

THAÏS

Music by Jules Massenet

Libretto by Louis Gallet, based on the novel *Thaïs* by Anatole France.

University Opera production directed by William Farlow

University Symphony Orchestra conducted by James Smith



Photo: Jules Massenet

This classic opera of religious zealotry provides rich opportunities for singers and orchestra, thanks to Massenet's melodic genius. The story itself also provides interesting dramatic opportunities for the cast, and has inspired many productions, some controversial.

Director William Farlow sets our University Opera production in New York City's licentious discothèque culture of the 1970s. He emphasizes that "*Thaïs* is a tale of two extremes – religious fanaticism and hedonism. Religion is offered up as an antidote for the ills of society, but in reality proves to be a far greater poison."

Written for the famed American soprano Sybil Sanderson, Jules Massenet's *Thaïs* is a cautionary tale of the zealous monk Athanaël's conversion of the infamous courtesan Thaïs. Amid an atmosphere of sexual depravity, Athanaël battles for the soul of Thaïs only to jeopardize his own.

William Farlow directs a cast of undergraduate and graduate students from the UW-Madison School of Music, with the University Symphony Orchestra under the direction of James Smith. The title role is shared by Emily Birsan (October 30 and November 3) and Kristin Schwecke (November 1). Other roles are performed by Justin Niehoff Smith (Athanaël), Anders Tobiason (Palémon), Ryan McEldowney (Nicias), Anna Danielle Slate (Crobyle), Emily Campbell (Myrtale), and Leigh Akin (Albine). This cast features three current or prior year recipients of Opera Props Awards: Schwecke, Slate, and Campbell.

Production staff includes costume designers Sydney Krieger and Hyewon Park, technical director Greg Silver, lighting designer Steven M. Peterson, set designer Angelina Paoli, vocal coach Bill Lutes and chorus master Susan Goeres. The English surtitles are by Christine Seitz and underwritten by Opera Props.

***Thaïs*, Jules Massenet**

Friday, October 30, 2009 7:30 PM

Sunday, November 1, 2009 3:00 PM

Tuesday, November 3, 2009 7:30 PM

All performances are at MUSIC HALL

Tickets \$20 General Public, \$18 senior/non-UW-Madison Student, \$10 UW-Madison Student

Tickets are available through the Wisconsin Union Theater Box Office, 800 Langdon St.

Box Office Hours: M-F 11:30 – 5:30 PM, SAT 12-5:00 PM, Phone 608-265-2787

Or order online at: <http://uniontheater.wisc.edu/boxoffice.html>

For the October 30 performance, see invitation to pre-performance dinner (page 6).

CAST BIOGRAPHIES FOR *THAÏS*

Leigh Akin (Albine) is a senior at the UW-Madison majoring in vocal performance under Paul Rowe. Recently, she received the Ida Drubeck and Fanny Drubeck Eliot Award. Leigh has performed the roles of Praskovia in *The Merry Widow* with the University Opera, and Dame Caruthers with the Madison Savoyards recent production of *The Yeomen of the Guard*. This semester, Leigh is also performing a scene from *Carmen* with Opera Workshop, and Dorabella for a concert version of *Così fan tutte*.

Emily Fink Birsan (Thaïs) is a soprano pursuing her graduate degree in Opera at the UW-Madison School of Music. She studies with Julia Faulkner and is a Collins Fellow. Emily has sung the roles of Pamina, Mrs. Ford, and Nella. Next spring, she will sing the title role of Maria in Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* with University Opera. She received her Bachelor of Music from Lawrence Conservatory in Appleton, WI where she studied with Karen Leigh-Post. Intrigued by all forms of music, she enjoys collaborating with other musicians in jazz, contemporary, and art song. In 2007 she was recognized by the National Association of Teachers of Singing award for "Outstanding Female Singer" and was most recently recognized at the Regional Metropolitan Opera Competition with a \$1,000 Encouragement award.

Emily Campbell (Myrta) is a junior psychology and voice performance major, studying with Mimmi Fulmer. She is currently singing in UW's Madrigal Singers and has appeared in University Opera's productions of *Don Pasquale* and *The Merry Widow*. She especially enjoyed playing Edith Metzger in the world premiere of *Art and Desire* last year. She is grateful to have received the Warzyn-Thorpe Scholarship Award and a 2007-2008 Opera Props Award.

