



# A True Blockbuster

by [B.A. Nilsson](#) on July 11, 2012

## Aida

By Giuseppe Verdi, conducted by Nader Abbassi, directed by Francesca Zambello  
Glimmerglass Festival, Cooperstown, through Aug. 25

Your average (and I do mean *average*) summer blockbuster movie has nothing on an old-fashioned, big-assed production of *Aida*. No amount of CGI can match the spectacle of livestock lumbering across the stage as a live orchestra thunders the opera's triumphal march. Yet that's hardly the heart of the piece. *Aida's* hugeness has ensured it a place on many an amphitheater stage, but the tragedy that leaves you with tears in your eyes is, like all tragedies, an intimate clash among flawed human beings.

The Glimmerglass Festival's Alice Busch Theater is not the place to parade elephants, so you'll find the pachyderms on the lawn. When, after the brief, string-intensive prelude, the curtain rises, it's to the sound of war booms and reveals what seems an old-world setting with up-to-date damage, a succession of looks devised by designer Lee Savage to bridge the opera's timelessness and an awareness of today's bloody conflicts.

Although the talk of the gods that kicks off the action seems to clash with the MacBooks we see onstage, soon enough it becomes clear that the religious tomfoolery driving much of the opera's action is no different than that which inspires the imperialist wingnuts of today, and *Aida* gains a terrible currency.

At its heart is the love of Ethiopian slave *Aida* for the Egyptian warrior *Radamès*, who returns her feeling but is of the wrong class and ethnicity to easily claim her hand. Besides, he's loved by *Amneris*, the king's daughter, so politics also work against his desire.

Sung by tenor Noah Stewart, *Radamès* suffers a classic schism between love and duty—and Stewart seemed at the start more convincing in the latter mode. He has the opera's first hit number, "Celeste *Aida*," which seemed, on opening night, perfunctory and a wee bit ragged. But by the third act, when he's forced to wrestle with those feelings, Stewart was absolutely in command, his "Nel fiero anelito" a thing of beauty, his duets with *Aida* skillfully matched.

And he had a tough act to follow. *Amonasro*, *Aida's* father, is the Ethiopian king, and spends the top of the act persuading his daughter to discover key military secrets. Baritone Eric Owens conveyed a sense of firm command, his voice a buttery marvel. (I look forward to seeing him in Glimmerglass's upcoming *Lost in the Stars*.)



*A great performance at the last minute: Aaron in Aida at Glimmerglass*

Soprano Michelle Johnson, originally cast in the title role, is on vocal rest for the next several days, so the opening-night performance was sung by Adina Aaron, who gave one of those legendary performances that affirms the magic and intensity of the human voice. Her lengthy “Ritorna vincitor” sequence was staged in one, intensifying the attention, but she could have performed it in Times Square traffic and still brought down the house, so deft were the shadings of her amazing voice. She’ll be performing July 13 and 15, after which Johnson returns.

Glimmerglass Young Artist Joseph Barron brought a theater-filling bass-baritone voice to the role of the High Priest, with a stage presence to match.

The spoiled-brat role of Amneris reveals some complexity by the opera’s end, and mezzo Daveda Karanas sang with a sure technique and gave the character enough depth to make the journey convincing. Her act two cat-and-mouse with Aida was chillingly convincing.

This after a pageant by the ensemble of slaves, choreographed by Eric Sean Fogel, who fitted all of the opera’s dance sequences with eye-catching movements appropriate to the general intimacy of the staging.

Francesca Zambello, who runs the Festival, staged the production. She isn’t afraid of the presentational, upon which a piece like this thrives, but placed her singers as effectively in the intimate moments as she did in the crowd scenes.

And she really turned loose in the final act, as convocation of priests determines the fate of Radamès. When the warrior remains silent during his interrogation, he’s subjected to a kind of waterboarding. (The horrifying moment nevertheless drew giggles from a woman behind me, who no doubt hurried home to contribute to the Romney campaign.)

Rather than simply vault-seal the doomed Radamès, he’s given an unusually slow-acting lethal injection. But it worked. (It’s opera.) Aida chooses to die by his side, and the finish of the piece—probably the most hopeless story Verdi ever set—had a glorious three-handkerchief misery. I’m amazed anyone had the strength to applaud.

But they did, with well-earned cheers. Much of it was won by the orchestra, who never sounded better—especially the strings, who get many mercilessly unsupported high-note phrases. Conductor Nader Abbassi not only drew the best from the players, but also achieved a superb dynamic balance with the singers.

The blockbuster approach to any entertainment ends up being mere distraction. We of the extended attention span have the chance to glory in the intimacy of this most iconic opera. Take advantage of it.