



Above: Michelle Johnson as Aida and Eric Owens as Amonasro in Aida.

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Glimmerglass Gambles and Wins

By James Sohre

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Impresaria Francesca Zambello kept up her seemingly tireless process of rejuvenating the Glimmerglass Opera Festival with an ambitious, nay downright risky repertoire choice.

No one could accuse the company of not ‘thinking big’ when they scheduled *Aida* as the showpiece of the 2012 season. Is there any piece that screams ‘Grand Opera’ quite as loudly? And is there any theatre more intimate than the Alice Busch, with its 910 seats, smallish stage, and even smaller pit?



Daveda Karanas as Amneris

Ms. Zambello turned these limitations into a distinct advantage by first divesting the piece of the usual 'Egyptiana.' Gone were the replications of temples and friezes and Nile dress and pageantry. For the director-designers have focused on the intimate love triangle and placed it in the context of the Arab Spring.

Set designer Lee Savage has located the action in a finely detailed bombed-out palace. After the prelude, sounds of warfare cause a group of rebels to seek shelter in the ruin, and subsequently to convert it (perhaps a bit too quickly) into a cyber-command center setting up chairs and tables laden with computers. Amneris' boudoir (apparently in a less damaged portion of the building) is created with the addition of a beautifully dressed 'Queen'-size bed, and the addition of luxuriously gowned ladies in waiting, looking like a bevy of bridesmaids in their South East Asia-inspired coral attire.

I quite like the placement of a jeep down right for the Nile scene, on the hood of which warriors strategized over a map of the region. The vehicle also afforded some interesting blocking opportunities as Radames and Aida sat in it and on it, and themselves regarded the map as Radames betrays the geographic placement of the rebel forces.

Bibhu Mohapatra has crafted an effective costume plot rife with bold choices. The Nubians were attired in modern adaptations of traditional regional dress, pure white flowing garments accented with blood red belts, trim and emblems. In the final two acts, princess Amneris showed up in a form fitting black sequined "wedding" dress that communicated 'black widow.' The King was in a thuggish North African leopard skin-accented Bad-Ass Gangsta ensemble. Overall, the dress suggested mid-eastern finery and/or commando/insurgent wear straight out of today's news. Best of all, Ms. Mohapatra's garb in the Triumphal Scene provided a riot of color that did much to satisfy expectations of pageantry.

The creative team came up with a viable solution that included a three-tiered tower that dominated the visual, with the King and Ramfis on top, Amneris and Radames on the middle level, and the full

complement of Young Artists grouped in bunches for maximum effect on the main floor. Through well-executed movement ('blocking by the inch') Miss Z showed her usual command of crowd management and devised a masterful ebb and flow that more than satisfied all our expectations.



Phillip Gay as the King

She was certainly mightily helped in her pursuit by Eric Sean Fogel's meaningful choreography, especially the taunting of the captives by aggressive, hyperactive young men snapping white cloths. Mr. Fogel's inspired work made me regret that the Act One ballet was cut. Rounding out the production team, company treasure Anne Ford-Coates oversaw an effective hair and make-up design (as she did for all productions). And Robert Wierzel designed highly effective lighting that not only encompassed the milieu of impending violence and garish military posturing, but also suggested moments of real serenity with cool washes. I especially liked the clever shadow screen effect in Act Three.

Nader Abbassi conducted a sensitive, moving account of the score, partnering beautifully with his soloists and eliciting exciting full-voiced singing from the amassed forces (David Moody, Chorus Master). Maestro Abbassi also drew forth intensely hushed choral effects in the Act One Temple Scene that made a supernatural effect, even competing as they were with a sudden pelting downpour of rain that hammered the roof. Although this group of musicians was smaller than we regularly encounter in larger pits, they performed with real distinction from the sinuous opening prelude, through the boisterous military scenes, down to the detailed solo work like the exquisite oboe solo in "O patria mia."

Speaking of which, Michelle Johnson in the title role reaped a sustained ovation for her rendition of that aria, one of many highpoints of her portrayal. Ms. Johnson is possessed of a ripe, round soprano, evenly produced throughout the range. She has plenty of power to hurl out gleaming top notes that ride over even the largest ensembles, but can also float ethereal pianissimo phrases ("Numi, pieta," to name one) with considerable distinction. Her chest voice has real firepower but is

always well controlled and well blended into her freely produced technique. Michelle is young and is still occasionally finding her way through the demanding part, but hers is a major talent and she will surely evolve into a sought after interpreter of this iconic role.

When last I heard Noah Stewart, it was as the wholly successful Prince in *The Flowering Tree*. But that was a lyrical role that showcased his sweetness of tone and his beautiful sense of line, all the while capitalizing on his irresistible charisma and super hero good looks. Radames is a major step forward for this young talent, which is also to say a major challenge. Mr. Stewart has evolved into a timbre of polished brass, with clarion power above the staff, and a personalized, smoky allure in the mid-range. With the assumption of heavier roles, it has to be said a bit of clumsiness has crept into the passaggio, with upper ah and oh vowels sometimes turning hard. But I hasten to add he was always in complete control of his considerable resources.