Ryan McEldowney (Nicias) is a Master of Music student at the UW-Madison, studying with James Doing. Recently, McEldowney created the role of the Bartender in the world premiere of Maura Bosch's *Art and Desire* with University Opera. Over the summer, McEldowney performed the role of Col. Fairfax in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Yeomen of the Guard* with the Madison Savoyards.

Kristin Schwecke (Thaïs) is a second year graduate student studying under Professor Mimmi Fulmer. She received a bachelor's degree from Carroll College in vocal performance. Kristin has appeared as a soloist with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, Menomonee Falls Symphony Orchestra, the Waukesha Choral Union, and the Madison Bach Musicians. Most recently, Kristin appeared with the Cobb Symphony Orchestra in Georgia as their soprano soloist for Carmina Burana. In her studies so far, Kristin has performed Sophie in *Die Rosenkavalier*, Cleopatra in *Giulio Cesare*, and Susannah in *Le nozze di Figaro* with the University Opera Workshop. She is thrilled to be performing Thaïs as her first complete role with University Opera. She is a recipient of a current year Opera Props Award.

Anna Slate (Crobyle) is in her final undergraduate year at UW-Madison pursuing a BA in Vocal Performance under Mimmi Fulmer. Previous University Opera appearances include Oberto (*Alcina*), Frou-Frou (*The Merry Widow*), and the Maid (*Don Pasquale*). Anna is also a recipient of a 2009-10 Opera Props Award, 2008-09 Robert and Lois Dick Award, and a four year UW-Madison Music School scholarship.

Justin Niehoff Smith (Athanaël) is a DMA candidate in vocal performance at UW-Madison under the guidance of Paul Rowe. He hails from rural southeastern Washington state and received his BM in vocal performance from Washington State University in Pullman, WA, attended the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and was active in the Bay Area opera scene. He has won several awards as a solo artist and has several operatic roles to his credit. Previous University Opera roles include Baron Zeta in Lehar's *The Merry Widow* and Melisso in Handel's *Alcina*.

Anders Tobiason (Palémon), Baritone, is a Ph. D candidate in Music Theory at UW-Madison. He completed a doctoral minor in voice with Prof. Paul Rowe in 2007. He is currently writing his dissertation, entitled Non-Assimilation in Schubert Song. Previous roles with the University Opera include Masetto (*Don Giovanni*, 2007), and Kromov (*The Merry Widow*, 2008).

MASSENET'S *THAÏS*: THE COMBAT OF CELESTIAL AND CARNAL

By John W. Barker

Jules Massenet (1842-1912) made a brilliantly successful career as a composer of operas. Many of them drew their success, if not also their inspiration, from brilliant divas for whom the composer wrote the title roles, and with whom he had phases of passionate personal engagement, such as the American-born soprano Sibyl Sanderson, and the mezzo Lucy Arbell, not to mention Mary Garden. In so many of these operas he was at particular pains to titillate the audience with either covert or blatantly outright erotic sensuality.

The other side to that sensual dimension, however, was the sacred. In addition to his some forty operas, composed between 1859 and his death, Massenet also wrote, during the last three decades of the nineteenth century, no fewer than four sacred oratorios (in addition to a number of short religious and liturgical pieces). It is interesting that the first of them, the “drame sacrée” in three acts, “Marie-Magdeleine”, was about the composite Gospel figure of Mary Magdalene, traditionally personified as the fallen woman who is redeemed by conversion to Christ.

The Magdalene is a significant symbol (and never mind the *Da Vinci Code* nonsense!), one that has through the centuries, in various media, inspired portrayals of her that juxtapose provocatively her early life of carnal degradation with her choice of spiritual salvation. Especially in the Renaissance and Baroque, she was the delight of painters who could portray the Magdalene's double life (nudity vs. contemplation) with vivid yet pious relish. Massenet had experimented a little with this dichotomy in his portrayal of Salome in his *Herodiade* of 1881/84, with her exertion of sensual power over the piety of John the Baptist. But the composer was able to match that Magdalene juxtaposition even more directly in the 1894 opera he called a “comédie lyrique”, the story of the pagan courtesan Thaïs (his last role created for Sanderson) and the Christian monk Athanaël.

