

# The libretto in brief

*Claudio Toscani*

---

## Act I

### Scene 1

*The Thebaid – Coenobite huts on the banks of the Nile*

Athanaël, a young coenobite, returns from Alexandria and is welcomed by the community's leader, Palémon. He tells his brethren of the moral corruption that is rife in the city, where Thaïs, a courtesan, incites the people to worship Venus. It is evident from the emotion in his tale that the strict coenobite has been struck by the woman's charms, although he means to redeem her by converting her to the religion of the Christian God. During the night, Athanaël dreams of the theatre in Alexandria, where a large crowd acclaims Thaïs who recounts the loves of Venus. On waking, the young monk, together with his brethren, begs God for the strength to resist worldly temptation.

### Scene 2

*Alexandria – The terrace of the house of Nicias*

Athanaël goes to the home of the young philosopher Nicias, but a servant, believing him to be a beggar, tries to chase him away. The monk manages to convince him that he is a friend of his master. While he is waiting to be received, Athanaël declares his loathing for Alexandria, a den of vice and licentiousness. Nicias recognises and welcomes his old friend and reveals that he has prepared a feast for the same evening in honour of Thaïs, his lover. Richly attired by Nicias' slave girls, Athanaël watches the entrance of Thaïs, who is struck by the coenobite's proud gaze. The serious young monk invites her to abandon her dissolute way of life and to be saved, but the courtesan counters by praising the joys of profane love, which the horrified Athanaël rejects.

---

## Act II

### Scene 1

*The home of Thaïs*

Alone, Thaïs expresses her bitterness over the cynicism and brutality of men, and she prays that Venus will preserve her beauty forever. Athanaël enters undetected and asks God to defend him against the temptations of such seductive beauty. He then speaks to the courtesan of a pure, spiritual love, rousing an ironical reaction in her. But Thaïs fears death and is unsettled by what the young monk has to say about this mysterious love and eternal life. And yet she musters her seductive arts, evoking Venus and sprinkling perfumes in the fire. The young man is himself unsettled and on the point of succumbing, but he reacts violently and rebukes the frightened Thaïs, who begs him not to hurt her. Outside, the voice of Nicias can be heard imploring Thaïs to let him love her one more time. She has a feeling of repulsion and rejects him. Athanaël leaves, ready to wait for Thaïs on the threshold until dawn. With one last show of rebellion, she reaffirms her wish to continue living as a courtesan. But her nervous laugh turns into sobs: the invitation to convert has had some effect.

### Scene 2

*Before daybreak, a square in front of Thaïs' house*

Thaïs sees Athanaël; she approaches him and tells him of her resolution to change her life. The coenobite reveals his intention to entrust her to the care of Albine, the abbess

of a convent where she will be able to spend the rest of her life peacefully in a nun's cell. Nicias arrives with some friends ready to spend the rest of the night revelling. Athanaël appears in the middle of the feasting accompanied by Thaïs, who is physically transformed, now wearing a habit. The general disbelief of the angry mob turns into dismay and violence and they would kill the pair, had not Nicias distracted everyone by throwing out gold coins, thus allowing Athanaël and Thaïs to escape. In the background, the palace is burning: Thaïs has set it on fire as a means of distancing herself from her past life and wealth.

---

### Act III

#### Scene 1

##### *The oasis*

Thaïs and Athanaël, exhausted by heat and fatigue, reach an oasis in the desert. She wants to rest a while, but he remorselessly urges her to continue the journey and accept her sufferings as expiation of her sins. When Athanaël sees Thaïs collapse from weariness and observes her bleeding feet he relents, supports her and sits her down in the shade of the palm trees. He tenderly offers her water to drink, while she gladly blesses her sufferings. Meanwhile, the nuns from the convent approach chanting, led by Albine to whom Athanaël entrusts Thaïs so that she may be consecrated to God. As the women move away, Athanaël is overwhelmed by the idea that he will no longer see Thaïs.

#### Scene 2

##### *The Thebaid – Coenobite huts on the banks of the Nile*

The coenobite community is concerned about Athanaël, whose victory over Thaïs appears to have broken him in body and spirit. Athanaël confesses to Palémon that, after converting Thaïs and winning her soul for God, he is obsessed by the woman and feels a physical attraction towards her of which he is unable to free himself. The young monk kneels and prays before falling asleep. He dreams that Thaïs comes to him, provocatively offering herself to him, but when he comes close to her, she vanishes. In another vision, he sees Thaïs dying, in the garden of the convent. Athanaël wakes up in a great state of agitation and shouts his desire to see the woman again and to be the only one to possess her. He rushes out into the dark night as a storm is about to break.

#### Scene 3

##### *The garden of Albine's convent*

Devastated by the prolonged penance that has redeemed her from her sins, Thaïs lies still and dying, surrounded by the nuns who pray for divine mercy for her. Athanaël, pale and worn out, arrives at the entrance to the garden. Albine thinks he has come to bring Thaïs a last blessing, but the young monk is distraught and incapable of saying anything other than the name of his beloved. He drags himself to her side and confesses his worldly love for her, renouncing his own faith. But Thaïs is by now detached from this world and cannot even hear him: lost in a celestial vision and gripped by mystic ecstasy, she feels that she is being transported to heaven. Athanaël sees her die and, racked by grief, he emits a cry and falls down by her side.

*(Traduzione di Chris Owen)*