Noah Stewart (center) as Radamès with members of the ensemble

Verdi gives our hero a major challenge right at the top of the show, and “Celeste Aida” was a tad labored and oversold. I might encourage our tenor to explore the soft option of the ending. Once that aria was dispatched, Noah relaxed noticeably, the technique settled into place, and he gave much pleasure with stentorian phrases as well as beautifully negotiated passages at mezzo forte and softer. ‘O terra addio’ was particularly heartfelt and affecting.

As Amneris, Daveda Karanas brought an appropriately steely resolve to bear, and she treated us to a riveting, forceful vocal presence at all pitches and volumes. Her tortured rendition of a powerful Judgment Scene earned Ms. Karanas a huge ovation. I wondered if she might not fare even better in a larger house where the acoustic and some distance might round out the steely vocal presence a bit.

From the Young Artist Program, Joseph Baron scored with a confident Ramfis, a role that perfectly suited his rolling, imposing baritone. Clay Hilley gave us a memorable Messenger, solidly sung with a secure, penetrating tenor. Philip Gay as the King showed great promise with his pleasing, reliable bass. And Lenora Green made the most of her brief turn as the Priestess, her lush soprano making us wish the character had more to sing.

It is a testament to the quality level of the other principals that the incomparable Eric Owens did not throw the balance of the show off kilter with his winningly performed Amonasro. This was Mr.

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Owens' first attempt at the part, and based on his total success, it will not be his last. With his entrance, his rich, powerful, imperious vocalizing raised the bar to an even higher level, and his colleagues responded to the challenge.

There is no question that Ms. Zambello's artistic commitment was the primary cause for the production's success. There were some controversial touches to be sure. The water boarding of Radames was not quite truthful for the Judgment Scene narrative but the 'truth' is it was a moment of powerful resonance nonetheless. There was also debate about Radames' execution by lethal injection (shades of Sellars' *Theodora*!). Aida subsequently injects herself, unstraps the dying hero from the table and the two expire in spasms without being able to physically entwine in a final embrace. Risky, yes. Different, yes. But when the results are so incredibly moving, who needs elephants?



L to R: Brandy Lynn Hawkins as Irina, Eric Owens as Stephen Kumalo and Makudupanyane Senaoana as Absalom

Having sung the matinee *Aida*, Eric Owens was back on stage that very evening gifting us with a Herculean achievement in *Lost in the Stars*. Mr. Owens was quite simply a force of nature, his compelling singing, unaffected acting and suggestion of an Afrikaner accent committed and honest. His singing this night had no equal and he rang down the Act One curtain with a searing sustained high note so anguished and powerful it may be resounding still. In Act Two Eric brought down what was left of the house with an extended aria that was a miraculous blend of lucid narrative and concentrated emotional journey.

Sean Pannikar was also excellent as the Leader, his solid tenor soaring easily over the full-throated choruses. Mr. Pannikar was instrumental in the profound impact of "Cry, the Beloved Country." As Irina, Brandy Lynn Hawkins, a sympathetic actress, deployed a rounded lyric soprano to affecting purpose in "Stay Well". As the selfish brother John, Amos Nomnabo's mellow delivery was characterized by an appealing fast and tight vibrato, an ironic aural counterpart to his dramatic mal-intent. Makudupanyane Senaoana's Absalom was so wonderfully winning that it was a shame he had nothing to sing.

Tazewell Thompson is a director of such taste and imagination that he made the whole meticulously coordinated evening seem improvised, spontaneous and effortless. The book is undeniably problematic, often repetitive, with scenes occasionally overlong. Sometimes musical moments are too infrequent. But Mr. Thompson compensates with focused direction, devising seamless transitions that inventively incorporate the excellent chorus (Mr. Moody again). He devises alternating moments of excited, well-choreographed motion, and reflective, sometimes painful repose. Choreographer Anthony Salatino supported Tazewell's vision with apt period choreography, especially for the naughty "Who'll Buy."



[Brandy Lynn Hawkins as Irina](#) and [Makudupanyane Senaoana as Absalom](#)

Too, this was an exceptionally effective physical production. Set and costume designer Michael Mitchell has created handsome unit set that not only gets re-dressed efficiently to suggest various locales, but also has a treasure trove of hidden delights, like a kitchen unit revealed by lighting through the slats in the basic box, and a wondrous suggestion of clouds with the hanging laundry (white sheets) that frames "Stay Well." With utmost economy of gesture the space becomes a church, a speak easy, a courtroom, a train, all with the simple addition/removal of a handful of chairs. A trapdoor suggests Absalom's prison. Mr. Mitchell's period costumes were also well-considered and character specific.