Both characters have historical prototypes of sorts, if of different eras. Thaïs, exactly so

named, is first reported in a Syriac sacred anthology of the eighth century, turns up in subsequent Greek and Latin texts, and is heroine of a play by the tenth-century German Benedictine nun Hrosvitha. She evolves as a fourth-century harlot who is converted to the faith by the monk Paphnuce or Paphnutius, himself a more authentically historical figure. He was a disciple of St. Anthony, the third-century founder of anchoritic monasticism, and he became active in church controversies of the early fourth century (as supporter of the fiery Alexandrian patriarch, Athanasius), while founder of an ascetic community at Antinoë in the Egyptian desert. It was only in later sources that Paphnutius was identified as the monk who converted Thaïs (another being one Sarapion).

The true source for Massenet's librettist, Louis Gallet, however, was explicitly the 1889 novel *Thaïs* by Anatole France (1844-1924). A brilliant writer, a paragon of the “slice-of-life” school of literature (paralleled eventually by Italian *verismo* opera), France was famous for his cynical anti-clericalism and his political leftism – most notably displayed, along with bravery, in the notorious Dreyfus affair. France delighted in confronting the Catholic establishment and in mocking what he saw as Christian religiosity and superstition.

The novel is a rich and kaleidoscopic work in which Thaïs becomes a channel for ideals of worldly beauty and even truth, while Paphnuce is a mean and cruel hypocrite, punished by becoming a convert from brutal fanatic to frustrated sensualist. Gallet's libretto changes a lot of this, beginning with the monk's name: Paphnuce (suggesting unfortunate rhymes in French) becomes Athanaël (which has echoes of the actual monk's ally, Athanasius, not to mention the Disciple Nathanael). For all their insistence that the story is a “comedy”, Gallet and Massenet aim at a more balanced, and hence more poignant, realization of the two protagonists. The pleasure-loving Thaïs comes to understand the monk's warning that her hedonistic life cannot be sustained indefinitely. (Cf. Violetta in *La traviata*; or, on the other

hand, the heroine's vacillation between self-indulgence and true love in *Manon*.)

For all the near-mockery made of the monks and of Athanaël himself (relish that scene in Act I, Scene 2, when the slave girls try to undress, anoint, and re-garb the monk), the portrayal of the "saintly" messenger is a sympathetic and even dramatically powerful one. (Anatole France had, in fact, really made him the main character of the novel, not Thaïs herself, and in the opera such a focus is perfectly arguable.) Within Athanaël's profound piety there is a powerful rift, as demonstrated by his erotic dreams of Thaïs. His missionary obsession with her is his way to suppress such impulses, which will in fact overwhelm and defeat him exactly at the time he has completed her redemption from the carnality he now craves.

The novel, the libretto, and the opera all presume a definite context in which the erotic and the pious can logically be opposed. Thus the opera's setting explicitly in the historical site of fourth-century Alexandria. It was the largest city of its day in the Western world, the most populous and the most wealthy. It could offer

whatever worldly pleasure could be sought. Yet, in the desert Thebaïd not far away was growing the new force of ascetic monasticism in its earliest Christian manifestations. It would be monks who would soon come to dominate the religious life of Alexandria as it became Christianized during the fourth century. Egyptian monks would be the shock-troops of Alexandrian theological and ecclesiological aggressiveness, and would give a strongly ascetic flavor to the Coptic Christianity of Egypt. Less than a century after our opera's historical time, in 415, a band of fanatic monks would brutally murder the Neoplatonic philosopher and scholar Hypatia, hated by them for the beauty and learning that won her an enthusiastic following of young (and definitely non-monastic) men.

Fully understood, our opera is not just about the crossed paths of its two protagonists: it is a parable of the eternal, never-resolved struggle between worldly sensuality and other-worldly piety – each of whose power must be given its due on stage.

Kudos, Karlos! Emeritus Opera Director Named to Wisconsin Academy

Karlos Moser, the founder and director of the opera program at the UW Madison, has been inducted a Fellow of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters. This exceptional honor recognizes the multifaceted contributions of this gifted and versatile musician to the cultural life of the University community, the City of Madison, and the State of Wisconsin. During his distinguished tenure as Professor of Music at the UW Madison (1961-1998), he directed and/or conducted more than 100 productions. Drawing on both the standard and the undeservedly neglected repertoires, he presented operas from the baroque, classical, Romantic and modern eras, as well as American and European musicals, in collaboration with the Department of Theatre and Drama. Delighting many generations of Madison audiences, these productions provided young singers and instrumentalists with invaluable performing experience. Many of those students have gone on to establish their own professional careers.

