enormous impact on Semele's thoughts and actions: she is pregnant. When we encounter her, she has been carrying Jupiter's child for three months. The young princess is in big trouble. No wonder her first aria is a prayer to Jupiter for his help. Semele has been made pregnant by a god, is supposed to marry a prince, and fears her secret will be discovered soon.

With this crucial knowledge of her pregnancy, we understand Semele's motives much better. In fact the whole story becomes clearer, and our opinion about the princess changes entirely. Vanity, often chosen as the theme of this opera, no longer plays a part. We find a touching story of a young girl fighting for her unborn child. Now we accept her stubborn ambition to become immortal. And we understand the fanaticism with which Juno plots the elimination of her rival.

Semele's extramarital pregnancy has become the focus of this production. For this reason her story is connected to a world where such a pregnancy would cause great scandal and put a young girl at risk. The Victorian era, with its strict moral and social rules, offers us the right setting.

In Victorian times antiquity was very popular. Artists like Alma-Tadema achieved success with paintings of classical subjects. Roman influences made their way into architecture and costume design. This merging of the 19th century and antiquity, what we experience when we see pictures of this period, creates precisely the right background for Semele's dramatic story.

There is another surprising aspect we have to consider. At the end, after the death of Semele, the atmosphere of the opera changes to show a more spiritual side. Apollo appears to foretell the birth of Semele's child: *A God he shall prove more mighty than Love, and sighing and sorrow for ever prevent.*

The Chorus responds: *Happy shall we be, free from care, from sorrow free.*

We have heard similar phrases before, and so had the audience in Handel's time. Although everybody sings here about the young Bacchus, the audience clearly understood the message of Christian salvation. This adds another layer to the story. The magical world of the Roman gods now becomes a vehicle for a Christian message of hope.

Wim Trompert

Set and Costumes for POV's Production

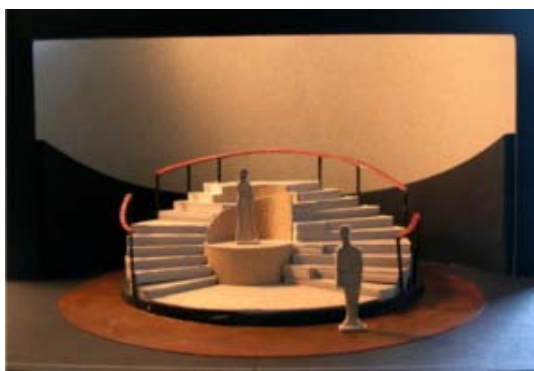
In this original production by Pacific Opera Victoria, director Wim Trompert transports *Semele* into the 19th century where her dilemma plays out amid stifling Victorian conventions. Designer Brian Perchaluk, making his POV debut, has created designs that merge the two worlds of the original Greek myth and the Victorian era.



Designer Brian Perchaluk's costume sketches for Athamas (left), Juno (centre), and Semele (right)



Costume sketches for Jupiter (left), Iris (right), and Somnus (right)



Model of the set, designed by Brian Perchaluk

The Music and the Composer

Highlights from the Opera

Handel's music for *Semele* is simply scrumptious – bright, crystalline orchestration framed by vocal lines that are as lavishly ornate and ravishingly sweet as spun sugar. Words brimming with innuendo just add to the fun – although Handel actually toned down Congreve's racy lyrics. Here are a few highlights. You can listen to the music from these selections on POV's website at <http://www.pov.bc.ca/semele.html>.

Semele

Endless Pleasure, Endless Love. Act 1, Scene 4

Her nuptials disrupted by thunderbolts, Semele has been carried off by Jupiter, disguised as a purple-winged eagle. She exults in the endless love she is enjoying. Called by one critic "that most voracious of arias," *Endless Pleasure* is unabashedly sensual; even the chorus joins in!

*Endless pleasure, endless love
Semele enjoys above!*

*On her bosom Jove reclining,
Useless now his thunder lies.*

Jupiter

Where'er you walk
Act 2, Scene 3

The opera's greatest hit, this tender love song shows the wily Jupiter at his most charming and amorous. Semele is making noises about wanting to be immortal, and Jupiter distracts her with his love talk; what girl wouldn't be impressed?

*Where'er you walk, cool gales
shall fan the glade;*

*Trees, where you sit, shall crowd
into a shade.*

*Where'er you tread, the blushing
flow'rs shall rise,
And all things flourish where'er
you turn your eyes.*

Somnus

Leave me, loathsome light.
Act 3, Scene 1

Every slugabed who has ever hit the alarm and burrowed back under the covers will appreciate this petulant growl from Somnus, the god of sleep, as Juno orders him to get up.

*Leave me, loathsome light,
Receive me, silent night!
Lethe, why does thy ling'ring
current cease?*

*Oh, murmur, murmur me again
to peace!*

Juno, more annoying and more persistent than any alarm clock, has no Snooze button, but after she promises Somnus a pretty girl named Pasithea, he perks up.

