

FIRST NIGHT

Opera Teseo

Theatre Royal,
Bury St Edmunds

★★★★☆

Robert Thicknesse

THE sweet old Theatre Royal in Bury St Edmunds has plans to become part of a European network performing neglected works, following its restoration next year. This visit by the Goethe Theatre in Bad Lauchstädt, and the orchestra of Berlin's Lautten Compagny, was the highly worthwhile start to this initiative.

Teseo is Handel's only five-act opera — his librettist Haym nicked it from a French model. This means that characters do not have to leave the stage after their arias, giving the thing more fluidity than usual. In other ways, particularly in the character of Medea, it foreshadows the likes of *Alcina* with its bad-to-the-bone but foxy anti-heroine.

The events in question concern Theseus in pre-Minotaur days. He has just arrived in Athens where king Aegeus (his father, though neither knows it) is just rejigging his love-life, dumping Medea (and planning to marry her to Theseus) in favour of one Agilea. Naturally, Agilea and Theseus are in love.

Too many laughs in Handel usually mean a failure to take the drama seriously, and *Teseo* has not previously been known as a comedy. From the moment Agilea faints at the

appearance of a Greek soldier, we know we are in Emma Hamilton-land of attitudes and swoons, a jovial subversion of gesture and convention; but it is not overdone, and only Johnny Maldonado's grandly camp Aegeus is really played for fun. Theseus slopes on in ankle-length duster, raggy beard and shoulder-length hair — and turns out to be the soprano countertenor Jacek Laszczkowski, an extraordinary, small voice of amazing focus and beauty.

Despite its attractive peripheries, notably a Monteverdian pair of subsidiary, semi-comic lovers, the thing doesn't catch fire till the appearance of black-clad Medea (Cécile van de Sant), with a Lady Macbeth-type bloodstain problem. The modest theatrical effects — lighting, prancing demons — are reserved for her, though the jokey staging undermines her sexy menace. Sharon Rostorf-Zamir is the strongest voice as Agilea, and two arias — the sweet *Vieni, torna* and the heartbreaking lute-accompanied farewell, *Amarti si vorrei* — are timestopping moments of real Handel.

The small orchestra, conducted by Wolfgang Katschner, is a wonder of discipline and varied textures, understating the drama but astonishingly delicate and beautiful in the intimate moments. Vocally the show is more uneven, but it's an attractive effort, done with wit and style if no great depth.

At the Britten Theatre,
London SW7, tonight 7.30pm
Box office: 01284 769505