Karlos and his wife Melinda are enjoying a very active retirement, pursuing both musical and non-musical hobbies. In particular, he continues to compose music in the vein of *Eros Piercing*, the program of his own compositions that was presented on campus a few years ago.

Opera Props salutes Karlos, with gratitude for decades of beautiful and stimulating musical memories. May he and Melinda have many more productive years!

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT OF OPERA PROPS

Our University Opera program is about to have an extraordinary 2009-10 season: That's because our current cohort of young singers may be the most talented ever assembled here, thanks to the voice faculty's great success in recruiting and helping develop this class of graduate and undergraduate students.

You can see and hear the results of these efforts in two challenging operas to be performed during the year, starting with Massenet's *Thaïs* on October 30 and November 1, 3. There will be other opportunities to hear our students and faculty perform this year, for instance the "opera scenes" program to be offered on November 24 at 7:30 in Music Hall.

Your enjoyment of the collaborative work of our students and faculty can be enhanced by attending the post-concert receptions sponsored by Opera Props, likewise the before-opera dinners available at the University Club: information on all that is available in this newsletter.

A key reason for the current excellence of the opera program here at UW-Madison has been some generous support provided by farsighted individuals. Unfortunately much of this support has been lost in the past year of financial upheaval and we must look for replacement contributions if we are to maintain recent progress. We welcome your ideas, and donations of all sizes!

-Dan Shea

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University of Wisconsin Continuing Education Program

Tuesday evenings through October 27, 7-8:45 pm in 2511 Humanities, 455 N. Park St.: **"Operas in Madison, 2009-2010"** offered by Professor John Barker, provides background information to enhance your enjoyment and understanding of the five operas to be produced by UW Opera and Madison Opera during the current season: Jules Massenet's *Thaïs* (UW Opera), Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (Madison Opera), Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* (Madison Opera), Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* (Madison Opera), and Gaetano Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* (UW Opera). For further information on this program (#3706), which commenced September 29, call (608) 265-5629, e-mail: music@dcs.wisc.edu, or visit the web site at <http://www.dcs.wisc.edu/classes/music.htm>

Opera Props News is published each semester for the members of UW Opera Props.
Editorial Committee: Charles Anderson, Kristine Bengtson, Helen Schmedeman, Dan Shea.
Opera Props website: uwoperaprops.org

A dining idea for Friday, October 30, opening night for *Thaïs*:

Come to the University Club for a social hour: cash bar and fellowship 5:00 - 5:45.
Then, from 5:45 - 7:10, we'll share a buffet meal in the Wayside Dining Room.

Bread Baskets of corn muffins, bread sticks and brown sugar flat bread
Fall Salad incorporating locally grown pears with walnuts finished with a sun-dried cherry vinaigrette.

Entrées of

Wild mushroom strudel with crimini, shiitake, oyster and portabella mushrooms,
Pine nut encrusted walleye fillet with beurre blanc,
Fall Roulade, thinly sliced beef loin wrapped around julienne parsnips, rutabaga, carrot and spinach finished with a brown mustard sauce,

accompanied by

Yukon gold horseradish mashed potatoes,
Glazed sweet potatoes, and
Marinated roasted seasonal root vegetables,

followed by dessert

Apple and Pear Crisp à la Mode incorporating locally grown granny smith apples and bosc pears served with Babcock dairy ice cream.

Our Program: Joining us to discuss *Thaïs* will be one of our two current year Opera Props award winners, Kristin Schwecke, who will appear as *Thaïs* on the following Sunday afternoon.

Following dinner and program, it's just a short walk to Music Hall for the 7:30 curtain.
Early parking at 5:00 should be relatively easy, on a busy weekend.

PLEASE SEND US YOUR LIST OF NAMES OF THOSE ATTENDING, AND A CHECK FOR YOUR GROUP (\$32 PER PERSON, gratuities included).

Note: Tables will seat a maximum of 6. Parties of 4 to 6 can have a table reserved for them.
Checks are payable to "UW Opera Props (Dinner)" and **mail by October 24** to:

Dan Shea
3337 Conservancy Lane
Middleton, WI 53562

Questions? Call Dan at (608) 836-6911 or email: dshea@chorus.net

The University Club is located at 803 State Street, corner of Murray Street.