*More sweet is that name
Than a soft purling stream.
With pleasure repose I'll forsake,
If you'll grant me but her to
soothe me awake.*

Semele

Myself I Shall Adore.
Act 3, Scene 3

As part of her plot to destroy Semele, Juno, disguised as Semele's sister Ino, gives Semele a magic mirror that makes her appear dazzlingly lovely. Transfixed by her own beauty, the naïve Semele sings:

*Myself I shall adore,
If I persist in gazing.
No object sure before
Was ever half so pleasing.*

Semele

No, no, I'll take no less.
Act 3, Scene 4

Overwhelmed with desire, thanks to Juno's trickery, Jupiter swears to grant Semele anything she wishes. She asks him to cast off his human shape and appear in his full godly splendour. He urges her to reconsider, but she is adamant:

*No, no, I'll take no less,
Than all in full excess!
Your oath it may alarm you.
Yet haste and prepare,
For I'll know what you are,
With all your powers arm you.*

Handel and His Music

George Frideric Handel (February 23, 1685 – April 14, 1759) was one of the greatest European composers during the Baroque period of the 18th century. He was born the same year as the other great Baroque composer, Johann Sebastian Bach, although the two never met.

When Handel was born in Halle, Germany, he was given a good German name: Georg Friederich Händel. Years later, in 1727, he became a British subject and anglicized the spelling of his name to George Frideric Handel.

Like many parents who want their children to take up a lucrative and respectable career, Handel's father hoped he would be a lawyer and discouraged his early interest in music. However, Handel managed to sneak a small clavichord into his attic and practice in secret. In his teens he worked as a church organist and then in 1703 he landed a job as violinist in the Hamburg opera orchestra.

Within a year he had composed his first opera, *Almira*, and was nearly killed in a duel. Handel and his friend, the composer Johann Mattheson, had disagreed over who should get to play the harpsichord during a performance of Mattheson's opera *Cleopatra*. They decided to settle the matter with a duel, and Handel was saved only when a big brass button on his coat broke the point of Mattheson's sword. Afterward, the two became better friends than ever.

In 1706 Handel went to Italy, which was *the* centre of operatic innovation. In 1710 he returned to Germany and became Kapellmeister (director of music) for George, Elector of Hanover, who would become King George I of Great Britain in 1714. Handel made several visits to England. His opera *Rinaldo*, the first Italian opera composed for the London stage, premiered in 1711 and was a great success. By 1712 he had settled permanently in London, and in 1717 he became resident composer for the Earl of Caernarvon (later the Duke of Chandos).

In 1719 Handel became Music director of the new Royal Academy of Music, an organization that presented performances of Italian opera in London. But by 1728 the Royal Academy folded due to financial problems, waning public support for "foreign opera", squabbles among the directors, and

the bitter rivalry between two prima donnas, Faustina Bordoni and Francesca Cuzzoni, who actually came to blows on stage during a performance in 1727. The antics of these spoiled foreign singers were yet another blow against Italian opera; the rivalry between Faustina and Cuzzoni was satirized in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, which appeared a few months after their public spat.

After the decline of the Royal Academy, Handel went into partnership with the impresario Johann Jacob Heidegger to lease the King's Theatre and continue to produce Italian opera. Even as he churned out more operas through the 1730s, he began turning to the English language oratorio. However, oratorios remained a sideline until 1738, by which time he was bankrupt and ill. Changing public tastes and rival opera companies had taken their toll.

In 1741 the Duke of Middlesex set up an opera company in competition with Handel. Handel now made writing and producing oratorios the main business of his career. His most popular oratorio, *Messiah*, premiered in Dublin in 1742. In order to fit everyone into the hall, organizers published an announcement requesting *the Favour of the Ladies not to come with Hoops this Day to the Musick-Hall in Fishamble Street: The Gentlemen are desired to come without their Swords*.

Handel had now found a viable business model. Oratorios – unstaged dramatic works in English, usually with a biblical theme – were not only cheaper to produce, but were acceptable fodder for performance during Lent when staged performances were forbidden. Handel could therefore present his dramatic works during Lent, when there were no rival operas and when the theaters were cheaper to hire.

When *Semele* premiered as a concert piece during the 1744 Lenten concert series at Covent Garden, Handel tried to pass it off as an opera *after the manner of an Oratorio*. Neither fish nor fowl, the work offended everyone: pious oratorio purists who expected a high-minded religious work were affronted by its sexuality; opera aficionados were put off because it was in English rather than the proper language of opera – Italian. Charles Jennens, the librettist of *Messiah*, dismissed *Semele* as *no oratorio but a bawdy opera*.

