



by Kristine McIntyre

**WHEN I PREPARE** to direct an opera, I always begin with the source material. It has frequently been written that the source for Rossi's libretto is a 16<sup>th</sup> century poem by Tasso entitled *Gerusalemme Liberata*, and that the character Tancredi was based on the historical figure of Tancred of Lecce, who is also the hero of Monteverdi's opera *Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*. As a lover of Monteverdi, I thought that was interesting. Unfortunately, it's not true.

The actual source material, however, proved to be something of a revelation. Voltaire's 1760 play *Tanocrède* is a taut political and moral drama, rife with intrigue and the threat of espionage and betrayal. It pits the individual against an unjust society and deliberates on the nature of power and the responsibilities of a society to its citizens. It is very much a product of Voltaire's 18<sup>th</sup> century political sensibilities and as such has little to do with its early medieval setting or with the life of its historical character Tancred of Hauteville, an exiled Norman prince.

In fact, one could argue that the main character of the drama is not Tancredi, but the society of Siracusa itself, a society which both Tancredi and his fiancée Amenaide are desperate to save. The story hinges on the fear and foreboding of a people under siege who are about to lose everything, their very way of life. And so

they make a desperate decision: to turn against themselves and their beliefs by ceding control to a man who is perhaps worse than the enemy at the gate. The only person who recognizes the moral cost of such an action is Amenaide, who is wrongly accused of pride, and then of treason, and is sentenced to death.

Clearly it is a story with modern, even contemporary political resonances, and I knew it would benefit from a more modern retelling. Inspired by the films and photographs of the period, we reset the story in Europe in the 1930's. The moral and political dilemmas of that period, the demands on the individual and the human cost of injustice seem to echo the themes of both Voltaire and Rossi's works. And certainly Amenaide's defiance and political savvy are wonderful to realize in a 20<sup>th</sup> century context.

But in this context, who is Tancredi? He shows up almost out of nowhere, like a story-book hero – invincible, aloof, almost fanciful at times, hard to reconcile with the gritty political reality of the other characters – and I believe that is exactly the point. For the people of Siracusa, Tancredi represents a communal dream of the Hero from the outside, the King who returns from afar to save his people, both beloved and reviled and ultimately unknowable. Even his music is more sublime, more

abstract than that of the other characters, as though he exists in his own reality, which he brings with him wherever he goes. The Otherness of Tancredi is mediated by Amenaide; she humanizes the Hero and through her love and respect we come to know and to value him. In Voltaire's play, Amenaide says of Tancredi:

*It is the fate of heroes to be persecuted;  
I believe that it is mine to love him anyway*

This sort of hero fantasy can be difficult to realize onstage but here we were helped by

the Sicilian setting: I drew on the wonderful tradition of *pupi*, marionettes that have been made in Sicily for centuries and which are still used to reenact the hero tales of the Crusades and the Middle Ages.

As both historical connection to the original setting and as a valued modern tradition, the puppets seem the perfect symbol for Tancredi himself, who exists out of time but is bound by the all-too-human politics of hate and fear which ultimately destroy him.