THAIS

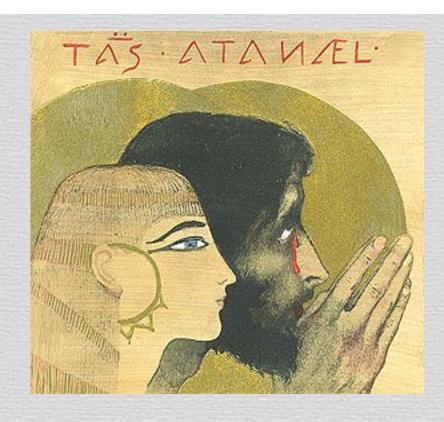


poster of the first performance



OPERA IN 3 ACTS
LIBRETTO BY LOUIS GALLET

after "Thaïs" by ANATOLE FRANCE



"You gave to my poor Thaïs the status of lyrical heroine. You are my most peaceful glory. I am enchanted [...] Eros's aria, the final duet, everything is of a charming and great beauty. I am happy and proud to have supplied you with the theme on which you developped the most inspired phrases. I shake your hands with joy"

- Anatole France -

SYNOPSIS

ACT I-Scene I- In the Thebaid desert, on the banks of the Nile. Palemon and the Coenobite monks await the return of Athanaël from Alexandria. He arrives with the news that debauchery reigns in the city, led by the courtisan Thaïs. He recalls how as a youth he had been tempted by Thaïs but had resisted, had joined the Coenobite order, and now wishes to reclaim Thaïs from sin. Palemon warns him to shun the company of worldly folk. The Coenobites pray as they disperse to their huts for the night. Alone, Athanaël has a vision of the near-naked Thaïs on stage as Venus, from which he wakes in terror. He resolves to depart on his mission to save Thaïs. Waking the monks, he proclaims this to them. Palemon repeats his warning but Athanaël is engrossed in his plans. Scene II- The terrace of Nicias's house high above Alexandria, leading to a great hall which is laid for a banquet. Athanaël, in his monk's habit, arrives to see Nicias, a philosopher and a friend of his youth. He is filled with loathing for the corruption of his native city. Nicias, entering with two slave-girls, greets Athanaël warmly. When asked about Thaïs, Nicias says he has sold everything to buy her

love for a week, which is almost up. She will arrive for the banquet after her evening performance. Athanaël reveals the purpose of his visit and asks for suitable clothes to join the banquet. As he talks to Nicias the slaves anoint and adorn him; he will not take off his habit so they cover it with a soft flowing robe. Thaïs's entourage and Nicias's friends arrive and are shown into the banqueting hall. Finally Thaïs herself appears. Nicias sadly welcomes her for the last time. Some philosophers emerge from the hall with Athanaël, who gazes sternly at Thaïs. She enquires who he is and he comes over and harangues her, as a crowd of surprised guests gathers round. Thaïs playfully invites him to join their group. He replies fiercely that he will leave her alone for now, but will come to her palace to bring her salvation. As she starts to disrobe in preparation for her mime performance, he flees.

ACT II-Scene I- Thais is feeling uneasy and looks into her mirror for confirmation of her beauty. She is afraid of the effects of time on her looks and invokes Venus to reassure her. She greets Athanaël, who has entered silently. He fears the snare of her beauty but tells her he has come to conquer her. She mocks him, but is perturbed by his enthusiastic promise of eternal life. Trembling, she asks him to initiate her into the mystery of divine love. Athanaël, tempted, prays to the Lord for protection from Thaïs's charm while she confidently invokes Venus. Suddenly regaining his composure, Athanaël tears away his robe to reveal his monk's tunic, and violently calls on her to repent. She is terrified and pleads for mercy; as he again promises eternal life she begins to weaken. Nicias's voice is heard pleading for Thaïs to go to him again, but she scorns him. Athanaël says he will wait outside her house until dawn, but she defies him and he leaves as she throws herself down in a mixture of sobs and hysterical laughter. Scene II- Sound of revelry are heard from Nicias's house as Thaïs comes out of her palace and finds Athanaël asleep. She tells him she has seen the light and asks for guidance. He says he will take her to stay in a cell at Mother Albine's monastery until Christ comes to claim her, but first she must put fire to all her worldly goods. She agrees bu wants to take with her a statuette of Eros. She still confuses earthly and divine love. In a rage, Athanaël smashes the statuette and they leave. Nicias and his companions come out of his house. He has won back at gambling many times what he had paid for Thaïs's company, and orders further revelry. A new performer, the Charmer, appears and Nicias bids her dance. The slave-girls sing and play as she performs her danse. Nicias sees Athanaël coming from Thaïs's palace. The guests mock him, but he reveals Thaïs to them, on a coarse tunic and with her hair unbraided. As smoke bellows from her palace he is ready to take her away, but their way is barred by a crowd. Nicias and the crowd of parasites try to prevent them from leaving. Flames are now rising from Thaïs's palace. The crowd threatens violence, until Nicias throws gold which they eagerly fall upon, as Thaïs and Athanaël escape.