What added to the tension and further eroded ticket sales was the rivalry between Lord Middlesex's opera company and Handel's oratorio productions. With *Semele*, Handel had stepped over the line into operatic territory. He had managed to put on an opera (and really, it *was* an opera; there were even stage directions in the libretto) without having to spend money on sets and expensive Italian singers. From Middlesex's perspective, Handel had broken a gentlemen's agreement to live and let live. And so during the performances of *Semele* there were stories of ruffians (presumably hired on Middlesex's behalf) harassing concertgoers as they entered the theatre and of muggings as people returned to their carriages after the performances. Mary Delany, a friend of Handel, commented: *Semele has a strong party against it, viz. the fine ladies, petit maitres, and ignoramus's. All the opera people are enraged at Handel.*

With so much controversy swirling around it, *Semele* lasted just four performances. For a revival the following December, Handel inserted a few Italian arias to placate the opera nuts and removed some of the most explicit material to mollify the pious, but *Semele* fell into a long decline. It was not until 1925 that *Semele* was actually staged as an opera, in Cambridge, and it had to wait over 200 years – till 1982 – to return to its original Covent Garden venue as a staged work.

Handel continued to write oratorios until he went blind in 1751. Even after that he continued to conduct performances of his work. He died in 1759 and was buried in Westminster Abbey, recognized in England and by many in Germany as the greatest composer of his day.

Handel's ability to capture not only the poetic surface of a text, but also the recesses of underlying meaning is second to none. His music not only fits the text like a glove, but often elevates and deepens the meaning and characterization.

Handel's Music

Handel wrote over 40 operas, over 30 oratorios, and a variety of church music, odes, cantatas, orchestral suites, keyboard works, concertos for various instruments, and concerti grossi (instrumental works in which a small group of instruments alternates with a larger group).

Among his most familiar works are these:

Water Music, so called because it was performed for a royal concert on the River Thames in 1717. The musicians played on a barge close to the royal barge.

Zadok the Priest, an anthem for the 1727 coronation of King George II, which has been performed at every British coronation since.

Music for the Royal Fireworks, commissioned by King George II for a celebration of the 1749 Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle.

Ombra mai fu, an aria from from the opera *Serse* (*Xerxes*); (often just called Handel's Largo)

Where'er you walk, the beautiful love song Jupiter sings in *Semele*.

Messiah, Handel's best known work, a famous oratorio which we hear frequently around Christmastime. Handel actually composed *Messiah* for Easter; it was first performed in Dublin in April, 1742. Beginning in 1750 Handel gave regular Easter performances of *Messiah* in London, in support of the Foundling Hospital, an organization for underprivileged children, which still exists today as the Thomas Coram Foundation. Handel was so committed to this charity that he left a copy of *Messiah* to the Hospital in his Will. The tradition of using his music to raise money continues today with a fundraising concert every February, celebrating Handel's music and his contribution to helping disadvantaged children.

John Andrews, British conductor and musicologist

Handel is the greatest composer that ever lived... I would uncover my head and kneel down on his tomb

Beethoven.

[Handel] is the only person I would wish to see before I die, and the only person I would wish to be, were I not Bach.

J. S. Bach.

Getting a “Handel” on Baroque Opera

By Robert Holliston

Composers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (at least those without independent means) really had two options open to them for regular employment: the court and the church.

The earliest (late sixteenth-century) Baroque operas had in fact been composed for aristocratic courts, but with the opening in the 1630s of the first public opera house in Venice, this new music/theater hybrid became the height of fashion for audiences from all levels of society, and an exciting new breed of free-lance composer emerged.

Germany’s first public opera house opened in Hamburg in 1678, and quickly became the most important operatic center in the German-speaking world (which of course included Austria). It was here that the ambitious 20-year-old George Friderick Handel had his first Italian opera, *Almira*, produced in 1705.

France and England, with their well-established traditions of classical theater, were somewhat more resistant to this upstart new genre: the idea of presenting a story solely through the medium of singing did not at first appeal to them. But composers such as Jean-Baptiste Lully and Henry Purcell were able to forge an operatic style that suited the French and English languages, and by the time Handel arrived in London in 1710, opera was truly the international popular entertainment.

Indeed, it was eventually said that in Handel we had a German composer who wrote Italian operas with French overtures for English audiences.

If Venice and Hamburg had given the world its first public opera houses, eighteenth-century London became the mecca for entrepreneurial free-lance composers eager to make their fame and fortune in this fickle new industry.

Perplexing as it may seem today, fashionable Londoners flocked to the theater to see performances of ancient histories and classical myths given in a language they did not understand, although a serious student of the genre – or an *au courant* young man-about-town eager to impress his date – could purchase a copy of the libretto ahead of time in order to acquaint himself with the story.

After Purcell’s death in 1695 foreign composers and star performers dominated London’s lyric stages utterly. And what star performers! Theater managers

(including Handel himself) regularly scoured the continent hoping to entice the most celebrated singers of the day with promises of high fees.

