



Glimmerglass's provocative 'Aida' combines great singing, shocking images

No room for elephants or camels on Zambello's daring geopolitical stage

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By David Rubin

Francesca Zambello, the artistic and general director of the Glimmerglass Festival outside Cooperstown, New York, plants her artistic stake in the ground early in her provocative, updated, and often brutal staging of Verdi's chestnut, *Aida*.

Immediately following the dying notes of the overture, an enormous explosion rocks the 900-seat auditorium as the audience is plunged into a contemporary Middle East conflict. Soldiers rush in to what looks like the bombed-out shell of a former government palace. Perhaps Sadaam Hussein lived here, or Muammar Gaddafi, or Bashar al-Assad.

Verdi's Egyptians have become Kalashnikov-toting, combat-boot wearing militiamen or terrorists. Forget the sandals and spears. The chorus in Act One, Scene One, calling for a victorious return from battle against the invaders (*Ritorna vincitor*) was bloodthirsty and raucous. I expected a CNN journalist to provide a voice-over commentary.

Zambello incorporated other post-9/11 references. In Act One the soldiers studied their laptop computers. In Act Three, in which Aida tricks her beloved Radames into revealing his battle strategy, the action was played in and around a military jeep. In the Judgment Scene in Act Four, Radames refused to answer the charges of treason even though he is being subjected to waterboarding in a most terrifying manner. I doubt I will ever see this scene again divorced from that image of Radames bound to a chair, gagging, feet twitching, as he experienced the sensation of drowning. In the final scene, Radames was injected with a paralyzing nerve drug by his captors, then strapped to a gurney in a vertical position and left to die.

When this opera is set in the historical mist of ancient Egypt it is easy for the audience to ignore the creaky geopolitical overlay and focus instead on the love triangle of the captured Ethiopian princess Aida, the Egyptian military hero Radames with whom she is in love, and the Egyptian princess Amneris, her rival for the affections of Radames.

In this production, however, televised images in our heads of the very real brutality that has been raging for more than a decade in the Middle East limit any American's interest in this trivial love affair. Who cares about Amneris's jealousy when Zambello makes the audience recall waterboarding?

She made it even easier to forget the rivalry between Aida and Amneris by dressing them — particularly Amneris — in glamorous gowns that would be appropriate at a \$10,000-a-ticket fundraiser at the Temple of Dendur in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Why is a Muslim girl in the middle of a 21st-century war zone in the Middle East dolled up in slinky green, gold, and peach confections, acting like a spoiled party girl? No wonder Radames spit in her face—truly—as she tried to save him from his fate.

And why were Verdi's ancient Egyptian priests not converted into mullahs with beards and turbans? Why dress them in old-fashioned robes straight out of a 1950s Met production? Why not go all in and dress Aida and Amneris in burqas?

Still, it was a pleasure to be challenged this way by Zambello. The elephants were gone. The triumphal parade was little more than the display of a few prisoners and some looted antiquities.

As one of my Welsh colleagues suggested, the production was a “dog's breakfast.” Zambello offered too many ideas, many of them not fully worked out. But she did have the audience on the edge of its collective seat wondering what was coming next. Would Dick Cheney show up?

It is quite astounding how young singers can cope with any staging and deliver the vocal goods, and such was the case here. The announced role Aida was replaced by the young American soprano Adina Aaron, a product of young artist programs in Santa Fe and Seattle. She has sung Aida extensively abroad at Finland's Savonlinna Festival, in Marseilles, and in Busseto, Italy (a performance that was televised and recorded). In short, she was not a substitute but rather an Aida of considerable experience.

This showed in her performance, which was engaging on every level. She has a beautiful upper register with the ability to float soft notes and hold them forever. She has the volume to ride over the orchestra, which, under conductor Nader Abbassi, was occasionally overpowering and inconsiderate of the singers.

Aaron is a fine actress, emphasizing the vulnerability of Aida and her inability to cope with the violence around her. She is due to be replaced later in July by the singer originally cast, Michelle Johnson — but Aaron is worth seeing here, or elsewhere.

Radames was performed by the young tenor Noah Stewart. Born and raised in Harlem, Stewart is a product of the Fiorello LaGuardia High School and Juilliard, with additional training as an Adler Fellow at the San Francisco Opera. The opera world is lucky not to have lost him to other musical genres that are a lot more popular with his age group.

Stewart has buckets of talent. His voice has heft and an attractive vibe. He forced a bit on the high notes, and the end of *Celesta Aida* in the first scene of Act One was too blunt. But most tenors sing it that way. He already seems comfortable on the stage.

He has the physique of an Olympic sprinter, with six-pack abs. Stripped to the waist for the Judgment Scene, he was something to behold. This is by far the biggest vocal and dramatic challenge he has accepted. He made the most of it.

Amonasro was sung by baritone Eric Owens. Those who saw the Met's recent *Das Rheingold* will vividly recall him as an Alberich of venomous intensity whose baritone easily plunges to bass depths. However, Owens scaled back his voice for Glimmerglass and blended well with his daughter, Aida. His appeal to her in Act Three to aid her people in exacting revenge on the Egyptians (*Rivedrai le foreste imbalsamate*) had fatherly intensity and reminded listeners that *Aida* is more about fathers and daughters (a favorite Verdi theme) than about war in Egypt.

The character of Amneris suffered most in this staging, in part because she was so out of place in her various glamorous gowns. She seemed to have wandered in from some other opera, perhaps *Fledermaus*. For the role, Zambello selected the young Greek-American mezzo, Daveda Karanas, with whom she had worked in San Francisco in her full Ring cycle in the summer of 2011. There she sang a solid Waltraute, among other Ring roles. Karanas was also an Adler Fellow at San Francisco Opera. (Clearly Zambello is drawing from a specific network of talent in her casting of young singers.)

Karanas's mezzo is a bit brittle, without the plummy depths of some, but she projects well with considerable volume. She didn't really command much attention until Act Four in her confrontation with Radames, when she offers to save him if only he will give up Aida. Here she sang with intensity and showed considerable dramatic skills.

Both the High Priest Ramfis (bass Joseph Barron) and the King (bass Philip Gay) were uncommonly well cast, Gay in particular. Both are members of the Glimmerglass Young Artists Program. Both are ready for successful careers.

Another Young Artist, Lenora Green, was cast in the small role of the High Priestess, and she, too, contributed to a performance of great vocal beauty.

At times conductor Abbassi unleashed more sound than I have ever heard from chorus and orchestra in the Alice Busch Opera Theater. *Aida* is among the grandest of operas ever presented here and an unusual departure for the company. It was exciting, for sure, but as noted above, Abbassi was not always kind to the young singers. Balances were off, with the brass overpowering the strings most of the time. But Abbassi had the measure of the score, which he has conducted often. His tempos made sense, the performance never lagged, and he moved along the final death scene, which can seem endless.

The male chorus in particular deserves special phrase for the delicate control they exhibited in hushed moments, and for the power they unleashed in saluting the Golden Kalashnikov as they headed for battle.

The bombed-out palace, which was either the location for the action or the frame for other scenes, was designed by Lee Savage and worked well enough. Some of the lighting, by Robert Wierzel, was provided by portable spots on tripods lugged on and off by performers. This *Aida* suggests what Zambello intends to offer her audience when she programs an opera from the basic canon: highly talented young singers in a production that will strike you either as involving and intelligent, or unnecessarily provocative and unfaithful to the original. While she did not fully work out her modern setting, Zambello deserves credit for some striking stage images, and for assembling a terrific young cast.