

## "Aida" @ Glimmerglass Festival, 7/7/12

July 8 2012

By Joseph Dalton

COOPERSTOWN – Probably never in its 25-year history has the Alice Busch Opera Theater been filled with such strong and sustained sound as it was Saturday night. It was the Glimmerglass season opener, a new production of "Aida."

But mounting the Verdi extravaganza seemed a risky and surprising programming decision by company boss Francesca Zambello, who was also stage director. After all, the famous parade of elephants and armies certainly couldn't fit on the mid-sized stage, let alone in the pint-sized budget. Zambello actually dispensed with that tuneful scene in short order. More importantly, as for overall musical execution the company proved equal to the task in every way. Nader Abbassi conducted and I can't recall ever hearing such muscular and consistently assured orchestra playing in Cooperstown.

Adding to the anticipatory drama of it all, the promising young soprano Michelle Johnson was put on "vocal rest" until later in the month and Adina Aaron stepped into the title role. She was exquisite with a voice that was as alluring and attractive in heated fortissimo as in prayerful pianissimo. Most arresting were the long passages that took her from high to low range in one giant breath and one seamless line.

Also excellent was the virile young tenor Noah Stewart as Radames. There's no warm up time for him, with his "Celeste Aida" coming early in the proceedings. His sound was always lean but determined, the image of a soldier conditioned for battle.

It took a bit more time for luster and beauty to arrive in the singing of mezzo Daveda Karanas, who played Amneris. But she filled her copious stage time and demanding role more than ably. And bass-baritone Eric Owens made easy work of the part of Amonasro. Look for him to also appear in Glimmerglass' "Lost in the Stars."

Zambello's staging walks a careful line of suggesting contemporary Middle East struggles without ever laying out a point of view. The single set is an abandoned castle of some sort and the costumes are a now-familiar mix of ancient and modern. Call it timeless or just a hodgepodge. Only Amneris' black sequined gown was a genuine distraction.

The props of war, though, are utterly contemporary. Lap top computers guide the maneuvers and machine guns are held aloft like golden calves. Aida's underhanded love scene happens on the hood of a desert jeep. After an interrogation by water boarding, Radames dies by lethal injection.

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### MUSIC REVIEW

Verdi's "Aida"

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Glimmerglass Festival, Cooperstown

Duration: Two hours 45 minutes with one intermission