Performers like the soprano Francesca Cuzzoni and the castrato Francesco Bernardi (better known as Senesino) enjoyed adulation that is virtually unimaginable today; it was not unusual for wealthy aesthetes to give gifts of ermine coats, gold-plated carriages, and real estate to their favorite divas and divos.

Needless to say, these creatures could be difficult and demanding, and any composer eager to please his public had first to write carefully for his stars. Handel was no exception, but he was made of sterner stuff than most: when Cuzzoni refused to sing a particular aria (apparently because it had originally been composed for another singer) he threatened to toss her out the third-story window unless she complied with his wishes. Or so the story goes; in any case, she not only sang the number but went on to have great success with it.

As early as Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo* (1607), composers had used instrumental pieces to introduce a musical drama. Gradually during the seventeenth century, two main types of overture crystallized: the French *ouverture* (pioneered by Lully) and the Italian *sinfonia*.

A typical Handel opera will begin with a French-style *ouverture*, which consists of two main sections: a slow, stately, majestic opening with solid chords and dotted rhythms (one can easily imagine a monarch such as Louis XIV entering the room to such an accompaniment); and a faster second section, which is usually imitative (i.e., fugal) and concludes with a brief return to the slow tempo and dotted rhythms of the first section. This is designed at least in part to get the audience’s attention.

Patrons of the Queen’s Theater on Haymarket were not the disciplined, well-ordered lot we are today: if the music was not to their liking – or if the star of the moment did not happen to be singing – they were quite happy to chat, comment on the fashions displayed in the neighboring box seats, play cards, eat, drink, and engage in amorous intrigues.

Once the star of the moment did take center stage, he or she would probably sing an aria in the fashionable *da capo* (Italian for “from the head”) form.

This structure, which can be abbreviated A/B/A, was central to the operatic school associated with Naples and the works of Alessandro Scarlatti; Handel had mastered this style during his years in Italy. Simply put, one section of music is followed by a contrasting one, after which the performer is instructed to return to the beginning and repeat the first section.

The success of this form depended on the solo singer's ability to improvise variations and ornaments during this repeat, and this skill was learned by, and expected of, all professional singers.

In general, there were two ways of ornamenting a given melodic line:

(1) small melodic formulas (such as trills, turns, appoggiaturas, mordents) attached to one or two of the written notes; and

(2) longer ornaments by means of which the notes of a melody were broken down into a multitude of smaller notes to produce a free and elaborate paraphrase of the written line (this practice was most appropriate to melodies in slow tempo).

Still another species of ornamentation, common in late Baroque opera, was the *cadenza*, an elaborate extension of the final cadence or full stop. These practices varied from country to country and from time to time, so that the restoration by modern scholars of all these traditions of performance is a complex and delicate operation.

The aria is essentially a non-narrative medium, during which a character may reflect on or respond to the dramatic situation at any point in the story. The music is given priority over the text (which is usually kept short and simple, with sections of words repeated in accordance with the musical phrasing), and the rhythm is metrical and dance-like. (The same is true of any ensembles and choruses, although these tend to play a less important role in Handel's operas than in his oratorios.)

The main vehicle for storytelling is the *recitative*, in which the non-metrical rhythms of speech are imitated and intensified by the addition of musical pitches.

This is perhaps the chief innovation of the early Italian opera composers, and it presented the biggest hurdle when moving the genre from one language to another.

A popular public speaker, teacher, and musician, Robert Holliston has given pre-performance lectures for Pacific Opera Victoria since 1993 and was Chorus Master for many years.

An important feature of eighteenth-century opera was the emergence of two distinct types of recitative: *secco* ("dry") and *accompagnato* ("accompanied"). The difference was in the type of accompaniment: *recitativo secco* is accompanied only by harpsichord and a sustaining bass instrument, and used chiefly to get through long stretches of dialogue or monologue as quickly and in as speechlike a way as possible. *Recitativo accompagnato* is accompanied orchestrally, and used for especially tense dramatic situations. The rapid changes of emotion in the words are reinforced by the orchestra, which both accompanies the singer and punctuates his or her phrases by brief instrumental outbursts.

The world of opera is nothing if not fickle. A composer can have a raging success on Monday and be out by Friday – as Handel himself discovered.

Inevitably, fashions shifted and the English public tired of the complicated plots, predictable structure, and foreign language of Italian opera. Its demise may have been hastened by the production in 1728 of John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, whose songs had popular tunes and English words and whose plot replaced Roman emperors and Greek gods with the pickpockets, prostitutes, and crooked civil servants of contemporary London street life.

