

SYNOPSIS

Tristan und Isolde

Drama in Three Acts

The setting is the legendary Celtic world of the early Middle Ages. The knight Tristan, orphaned at birth, had been brought up at the court of his uncle, King Marke of Cornwall.

Act 1 Tristan is returning from Ireland with the Princess Isolde, whom Marke has chosen to be his queen. Isolde is roused to fury by what she mistakes as the taunts of a sailor at the masthead. Bitterly, she sends her maid Brangäne to fetch Tristan but he refuses to come and remains at the helm. His squire Kurwenal scornfully recounts the story of how Morold, an Irish hero once betrothed to Isolde, had tried to exact tribute from Cornwall, and how Tristan had sent back Morold's severed head in lieu of taxes. Isolde overhears Kurwenal's insult and elaborates on these events for Brangäne. She had found a sword fragment in Morold's skull and had vowed vengeance on the sword's owner. Tristan, wounded in the encounter, had been obliged to seek Isolde's healing arts but went to her in disguise as 'Tantris'. She healed his wound but then discovered his true identity from his damaged sword. She was about to exact revenge when Tristan looked up and gazed into her eyes. At that moment they fell in love, although each concealed this love from the other. Tristan was nursed back to health and swore a thousand oaths of devotion before he left, but when he subsequently returned to claim Isolde it was not for himself but for his uncle, Marke.

Isolde was pained and humiliated by this turn of events. Still in love with Tristan, she declares that, before they reach land, they will be united in death. To Brangäne's horror Isolde asks for the death potion to be brought to her. As they near land, Tristan at last comes face to face with Isolde. Unable to reconcile his love for her with his loyalty to the king, and sensing her true feelings, he decides to offer her his life. She refuses his sword but offers to share with him the drink of atonement instead. Realising what she has in mind, he drinks from the cup, welcoming the healing draft of oblivion. Then Isolde drinks too. Believing they are both about to die, they fall into each other's arms with declarations of love. But Brangäne has substituted a love potion for the death potion and the lovers are astounded to find that they are still in the world of the living. As King Marke and his retinue come aboard with general rejoicing, Isolde collapses in shock into Tristan's arms.

Act 2 King Marke and his retinue have left for a night's hunt, and Isolde, as a signal to Tristan, extinguishes a torch in the garden near her chamber. The lovers meet, breathless with excitement as they curse the hated light of day and welcome the night that brings them together. Brangäne, keeping watch from a tower, warns that the night is passing. The lovers, consumed with passion, resolve to die together since, only in death, will they be able to join completely with each other. Daylight begins to intrude and suddenly Marke and his courtiers surprise them. The jealous Melot had sprung the trap, claiming he had saved the king's honour. But Marke is only concerned with why the two people he loved had repaid him with pain. Tristan can offer no answer but asks Isolde if she will follow him to where he must go, to the realm of darkness. She says that she will. Melot then rushes at Tristan who lowers his guard and receives a savage wound before falling back into the arms of Kurwenal.

Act 3 Tristan has been taken to Kareol, his castle in Brittany by Kurwenal who has sent for Isolde to save Tristan from death once more. While Tristan lies in agony in the cruel light of day, a shepherd beyond the walls pipes an old tune of sadness. He will continue to play this until he sees Isolde's ship approaching. Tristan contemplates the 'realm of darkness' and says he has struggled back from it to fetch Isolde to return with him. Feverishly, he imagines he sees her ship, only to have the shepherd's sad tune dash his hopes. He recalls hearing the same mournful melody long ago when told of the deaths of his father and mother. It answers the question 'Why was I born?' with the response 'To yearn, and to die'. Unsatisfiable yearning, he now realises, is the human condition and, as the sun overhead burns into his brain, he curses the potion that had intensified this yearning beyond endurance. He sinks into unconsciousness but then awakens to a wondrous vision of Isolde coming to him across a sea of flowers.

The shepherd's pipe suddenly plays a happy tune and Kurwenal sees Isolde's ship steering safely through the reefs, its flag flying. Tristan excitedly tears off his bandages, for Isolde has come to heal him – which is to say, to join him in death. He hears her voice. 'Do I hear the light?...The torch is put out' he cries and rushes to meet her, breathing his last word 'Isolde' as she takes him in her arms. She pleads with him to awaken and then sinks into unconsciousness. A second ship arrives and Kurwenal, believing they are under attack, kills the hated Melot before himself being struck down. Isolde hears neither Brangäne's voice nor King Marke's assurance that he has learnt the truth and has come, too late, to unite the lovers. Isolde, now roused once more, sees only her Tristan, transfigured and smiling as, together, they are engulfed by waves of sound and light and fragrant clouds, sinking and drowning in the unconsciousness of supreme bliss.

Synopsis by Peter Bassett