



Glimmerglass Festival 2012: 'Aida' Is Noisy, 'The Music Man' Is Buoyant

By MIKE SILVERMAN 07/16/12 10:28 AM ET 



Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival

COOPERSTOWN, N.Y. — Two topiary elephants greet visitors as they stroll up the lawn toward the Alice Busch Opera Theater for this year's Glimmerglass Festival.

The creatures, made of grapevine and willow over a rebar frame, are called "the Aida elephants," but the charming sight is worlds apart from the grim spectacle that confronts the audience when the curtain rises on Verdi's opera, the summer's opening production.

There are no elephants, pyramids or other traditional lavish effects in Francesca Zambello's version – but there is waterboarding and lethal injection. Updated from ancient Egypt to a modern Muslim state, this "Aida," seen at its second performance on Friday night, tries to be radical and provocative but mostly ends up settling for cheap sensationalism.

Happily, the season's second offering is an altogether different story: a buoyant production of Meredith Willson's classic Broadway musical "The Music Man" that opened the following night. There is updating afoot here as well, but its effect is benign, if gratuitous.

Zambello, who is artistic director of the festival, said she wanted her "Aida" to "bring out the intimate and personal nature of the story." That's a fine idea, but there's little that's intimate about her staging. Instead, we're assaulted by noise, crowds and clutter at every turn.

The set by Lee Savage depicts a room in a decaying palace where a metal scaffold serves as both royal grandstand and priestly altar. As soon the subdued prelude ends, the stage reverberates with artillery fire and Egyptian soldiers rush onstage. They remain there distractingly, fiddling with laptops, while the warrior Radames sings his aria, "Celeste Aida," musing on his love for the Ethiopian slave of the title.

In the scene that follows, Verdi establishes the opera's love triangle by having Radames, Aida and the jealous princess Amneris interact together – but here, too, the scene is muddled by the presence of the soldiers, who whoop and leer at Aida when she enters.

When Radames is eventually put on trial for treason, Amneris laments his fate and rages against the unforgiving priests. Much of the power of this scene comes from watching the once-haughty princess suffering alone onstage, while the chorus of priests is heard from the wings. But in this production, the trial takes place in full view, with Radames tied to a chair and repeatedly waterboarded.

In Verdi's original, Radames is then sealed in an underground tomb where he is slowly asphyxiated along with Aida, who has hidden there to join him. At Glimmerglass, he's strapped to a gurney, wheeled shirtless to an upright position at the front of the stage and given a lethal injection. It's a slow-acting poison that allows him to sing the final scene, though his body is wracked by spasms that are as unpleasant to watch as they are at odds with the ethereal music.

Of the four American principals, only baritone Eric Owens, making his role debut as Amonasro, was fully up to the challenge, pouring out a flood of warm, Verdian sound and making one wish the role were bigger.

There was a lot to admire in soprano Adina Aaron's Aida, especially when she sculpted ravishing soft phrases. But she couldn't quite manage the gradual rise to the exposed high C in "O patria mia," and other high notes sometimes sounded thin or slightly off-pitch. Michelle Johnson is scheduled to take over the role beginning July 23.

Tenor Noah Stewart, a fast-rising star in Britain, was a big audience favorite as Radames. He started shakily, with a "Celeste Aida" more blustery than elegant, but afterward displayed a pleasant, lyrical sound when he wasn't pushing to meet the heroic demands of the music.

Both Aaron and Stewart are attractive and appealing artists, and the fact they are both African-American, as is Owens, lent this production an unusual multiracial feel.

As Amneris, mezzo-soprano Daveda Karanas was simply out of her depth, with a shrill, tinny sound that encompassed neither the plush middle register nor the potent chest voice the role calls for.

Nader Abbassi conducted the orchestra with vigor but not much subtlety.

For "The Music Man," Glimmerglass imported two opera stars who managed the transition to musical comedy more seamlessly than most. Both baritone Dwayne Croft and soprano Elizabeth Futral took some time to warm up, but they soon had the audience rooting for them as they charted the rocky romance between professor Harold Hill and Marian the Librarian.

Director Marcia Milgrom Dodge kept the action flowing nicely with help from James Noone's sets, which included a lovely Grant Wood-inspired backdrop of an Iowa farm town. Dodge also provided the terrific choreography, highlighted by a rousing "Shapoo!" with a sensational turn by Josh Walden.

Dodge said in a program note she was updating the action from 1912 to the 1940s, but there was little evidence of this, other than Marian wearing pants. It also made nonsense out of references to the Wells Fargo Wagon and Hill's supposedly having a 1905 diploma from the Gary Conservatory of Music.

There was not a weak link in the cast, though the barbershop quartet had some pitch issues. As often is the case, Henry Wager, as Marian's little brother Winthrop, came close to stealing the show with his rendition of "Gary, Indiana."

Under John DeMain's baton, the orchestra played with flair and evident affection for the irresistible score.

The season continues through Aug. 25 with two more productions to come – Lully's "Armide" and Kurt Weill's "Lost in the Stars."

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