Handel, stubborn old Saxon that he was, had to lose a fortune before finally admitting defeat and turning his attention almost exclusively to the English-language oratorio. Although *Semele* was first presented "in the manner of an oratorio," it is in reality more of an opera. And in the words of Lord Harewood:

... the music of Semele is so full of variety, the recitative so expressive, the orchestration so inventive, the characterization so apt, the general level of invention so high, the action so full of credible situation and incident — in a word, the piece as a whole is so suited to the operatic stage — that one can only suppose its neglect to have been due to an act of abnegation on the part of opera companies.

As we have done so frequently in past seasons, Pacific Opera Victoria is attempting to redress this neglect with our upcoming production.

Exploring the Myth of *Semele*

Handel's opera *Semele* sticks fairly close to the elements of the original Greek myth, but it leaves out some of the story. If we explore Semele's place in Greek mythology, we can learn a lot more about what happened before Semele got involved with Jupiter and after her fiery death.

Chart of Who's Who

Reading ancient mythology is a bit like shopping in a Canadian grocery store. It helps to be bilingual. Meat and produce are labelled in both pounds and grams. Gods of the ancient world had both Greek and Latin names. Here's a chart of some of the characters mentioned in this study guide.

| Greek Name | Roman (Latin) Name | Who is this? |
|------------|--------------------|---|
| Zeus | Jupiter or Jove | King of the gods, god of the sky, law, and fate. Chronically unfaithful husband of Hera/Juno. Father of Ares (and therefore great grandfather of Semele). |
| Hera | Juno | Wife (and older sister) of Jupiter/Zeus. Goddess of marriage. Mother of Ares. Great grandmother of Semele. |
| Semele | Semele | Girlfriend (and great grand-daughter) of Jupiter. Mother of Bacchus. |
| Dionysus | Bacchus | Son of Jupiter and Semele. God of Wine. |
| Cadmus | Cadmus | Father of Semele. A mortal. |
| Harmonia | Concordia | Goddess of harmony and concord. Daughter of Ares and Aphrodite. Mother of Semele. |
| Ares | Mars | God of war. Son of Jupiter and Juno. Father of Harmonia. Grandfather of Semele. |
| Aphrodite | Venus | Goddess of love and beauty. Mother of Harmonia, Grandmother of Semele |
| Eros | Cupid or Amor | God of love. Son of Ares and Aphrodite. Brother of Harmonia. Uncle of Semele. His arrows caused people to fall in love. |
| Hypnos | Somnus / Sopor | God of Sleep. |
| Iris | Iris | Messenger of Juno. Goddess of the rainbow. |
| Minerva | Athena | Goddess of wisdom. Daughter of Zeus and Metis, born fully armed out of Zeus' head |
| Hephaestus | Vulcan | Son of Hera. God of blacksmiths, technology, fire and volcanoes. Midwife to Zeus (he split open Zeus' head so that Athena could be born.) |
| Europa | Europa | Sister of Cadmus. Aunt to Semele. Carried off to Crete by Jupiter. Her family never found her. The continent of Europe is named after her. |
| Hermes | Mercury | God of travel, thieves, writing, and messenger of the gods. Son of Zeus and Maia. |
| Hades | Pluto | King of the Underworld and god of death. Brother of Jupiter. Husband of Persephone |
| Persephone | Proserpina | Queen of the Underworld, goddess of spring. Wife of Hades. Daughter of Demeter by Zeus. |
| Demeter | Ceres | Goddess of agriculture. Sister of Hera, Zeus, and Hades. Mother of Persephone. |

The Prequel

Semele really should have known better than to get involved with Jupiter. First of all, if you examine her family tree, you'll find that he was her great grandfather. Of course, he was also an immortal god, and no one batted an eye about such matters.

What is more, Jupiter had previously disguised himself as a bull and abducted Semele's aunt Europa. Semele's father Cadmus had searched long and hard for his sister, but never found her (Jupiter had carried her off

The Sequel

The story of Semele doesn't really end with her death. Like a movie that spawns an entire franchise of sequels or a television series that generates spinoffs, the story of Semele keeps going even after her death. Here are answers to some questions we might ask at the end of the opera.

What happens to Baby Bacchus?

The first order of business when a baby is born prematurely is to try to save its life. In this case, the baby's father, Jupiter, stepped in and sewed the baby into his thigh in order to bring him to full term.

The notion of a father carrying a baby to term (in essence being pregnant) is not without precedent. Seahorses do it. And Jupiter had done it on another occasion. Afraid that his child by the goddess Metis would be more powerful than he, he had tricked Metis into changing herself into a fly and then swallowed her. He later developed a splitting headache. The god Hephaestus split open Jupiter's head, and out came his daughter Athena – fully grown and wearing full armour.

After a few months inside Jupiter's thigh, Bacchus was born as a healthy baby and nicknamed *the twice-born*. But Juno's revenge had not ended.

Jupiter left the baby with Ino and Athamas (Semele's sister and her husband), and persuaded them to rear him as a girl in order to protect his identity. But Juno found out and drove Athamas and Ino into madness so that they killed two of their children.