The story of apartheid and repression is sadly still relevant. But *Lost in the Stars* also embodies themes of redemption and deliverance that are important, welcome, and cathartic. There was audible weeping in the house at the conclusion as the father of the murdered boy comforts and cradles the grief-stricken father of the murderer. This was powerful lyric theatre of the top tier. John DeMain conducted a straightforward, idiomatic reading of Weill's score.

Lully's seldom performed *Armide* was lavished with an arresting set design from Gerard Gauci, colorful and varied, starting with a show drop scrim based on fanciful calligraphy and symbols. The drops and flown legs were sparkling with eye-catching Muslim decorative touches, complemented by twinkling lights and even blazing fires. Bonnie Beecher provided a multi-faceted lighting design complete with storm and transformation effects, and good uses of gobos and area lighting.

Dora Rust D'Eye's elaborate costumes defied period but suggest a sort of generic, timeless jewel-toned southeast Asian splendor and revelry, to include Batik'd and tie-dyed tights. Ms. D'Eye certainly took full advantage of the wonderful physiques of her actors and provided a costume plot full of erotic imagery. Caveat: the bare-shouldered look for the heroine with its push up bra and generous décolletage became a distraction as the show progressed.



Olivier Laquerre as Chevalier Ubalde and Colin Ainsworth as Renaud

Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg has choreographed a never-ending, prolific series of numbers that melded stylized court dances, classical ballet, and suggestions of primitive tribal dances. The fluid, stage-filling movement from the seventeen dancers of Opera Atelier was a major asset but also proved a bit repetitive, and ultimately a bit too placid and polite considering what's at stake in the unfolding story. The athleticism of the men's choreography was arguably the more interesting with the sword 'pas de deux' quite skillfully done. To be fair, the ladies' dance with castanets and bells offered nice variety. Side bar: the men pulling little scimitars out of their little scabbards and brandishing them as they jetée'd off to battle was about as threatening as "Ballerinos with Butter Knives."

Marshall Pynkoski's contribution as director was a series of pleasant stage pictures, sound traffic management, and melodramatic poses, all fluttering hands and deliberate gestures. While I admired the consistency, the approach was occasionally limiting although there was good development of character relationships and uninhibited intimacy. Overall, Mr. Pynkoski used all the stage areas with good variety and developed an effective series of couplings (and un-) for his principals.

Peggy Kriha Dye sang quite an impressive Armide. Her secure soprano easily dispatched the role's rangy demands, notably more vibrant at fuller volumes. Below *mezzo forte* the tone tended to veer a little to the dry side. What Ms. Dye's instrument may lack in natural gradations of color in the lyric segments, she more than makes up for with good French diction and a calm sense of line. But when she got riled up in Act Two, Peggy invested heavily in the emotional content (occasionally at her vocal peril) with a rasp here, a strident chest tone there, a ferocity of output that pushed the voice almost beyond its limit. Still, all this risk-taking and decision-making produced compelling results, drew us into her plight, and earned her a vociferous reception at curtain call.

Although no announcement was made, I wondered if young, handsome Colin Ainsworth (Renaud) might not have been indisposed. The basic core of his voice suggested a sweet lyrical tenor. But the top was often cloudy, the middle and low were somewhat barked, and the voice just didn't respond the way he wanted, especially above the staff. His performance was highly musical and he husbanded his resources well, but it seemed as though he was making his way around some limitations by sheer force of will. He showed a pleasing enough musical approach that I would look forward to hearing him again on another occasion.



[Jack Rennie as Love with Peggy Kriha Dye as Armide and Curtis Sullivan as Hatred](#)

Perhaps the two most exciting singers in the production were the Young Artists Mireille Asselin (Phénice/Lucinde) and Meghan Lindsay (Sidonie/WaterNymph). Ms. Asselin sports a most refined singing technique, a lilting silvery tone, and poised delivery. Ms. Lindsay's winning soprano is warm and round, yet can be incisive when required.

Olivier Laquerre (Artémido/Ubalde) and Aaron Ferguson (Chevalier) shared some successful accomplishments as well as some weaknesses. Mr. Laquerre is a pleasing actor who cuts a good, lithe figure, and Mr. Ferguson matches him for on-stage presence, abandoned impersonations, and spot-on timing. Their comic relief scene was faultlessly played and the two were audience favorites. Unfortunately, their vocal delivery was marred by uneven vocal production, limited by a weak sense of line and inconsistent focus.

Thomas Cannon has a forceful throbbing voice to be sure, but he pushed his brief scene as Aronte so hard that tuning was problematic. A bit of restraint should fix that right up since he performed commendably in *Stars*. Curtis Sullivan offered a stalwart portrayal as Hate, with a straight-ish, open tone, his delivery consistent throughout the range. As Hidraot, João Fernandes used his pleasantly darkened baritone to good effect, but he might incorporate a bit more 'point' to truly register as the imposing sorcerer. His singing lost presence when he sang from upstage, which might have been corrected by more advantageous placement.