Note: If you have tickets for another performance of *Thaïs* and prefer to change them to Friday night, October 30, in order to join our social-buffet program, call or visit the Wisconsin Union Theater Box Office, 800 Langdon St. (608-262-2201).

A FEW UPCOMING MADISON EVENTS FEATURING VOCAL MUSIC

Friday, Oct. 16 (8:00 pm) and Sunday, Oct. 18 (3:00 pm): Madison Bach Musicians, Bach - *Cantata 78*, 'Jesus, der du meine Seele'; Josquin – excerpts from *Missa Pange Lingua*; and orchestral selections. Oct. 16 at First Congregational Church, 1609 University Ave.; Oct. 18 at Trinity Lutheran Church, 1904 Winnebago Ave.

Friday, Oct. 30 (7:30 pm), Sunday, Nov. 1 (3:00 pm) and Tuesday, Nov. 3 (7:30 pm): University Opera, Massenet - *Thaïs*. Music Hall.

Friday, Nov. 6 (8:00) and Sunday, Nov. 8 (2:30): Madison Opera, Bizet – *Carmen*. The cast includes James Kryshak (MM 09) and Jamie Van Eyck (current DMA student). Overture Hall.

Friday, Nov. 13 2009 (8:00 pm): Concert Choir, Beverly Taylor, conductor. Mills Hall

Tuesday, Nov. 24 (7:30): University Opera, Opera Workshop. Selections from Bizet's *Carmen*, Boïto's *Mefistofele*, Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*, Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*, and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*. Music Hall

Week of Dec. 1: Masterclass with Sylvia McNair. Time and place TBA (see music.wisc.edu/calendar)

Sunday, Dec. 6 (7:30 pm): The University Symphony Orchestra, James Smith, conductor; Kenneth Woods, guest conductor; with Paul Rowe, baritone. Selections will include Overture to *Rienzi* by Richard Wagner; 'Rückert Lieder' by Gustav Mahler. Mills Hall

Thursday, Dec. 10 (7:30 pm) and Friday, Dec. 11 (8:00 pm): Choral Union, Beverly Taylor, conductor; with Chamber Orchestra, James Smith, conductor. *Chichester Psalms* by Leonard Bernstein and *Missa cellensis* by Joseph Haydn. Mills Hall

Some events to watch for in 2010:

Thursday, Jan. 28 (7:30 pm), Friday, Jan. 29 (8:00 pm), Saturday, Jan. 30 (8:00 pm), Sunday, Jan. 31 (2:00 pm): Madison Opera: Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* (the cast includes Julia Faulkner, Gregory Schmidt, and Jamie Van Eyck). Overture Center Playhouse.

Friday, Jan. 29 (8:00 pm): Mimmi Fulmer, soprano; Christopher Taylor, piano. Mills Hall

Saturday, Feb. 13 (8:00 pm): James Doing, tenor. Mills Hall

Wednesday, Mar. 10 (7:30 pm): University Opera, Opera Workshop. Music Hall

Saturday, Apr. 10 (8:00 pm): Concert Choir, Beverly Taylor, conductor. Mills Hall.

Friday, Apr. 9 (8:00 pm) and Sunday, Apr. 11 (2:30 pm): Madison Opera, Wagner – *The Flying Dutchman* (the cast includes Julia Faulkner). Overture Hall.

For more information about UW-Madison School of Music events, visit the website at www.music.wisc.edu/calendar. From the drop-down menu 'Show Events In,' select 'student recitals' to find the latest scheduling information on student recitals. Also see the Opera Props website at: uwoperaprops.org

Madison Opera Trips to Lyric Opera: Madison Opera's bus trips to Chicago will include *Ernani* on October 27, *Katya Kabanova* on December 1, *The Merry Widow* on December 16, *The Elixir of Love* on January 27, and *The Marriage of Figaro* on March 24.

For more information call Fern Lawrence at 238-1529 and visit: madisonopera.org.

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I am already a 2009-2010 Props member, but wish to *make an additional contribution* of \$ _____ this year.

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All contributions will be acknowledged in the Opera Props Newsletter unless you request otherwise.

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