Bacchus was then placed in the care of the nymphs of Mount Nysa, who were rewarded by Jupiter by being placed among the stars; they are known as the Hyades star cluster.

When Bacchus had grown, he discovered that grapes could be made into wine. However, he was driven mad by the still jealous Juno, and wandered through the world, conquering lands as far away as India and teaching people to cultivate grapes and make wine.

to Crete). Eventually Cadmus founded the Greek city of Thebes and brought the alphabet to Greece. He became the first king of Thebes, married Harmonia, daughter of the gods Ares and Aphrodite and had five children with her. Most of them met with tragic ends, because Cadmus had once killed a serpent sacred to Ares. Saddened by all the tragedy in their lives, Cadmus and Harmonia eventually left Thebes and were finally themselves turned into serpents.

Bacchus became the god of wine, agriculture, fertility, and the theatre. Festivals in his honour were called bacchanals. Today the word bacchanalian refers to any kind of drunken revelry or orgy.

Is Semele really dead?

Well, yes. But in Greek mythology as in modern vampire and zombie stories, even dead people can get around.

Like many children who have lost a parent, Bacchus wondered about the mother he had never met. Eventually he went down to the Underworld and rescued her. She became a goddess on Mount Olympus, with the new name Thyone ... and finally achieved immortality after all!

There are myths of other people being brought back from the Underworld. Persephone, daughter of the earth goddess Demeter, was abducted by Hades, the king of the Underworld. She was eventually allowed to return to earth for part of the year. During her visits home, Demeter is happy and the earth flourishes. But when Persephone returns each year to Hades, Demeter refuses to let anything grow, and winter begins.

The great musician Orpheus travelled to the Underworld to retrieve his dead wife Eurydice. His singing was so beautiful that Hades' heart was softened and Orpheus was permitted to lead Eurydice back to the world of the living – as long as Orpheus did not look back during their journey. However, he did look back to be sure Eurydice was following him, and this time he lost her forever.

Can Juno and Jupiter's marriage be saved?

There's no record of their ever divorcing, although they fought, separated, and reconciled many times. Jupiter was notorious for seducing or abducting a succession of women. It's no wonder Juno, his wife, set the gold standard for the conduct of jealous spouses. She had plenty of practice.

The 5th century Greek poet Nonnus wrote an epic about Bacchus/Dionysus, called the *Dionysiaca* in which he listed just 12 of the women with whom Jupiter had affairs:

Now Eros the wise, the self-taught, the manager of the ages, knocked at the gloomy gates of primeval Chaos. He took out the divine quiver, in which were kept apart twelve firefed arrows for Zeus, when his desire turned towards one or another of mortal women for a bride. Right on the back of his quiver of lovebolts he had engraved with letters of gold a sentence in verse for each.

The list that followed, including Europa, Semele, and others, was nowhere close to a complete list of Jupiter's girlfriends.

As she did with Semele, Juno took revenge on many of the women with whom Jupiter was involved. She turned one (Callisto) into a bear. She tormented another (Io) by sending a gadfly to sting her as she wandered the earth. When another, Alcmena, was in labour with Jupiter's son, Hercules, Juno persuaded the goddess of childbirth to prolong the labour; she also sent snakes to kill all Alcmena's children (Baby Hercules strangled and killed the snakes).

An Alternate Version of the Semele Myth

Many ancient myths have multiple versions, and Semele's story is no exception. One alternate version says that Bacchus was the son of Jupiter and Persephone. The jealous Juno sent the Titans to kill the child. They ripped him to pieces after luring him with toys, then boiled the pieces. Zeus killed the Titans and gave the pieces of his son's heart to Semele in a drink, and she thus became pregnant. The story then picks up as before, with Juno, disguised as Semele's nurse Beroe, telling the girl to ask Zeus to come to her in his full glory, with the same fatal results.

This version makes Bacchus not twice-born, but thrice-born!

Links for Further Learning

Below are some general links to help you learn more about *Semele*. These are followed by several pages of additional resources and suggestions for listening, for classroom activities, and for further reading.

The Myth of *Semele*

<http://www.theoi.com/>

A superbly detailed, cross-referenced site exploring Greek mythology and the gods in classical literature and art, with reference to the ancient sources for each story.

Within this site you can find the story of Semele at <http://www.theoi.com/Georgikos/Thyone.html>

You can also find Semele's family tree at <http://www.theoi.com/Tree5.html>

<http://classics.mit.edu/Ovid/metam.3.third.html>

Book 3 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the main source for the myth of Semele.

Handel

<http://gfhandel.org/>

Website devoted to all things Handel (even trading cards with pictures of Handel)

Semele

<http://opera.stanford.edu/iu/libretti/semele.htm>

The Libretto of Handel's *Semele*, adapted from the libretto by William Congreve

<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~rbear/congreve1.html>

William Congreve's original libretto for the opera *Semele* by John Eccles.