For all the assembled talent on stage, I felt overall that "Armide" lacked inner life, which must be placed on conductor David Fallis, who led a competent but uninspired reading. Orchestral coloration and dramatic engagement were in short supply, there were some decidedly scrappy ensemble

passages between pit and stage, and there was an overall lack of artistic collaboration. Pity, since there was such a good roster of talent involved.



Peggy Kriha Dye as Armida

I love *The Music Man*. It is the first live musical I ever saw, and in college we ‘theatre geeks’ prided ourselves on learning all the ‘rap’ segments by heart. I can still do a pretty mean one man show version of the “Rock Island” opening. I have directed it twice. So, it was with some trepidation that I settled in my seat to hear a bunch of classical singers take on some of musical theatre’s best known characters. My worries were unfounded.

If Dwayne Croft’s spoken lines were at first a little bit ‘opera house grand,’ my ear attuned to it, and his assured performance nailed the laughs and captured the sentiment. Of course he is a fine baritone with a big, burnished tone and this was likely the best sung Harold Hill on record. But I was unprepared for his spontaneity, his sense of fun, his fleetness of foot, and his immersion in the style. A hometown boy, Dwayne started off performing on Cooperstown stages in musical comedy and well, he still has it in him.

As Marion, Elizabeth Futral was as lovely as ever and sang with her usual heart and resonant tone. She seemed misdirected to be unwaveringly harsh in Act One, and her aggressive, level speaking voice did not welcome us to embrace her as we might. Also, when her singing took over there was a somewhat jarring gearshift from sassy retort to rich, mellow outpourings. A softening of edges might make Ms. Futral’s impersonation even more effective.

Jake Gardner landed every punch line as he dithered and blathered delightfully as the bumbling Mayor Shinn. Josh Walden was a wiry, animated Marcellus, who proved himself a stellar hooper. Cindy Gold was a saltier-than-usual Mrs. Paroo, relishing her ribald references. Megan Ort and Allan

K. Washington were well paired as Zaneeta and Tommy. Ernestine Jackson brought a fresh new take to Eulalie Mackecknie Shinn. And as Amaryllis and Winthrop, the youngsters Aria Maholchic and Henry Wager performed like old pros, the latter stopping the show with “Gary, Indiana”. Master Wager also touched our hearts with the important transition scene late in Act I when the shy boy-with-the-lisp suddenly effuses about being handed his new trumpet. (“Sister, sister, did you ever see such a scrumptious solid gold thing?”)



[Elizabeth Futral as Marian Paroo with Aria Maholchic as Amaryllis](#)

The rest of the large cast was filled out with the fresh-scrubbed, full-voiced Young Artists who sang the choral pieces with panache (David Moody, chorus master again). Special mention goes to the barbershop quartet: Eric Bowden, Adam Bielamowicz, John David Boehr, and Derrell Acon. This is a very specific style of singing and blending, and the four talented young men skillfully brought it off.

Once one accepted the updating of the action to the 1940’s, the physical production could hardly be faulted. There were several spectacular show drops of the sort you hardly see any more, a marvel of a rotating and unfolding set (designer James Noone) that looked handsome and was exceptionally fluid. Leon Wiebers has created a lavish parade of colorful costumes that captured the period beautifully, although I would have preferred that Marion not be in pants for her first scenes. I appreciate the thought of reinforcing her outsider status but it distanced the audience as well as the other “citizens.” Kevin Adams’ atmospheric and vivid lighting enhanced every moment, and there was excellent work from the follow spots.

Conductor John DeMain was the sure hand in the pit that kept matters humming along like a well-oiled top. Marcia Milgrom Dodge did yeoman (yeo-woman?) duty as director and choreographer. Her inventive staging conveyed an impression of graceful fluidity from start to finish. The updating

mostly worked, with some effective re-imagining like the biddies rolling on seated under hair dryers at the beauty salon in the spin-up to “Pickalittle.” It worked less well with the Wells Fargo Wagon being a motor vehicle, since the horses hooves are so well characterized in the score. And, keeping Harold as a Conservatory graduate of ‘aught-six’ would make him about sixty-two, past the sell-by date as the ‘usual’ leading man status!



Elizabeth Futral as Marian Paroo and Dwayne Croft as Harold Hill

The discussion will surely continue whether Broadway musicals with opera stars belong in a “classical” festival. As I listened to the ripples of delighted laughter and the outbursts of spontaneous applause; reveled in hearing un-amplified performers reminding me of the joys of *The Music Man*; and considered the SRO audience that included many children, I thought. . .”and what’s the discussion”?

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