



OPERA REVIEW

Glimmerglass updates Verdi's *Aida*

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Glimmerglass Festival's artistic director Francesca Zambello likes the new and the different, and the 2012 season is certainly that.

Her mandate is an opera from the standard repertoire (Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*), an opera in English (Kurt Weill's *Lost in the Stars*), an early opera (Jean-Baptiste Lully's *Armide*), and a musical sung without amplified voices (Meredith Willson's *The Music Man*).

On paper this program might not necessarily look radical, but in real life it has shaken up some of the GG purists. For example, Zambello's production of *Aida* includes waterboarding and lethal-injection executions, while most of the GG audience has never seen a French baroque opera-ballet with its integrated dances courtesy of Toronto's Opera Atelier.

All Canadian eyes, of course, are on *Armide* and its reception. Except for the orchestra, chorus and a couple of minor roles, the singers, dancers, director (Marshall Pynkoski), choreographer (Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg) and conductor (David Fallis) are all from the Toronto production. This American window is a huge exposure for the company.

When I met up with the OA crowd backstage after the performance, the excitement was palpable. The discerning GG audience had just given OA's distinctive fusion of dance, singing and emotional mélodrame a prolonged reception. Zambello has also invited OA back for the 2014 season with its production of Lully's *Persée*. The GG buzz is that *Armide* is the show to see.

It hasn't been smooth sailing, however. The work papers of Pynkoski and stage manager Arwen MacDonell were held up so conductor Fallis had to step into the breach and take the early rehearsals. Poor baritone Vasil Garvanliev (Amonasro) never did get clearance and had to be replaced by an American singer. Pynkoski, Zingg and the 17 dancers have to come back to Toronto by bus (a 6-8 hour trip) between shows to save on expenses.

The consensus among my fellow B&B guests at breakfast was that *Armide* is absolutely beautiful to look at, but the dancing and Lully's music ("Lully is lulling") will take some getting used to. The singers, especially soprano Peggy Kriha Dye (*Armide*) and haute contre tenor Colin Ainsworth (*Renaud*) were showered with praise.

The GG artist in resident this season is charismatic American bass-baritone Eric Owens who is absolutely sensational. He performs Amonasro, *Aida*'s father, in *Aida* and Rev. Stephen Kamalo in *Lost in the Stars*. His beautiful, burnished sound is as commanding as it is nuanced. Owens is also a formidable actor who rivets the eye every time he is on stage.

As for Zambello's gutsy *Aida*, the production confirms her reputation as a director who breaks the rules. Her vision sets Verdi's warhorse in a bombed-out building somewhere in the Middle East. The scene never shifts. Zambello's direction is relentless, never letting the drama flag for a nanosecond, aided and abetted by Egyptian conductor Nader Abbassi.

The costumes by New York designer Bibhu Mohapatra split the centuries. The principal singers and the female chorus wear a mix of biblical meets futuristic, while the male chorus is garbed like American soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Outstanding soprano Michelle Johnson (*Aida*) sounds like a young Leontyne Price. Mezzo-soprano Daveda Karanas (*Amneris*) has a huge voice with an old-fashioned tinny timbre. Noah Stewart is a bit young for *Radames*, but has a great tenor in the making.

Lost in the Stars, a co-production with Cape Town Opera, is based on the famous book *Cry the Beloved Country* by South African writer Alan Paton. The story, set during the apartheid era, is about a black man's search for his son who has gone to the big city, only to find out that he has killed a white man.

The opera version (1949) has a weighty first act thanks to the laborious book by Maxwell Anderson, but the second act is tight, controlled, and very moving. American director Tazewell Thompson seamlessly moves his mixed South African/American cast through South African designer Michael Mitchell's bleak set of corrugated tin walls. Mitchell also did the effective period costumes. Happily, Thompson avoids cheap sentimentalism to let the power of the story speak for itself.

Singers to watch in this production are tenor Sean Panikkar (*The Leader*) who has a seductive, honey-coated voice and the good looks to match, Brandy Lynn Hawkins (*Irina*) and her soaring lyric mezzo-soprano, and South African mezzo-soprano Bongwiwe Nakani (*Answerer*) with her lush sound.

Director/choreographer Marcia Milgrom Dodge's enjoyable production of *The Music Man* (1957) is the most conventional this season. She's updated the time period to 1946 from its original 1912 setting, and kudos to designer Leon Wiebers for his costumes that cover the waterfront of Iowa life from farmers (including the couple from Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic*) to townies. James Noone's whimsical set is based on Wood's 1930 painting *Stone City, Iowa*.

Zambello's penchant for unaccompanied voice from the good old days of the American musical means opera singers have to play the roles. *The Music Man* features Cooperstown-born baritone Dwayne Croft as a dapper, light on his feet Prof. Harold Hill whose smooth voice suits the part beautifully. Soprano Elizabeth Futral is a delightful Marian the Librarian but has problems reigning in her gorgeous voice, especially when singing in her passagio range.

American conductor John DeMain does double duty with both *Lost in the Stars* and *The Music Man*, always finding the dramatic arc of the music.

The Deborah Voigt love-in recital with pianist Brian Zeger was absolutely wonderful. It included ravishing singing (in songs and arias by Richard Wagner, Richard Strauss, Ottorino Respighi, Leonard Bernstein, Amy Beach, and Ben Moore), and very funny asides. The last encore, Irving Berlin's *I Love a Piano*, brought down the house. For the last chorus, soprano Voigt joined Zeger on the piano bench for a two-handed, raucous, fire and brimstone piano duet.