<http://www.pov.bc.ca/semele.html> (Click on *Musical Selections*)

POV's Best of YouTube: Hear and watch selections from productions of *Semele*.

Directions for Further Learning

For Elementary and Middle School Students

1. Discover Handel's Music

Listen to examples of music by Handel. You can start by listening to some of the music from *Semele* at <http://www.pov.bc.ca/semele.html> (click on *Musical Selections*). Then you can listen to online recordings of some of Handel's most famous music

Water Music

<http://www.archive.org/details/HandelWaterMusic>

Music for the Royal Fireworks (wait for the fireworks!):

<http://ca.youtube.com/watch?v=I38Kw-oG0kE&feature=related>

The famous **Hallelujah Chorus from *Messiah***

<http://www.archive.org/details/GeorgeFridericHandelHallelujah>

The Coronation Anthem, ***Zadok the Priest***. Performed during the Golden Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. Includes video of her coronation in 1952.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1W1XJ96y9k&feature=related>

The Harmonious Blacksmith, a piece for piano by Handel, recorded by Sergei Rachmaninoff in 1936

http://www.archive.org/details/Harmonious_Blacksmith

Ombra mai fu from the opera *Xerxes*.

Here are two versions of this beautiful aria. One is sung by a woman with a contralto voice (the lowest female voice). The other is sung by a man with a countertenor voice. A countertenor is a male singing voice whose vocal range is equivalent to that of a contralto, mezzo-soprano or (less frequently) a soprano. Today, countertenors are much in demand, particularly for Baroque opera. The role of Athamas in POV's *Semele* is sung by countertenor Scott Belluz.

Listen to these two recordings and discuss the differences between them.

Contralto Kathleen Ferrier sings *Ombra mai fu*.

<http://ca.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9LiyM3ZwxA>

Countertenor David Daniels sings *Ombra mai fu*.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wa1e49KLXNU>

2. Explore the Vocabulary of Mythology

The gods and goddesses of Ancient Greece and Rome may seem very remote, but they have become part of our everyday language. Starting with the names on the chart on page 12, see how many English words you can think of that originated with a Greek or Roman god or goddess. Explain what the words mean and how they relate to the god or goddess from whose name they are derived.

Example: The god of sleep is called Hypnos in Greek and either Somnus or Sopor in Latin. Here are some English words that are derived from the names of the god of sleep: *hypnosis*, *somnolent*, *insomnia*, *somnambulate*, *soporific*. What does each word mean?

Many more English words are derived from mythological names. You can find more resources at these web sites:

http://www.vocabulary.com/index.php?dir=def_match&file=attempt_def_match&theme_id=52

Match myth-derived words to their definitions (an interactive online exercise which may also be printed)

<http://fayette.k12.in.us/~cbeard/calliope/> Worksheets for classroom use.

<http://library.oakland.edu/information/people/personal/kraemer/edcm/index.html>

Useful lists of modern English words with definitions and explanation of the mythical origin of each word.

3. Design an Opera Production

If you could create your own production of *Semele*, what would you do?

Choose a time and place to set your production. It can be anywhere, at anytime. Use your imagination.

The planet Jupiter in 2099?

A pre-historic plain with woolly mammoths running around?

Victoria, BC, in 1900?

Mount Olympus in 2000 BC?

Now you need to design a set that matches the time and place you have chosen.

What scenery or furniture will you have on stage?

How will your characters dress?

Draw your set. You may need a different set for each act of the opera.

Design the costumes for your characters.

For Middle School and High School Students

Character analysis

Read the synopsis of *Semele* in this study guide. If possible, read the online libretto at <http://opera.stanford.edu/iu/libretti/semele.htm>

1. Create a character sketch for one of the main characters. Consider the following questions:

What can be assumed about this person?

What is the character's relationship with the other characters?

Why does the character make the choices he or she does?

Include evidence from the opera to support your claims.

Include information about the following:

Character's Name

Physical Characteristics (style and physical attributes)

Psychological Characteristics (mental aspects of character, how does he/she think?)

Emotional Characteristics (is he/she generally cheerful, sad, snobbish, "off-balance" etc.?)

Family background

How the events in the opera have affected the character

Other interesting facts

After seeing the opera, look at your character sketch again. Does any aspect of the performance or the music you heard change your view of the character you have profiled? Why? Do the emotions conveyed through the music fit the character sketch?

2. Create a journal or blog from the point of view of your character: Choose a point of conflict for the character you chose for your character sketch, and write a journal or blog of those events from the character's point of view, using the character profile for assistance. Take on the persona of that character and refer to the character in the first person. Remember to express only information that your character would know.

