

Glimmerglass festival makes operas like *Armide* and *Aida* relevant: Littler

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Peggy Kriha Dye plays the title role and Colin Ainsworth is her potential victim Renaud in Opera Atelier's production at the Glimmerglass event in Cooperstown, N.Y.



By [William Littler](#)
Music Columnist

COOPERSTOWN, N.Y.—Opera, the guaranteed route to other-worldly escapism? Not this summer in a picturesque theatre nestled in a grassy field outside the upstate, baseball-mad town of Cooperstown.

For there, on the stage of the Alice Busch Opera Theater, the Glimmerglass Festival is mounting four productions — three operas and a classic Broadway musical — united by the theme of social awareness and change.

The theme is the brainchild of the festival's artistic and general director. Now in her second season at the helm of the only major summer opera producer within a tank of gasoline of Toronto, Francesca Zambello has declared her interest in championing “works that could inspire discussion about our world today. I also wanted to collaborate with organizations and artists who could help us in our quest to better understand other cultures, races, religions and ideologies.”

So how does she reconcile this objective with the importation from Toronto of Opera Atelier's production of *Armide*, a 17th-century French Baroque opera by Jean-Baptiste Lully? Simple. The opera happens to

be set against the background of the First Crusade and the capture of Jerusalem from the Muslims by Christian Crusaders. A more timely reminder of today's so-called clash of cultures could hardly have been chosen.

Even without its political resonance, *Armide* is turning out to be a touchstone of success for Opera Atelier. Following a successful run at the Elgin Theatre in April, it was taken, by invitation, to the Royal Theatre at Versailles for an equally successful run and represents the first French Baroque opera ever staged at Glimmerglass.

“Because we had no experience in this field I wanted to find a knowledgeable co-producer,” Zambello acknowledges, “and with Opera Atelier up the road in Toronto the choice was obvious. We couldn't be more delighted with the results.”

Although, for reasons of budget, the Toronto company was unable to bring its regular period instrument-playing orchestra, Tafelmusik, to the shores of Otsego Lake (dubbed Glimmerglass by the novelist James Fennimore Cooper), its music director, David Fallis, secured a remarkably stylish response from the versatile, mostly modern instrument-playing Glimmerglass orchestra. Otherwise, the production looked and sounded every bit as handsome as it had in the Elgin Theatre, with Marshall Pynkoski's direction and Jeannette Zingg's choreography guiding a splendid cast. Negotiations are underway for future collaborations between the Toronto company and Cooperstown festival.

Meanwhile, back to our theme. Zambello herself directed the first Glimmerglass production of Verdi's *Aida*, an opera set in ancient Egypt. “When we think about this opera,” she says, “we tend to think first about festive marches with elephants, but the opera is really about slavery, political struggles and personal trials.” As if to reinforce her point, Zambello has moved the opera forward to the present day arena of Middle Eastern conflict, with soldiers dressed in fatigues and brandishing automatic rifles rather than spears.

Although the historic parallel looked forced to my eyes, Glimmerglass assembled an engaged cast, headed by the vocally impressive *Aida* and *Amonasro* of Michelle Johnson and Eric Owens.

Owens returned even more impressively as the dominating figure of Rev. Stephen Kumalo in a superb, simply conceived staging of *Lost in the Stars*, Kurt Weill's musical setting of Alan Paton's celebrated anti-apartheid novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*, co-produced with South Africa's Cape Town Opera. Of all the chosen works, this one, with its message of racial tragedy, addressed most directly the season's theme. Directed by Tazewell Thompson and conducted by John DeMain, with a well-chosen, partly South African cast, it illustrated how a powerful message and honest production can lift a middling quality text and score to the level of memorability.

Connecting Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man* to the season's theme involved more of a stretch, with Zambello arguing that the 1957 musical “speaks to some deep human values that we have lost, community values that we might hope to get back one day.”

The Glimmerglass season continues through Aug. 25.

