

SYNOPSIS

ULYSSES

Based on the second half of Homer's *Odyssey* (Books 13 to 24), the opera follows Ulysses' progress toward his goal: his return to his homeland.

PROLOGUE

Human Frailty is presented as a character who is taunted by Time, Fortune and Love. This threesome claims to control man's fate, in turn rendering him weak, poor, and confused. The character of Human Frailty is linked both to Penelope and Ulysses, both of whom suffer at the hands of these three antagonists.

ACT ONE

Scene One—The Palace

Penelope laments Ulysses' long absence. The nurse Eriolea interjects, echoing her mistress's distress. Penelope cannot be comforted and exists in a state of hopelessness and depression.

Scene Two—The Palace

Meanwhile, the household has been driven into debauchery by an unscrupulous group of suitors who, believing Ulysses to be dead, vie for Penelope's hand. Two of the servants, Melanto and Eurimaco, flirt lasciviously in vivid contrast to Penelope's mournful mood. In this scene we learn that Eurimaco is allied with the suitors and has urged Melanto to convince Penelope to accept one of them as her husband.

Scene Three—The Sea and Sky

Neptune and Jupiter debate the fate of the Phaeacian sailors who have disobeyed Neptune's command by returning Ulysses to his homeland. Jupiter agrees to allow Neptune to punish the sailors.

The sailors arrogantly sing of man's independence from the gods, whereupon Neptune destroys them and their ship. He states that Ulysses will accomplish his return only with the help of the gods.

Scene Four—The Shore of Ithaca

Ulysses awakens on the shore of Ithaca believing himself to have been abandoned by the Phaeacian sailors in a foreign land. The goddess Minerva appears, disguised as a shepherd boy, and Ulysses hopes this youth will help him find his way. Ulysses learns that he is in Ithaca, his home, and that the shepherd is Minerva. Minerva tells Ulysses that suitors have laid siege to his wife and kingdom, and that Penelope remains faithful. Minerva disguises Ulysses as an old man and sends him to find Eumete, the keeper of his flocks.

ACT TWO

Scene One—The Palace

The servant Melanto urges Penelope to choose one of the suitors as a husband, but the Queen is adamant in her refusal: she will not increase her suffering by falling in love again.

Scene Two—A Pastoral Setting

Eumete (the keeper of Ulysses' flocks) delights in his pastoral existence. Ulysses arrives, disguised, and assures him that Ulysses is alive and soon to return. Eumete, knowing the gods favour beggars, offers Ulysses shelter and leads him away.

Scene Three—Minerva's Chariot

Telemaco, Ulysses' son who was searching for his father, is flown back to Ithaca in Minerva's chariot. They sing a duet in praise of the gods' power.

Scene Four—A Pastoral Setting

Eumete joyfully welcomes Telemaco and introduces the beggar who has predicted Ulysses' return. Telemaco dispatches Eumete to the palace to inform Penelope of his arrival. Ulysses is transformed into his true self and he and Telemaco are reunited. Ulysses sends Telemaco to his mother telling him he will follow, but in his former disguise.

INTERMISSION

ACT THREE

Scene One—The Palace

Melanto tells Eurimaco of Penelope's unwillingness to choose a new husband. They, in contrast, abandon themselves to love.

Scene Two—The Palace

The suitors enter with Penelope and she rejects their offers of marriage. Left to their own devices, the suitors and servant women indulge in carousing and dancing.

Scene Three—The Palace

Eumete informs Penelope that her son will soon arrive, as will Ulysses. Penelope responds with skepticism. The suitors decide they must act quickly and plan to soften Penelope's resistance with valuable gifts.

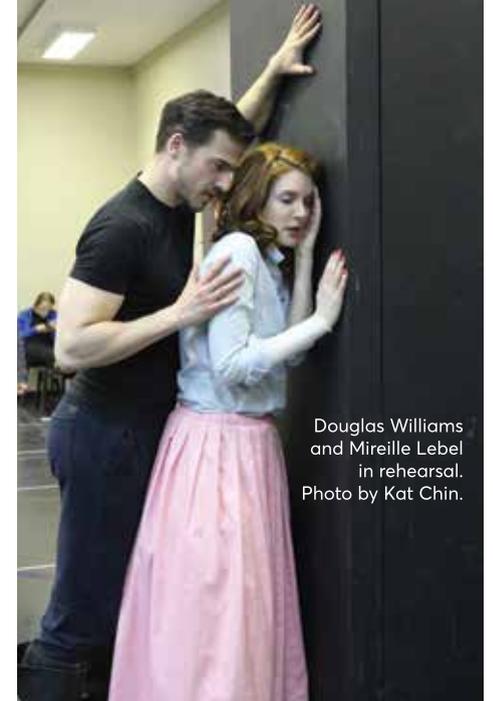
Scene Four—The Palace

Minerva assures Ulysses that she will enable him to kill the suitors. Eumete then tells Ulysses of the suitors' fearful reaction to the news that he is alive.

ACT FOUR

Scene One—The Palace

The suitors appear and berate Eumete for bringing a beggar (Ulysses) to the palace. Penelope protects the beggar and each suitor attempts in vain to woo the Queen. Penelope (magically controlled by Minerva) agrees to choose as husband the one who can string Ulysses' mighty bow. The suitors celebrate with singing and dancing.



Douglas Williams
and Mireille Lebel
in rehearsal.
Photo by Kat Chin.

Each suitor fails the test whereupon the beggar (assuring the Queen he does not seek her as prize) asks to attempt the task. He strings the bow successfully and, invoking Jupiter and Minerva with shouts for vengeance, he slays all the suitors.

ACT FIVE

Scene One—The Palace

Eumete tells Penelope that the beggar was Ulysses in disguise but she refuses to believe him. Telemaco explains that the disguise was provided by Minerva but Penelope chides him for his gullibility.

Scene Two—The Palace

The nurse Eriolea considers whether or not to reveal that she recognized Ulysses in his bath by the scar on his thigh. Penelope continues to reject the idea that the beggar is Ulysses. Finally restored to his true form, Ulysses joins them to plead his case but Penelope fears she is being tricked. Only when Ulysses describes the embroidered bedcover made by Penelope, which only he has seen in the intimacy of their bedroom, is she convinced. They finish the opera in each other's arms.