3. Draw a Family tree for your character. Use the chart in this study guide to help, or consult online resources, such as the family trees available at <http://www.theoi.com/Tree.html>

For High School and Post-Secondary Students

Women in Victorian Times

Director Wim Trompert is setting Pacific Opera Victoria's production of *Semele* in Victorian times in order to highlight the dilemma of a young girl who finds herself pregnant with no legitimate refuge.

In the original mythological setting, Jupiter regularly impregnates girls. The consequences can be dire (being incinerated or changed into a bear, for example), but they can feel rather remote to a modern audience.

Consider how the choice of a Victorian setting can sharpen the focus on Semele's plight, not to mention that of the other women in the opera. Examine aspects of the Victorian era and the place of women in society at the time.

Consider too how a similar situation might play out if the opera were set in the present day.

Starting points for research on Victorian Times

Victoria Research Web: Links to books and articles on the social, political and economic atmosphere that inspired the literature of the day. <http://www.victorianweb.org/>

The Victorian Women Writers Project, Indiana University: transcriptions of works by many lesser known British women writers of the 19th century including anthologies, novels, political pamphlets, religious tracts, children's books, and volumes of poetry and verse drama. <http://www.indiana.edu/~letrs/vwwp/>

Literary History: Nineteenth Century Literature: Academic, scholarly, and critical articles on American and British poets, novelists, and essayists of the nineteenth century. <http://www.literaryhistory.com/19thC/Outline.htm>

Some authors to explore

Charlotte Brontë

George Eliot

Elizabeth Gaskell

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

Jane Austen (technically a pre-Victorian as she died in 1815, and Queen Victoria didn't come to the throne until 1838). But Austen's novels are well known and sharply focused on the predicament of many women at the time. Yes, they are wonderful romances. But note the frequent discussion of money, the constant pressure for women to marry well in order to achieve economic security, the tension between love and pragmatism, and the threat of scandal at any hint of impropriety.

For Anyone

A Review of the Opera

Before you see the opera, you might read a few examples of reviews for fine arts events from the newspaper, or have a look at some online reviews of opera. Here are a few examples of reviews of *Semele* from the Internet:

http://www.operatoday.com/content/2004/11/handels_semele.php

Opera Today: Robert Thicknesse reviews English National Opera's revival of Robert Carsen's production (November, 2004)

<http://scotlandonsunday.scotsman.com/ViewArticle.aspx?articleid=2606412>

Scotland on Sunday: Sarah Jones reviews a Scottish National Opera production (February, 2005)

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/15/arts/music/15seme.html?_r=2&n=Top/Reference/Times%20Topics/Organizations/N/New%20York%20City%20Opera&oref=slogin

New York Times: Bernard Holland reviews New York City Opera's production (September, 2006)

After seeing *Semele*, **make some notes in point form**, answering the following questions:

- What did you like about the opera? What did you dislike?
- What did you think about the sets, props and costumes?
- What did you think of the singers' portrayal of their characters?
- Would you have done something differently? Why?
- What were you expecting? Did it live up to your expectations?

Discuss your reactions with your fellow students. Feel free to go beyond the questions listed above.

Then begin to **outline your review**. Keep in mind that a review should contain the following:

- A clearly stated purpose (why are you writing this and who is your audience?)
- A brief plot synopsis (including who sang what role, etc.)
- A coherent series of paragraphs comparing and contrasting things you liked or didn't like
- A summary / closing paragraph

Your review should capture the interest of the reader. Once your outline has been completed, write your **rough draft**. **Exchange reviews** with other students to critique and edit. Focus on effective and logical expression of ideas and correct grammar and punctuation. **Edit and revise** your review until you have a polished final version.

Students might submit their writing for publication such as a school newspaper. Students are also welcome to send the reviews to Pacific Opera. We would love to hear your thoughts!

Teacher's Comments

Your comments and suggestions are greatly appreciated. Please take a few minutes to fill out this questionnaire and return it to the address below. Thank you for your comments and suggestions.

Name: _____ School: _____

Address: _____

Phone Number: _____ Fax: _____ Grade(s) you teach: _____

Email: _____ Subjects: _____

Have you attended other arts events with your students in the past year? Yes No

If yes, what were they? _____

Were you able to use the Teacher's Study Guide in your classroom activities before attending the opera?
 Yes No

If not, please elaborate: _____

If so, which sections of the Study Guide did you find most useful?

How appropriate was the information provided in the Study Guide? _____

What would you add/delete?

Did you spend classroom time discussing the performance after your students attended the opera?
 Yes No

Do you have any comments about the performance itself?

Would you like to receive information on our future Student Dress Rehearsals? Yes No

How would you like to receive information? Fax Email Letters Other _____

Further comments and suggestions _____

Please return this form to:

Pacific Opera, 1815 Blanshard Street, Suite 500, Victoria, BC V8T 5A4 Fax: 250.382.4944

Or you may scan and email it to mwoodall@pov.bc.ca