ACT III-Scene I- The oasis- Nearing the end of their trek through the desert, Thaïs begs for a moment's pause. Athanaël drives her on, but she collapses. He is seized with compassion and goes to bring fruit and water, pointing out the convent nearby. Alone for a moment, Thaïs blesses Athanaël and the suffering he has put her through. She gratefully receives the fruit and water, and then Albine and the White Maids are heard approaching in prayer. Athanaël and Thaïs take leave of one another, and he suddenly realises that he will never see her

again on earth. When she and the sisters have gone, he calls out inconsolably. Scene II- The Coenobites comment fearfully on the evening storm which is brewing. Palemon bids them take their food into their huts. He says Athanaël has been back for three weeks but has not appeared among them to eat or drink. The wasting Athanaël comes out and they leave him alone, but he detains Palemon and confesses that he is obsessed with voluptuous thoughts of Thaïs. Palemon reminds him of his advice to shun the world, then leaves him. After praying, Athanaël lies down to sleep. Soon he sees a seductive vision of Thaïs. When he becomes delirious she cackles with laughter and disappears. In another vision, Athanaël sees the White Maids kneeling around Thaïs as she lies dying under a fig-tree. Athanaël is distraught and rushes off through the thunder and lighting to be with Thaïs. Scene III- Albine and the sisters pray over Thaïs's motionless body. Albine greets Athanaël and as the sisters move apart he sees Thaïs and falls to his knees, calling her name in anguish. Thaïs comes to and recognizes him. She harks back to their desert journey and does not hear him as he pours out his love for her. While he continues on the same vein she has a vision of the heaven which awaits her. Finally she expires.

(Hugh Graham)

1st PERFORMANCE

Date March 16, 1894

City Paris

Theater Opéra

Conductor Paul Taffanel

Thaïs Sybil Sanderson

Crobyle Miss Marcy

Myrtale Mrs Héglon

Albine Miss Beauvais

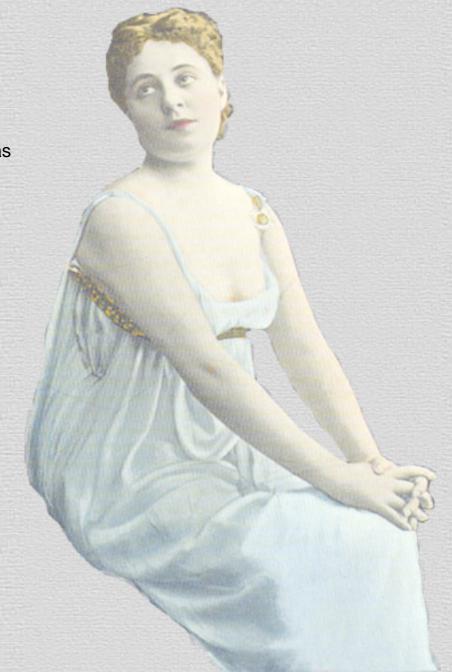
The charmer Miss Mendès

Athanaël Jean-François Delmas

Nicias Alvarez

Palémon Delpouget

A servant Euzet



Sybil Sanderson