



Updated Aida and Stylish Armide at Glimmerglass

by [Robert Levine](#) on AUGUST 15, 2012

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Francesca Zambello's second season as artistic director of the Glimmerglass Festival is a great success. Festivals seem required to have themes nowadays—and why not? Zambello chose the issue of religious differences and conflicts: Lully's *Armide* relates the tale of a Muslim sorceress/princess who loves a Christian knight during the Crusades in 1099; Verdi's *Aida* concerns an Egyptian warrior who loves an Ethiopian slave girl who is a princess in her own country, which is at war with Egypt; and Kurt Weill's *Lost in the Stars* tells the story of a black priest in South Africa under apartheid. (The Weill is not reviewed here.)

Armide is one of the finest productions of a French Baroque opera I've encountered in this country. These rarified concoctions, usually composed for Louis XIV's court, are stylized in the extreme: artifice can conceal art if the listener/viewer is not diligent or the production is too frou-frou. This one is a co-production with Toronto's Opera Atelier; the company has loaned 16 of its dancers to this show. They're remarkable; the opera contains almost as much dance as song, and this is a fine troupe, with choreography by Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg.

Real ballet, swordfights, pantomiming the feelings of the singers—all were handled beautifully; when the chorus, seated in the opera house's second balcony, sang, the visual was dance. It was diverting, grand, exciting—Louis would have approved. As directed by Marshall Pynkoski, the singers move well, with stylized but never dehumanizing motions; feelings are straightforward. Pynkoski miscalculated the roles of the two Danish knights who come to rescue Renaud; he played it for broad comedy. (It didn't help that the singers were not good.) The character of Hatred, a singing role, is also danced by the same man (in a flame-decorated leotard); similarly, many of Renaud's movements are balletic. Gerard Gauci's sets look like something out of the *Arabian Nights*—lush golds and greens—and the costumes, by Dora Rust D'Eye, are colorful gowns for the women and vaguely medieval tights and doublets for the men. Cupid wears gigantic wings to stunning effect.

Peggy Kriha Dye, a fine lyric soprano, sang and acted *Armide* with great expression and passion. The role is filled with angry and/or wild exclamations, and what she lacked in volume she made up for with determination. As her love interest, the knight Renaud, tenor Colin Ainsworth, looked spectacular but does not possess the right type of *haute-contre*, a type of tenor voice that can cope with Lully's high tessitura without either belting or resorting to falsetto. His voice isn't unattractive, but he worked too hard to sound elegantly French.

As Armide's handmaidens, young sopranos Mireille Asselin and Meghan Lindsay were lovely; as her wicked uncle Hidraot, bass Joao Fernandez was the best of the male supporting cast, although Curtis Sullivan, as the singer/dancer Hatred, was notable. Conductor David Fallis led both stylishly and heartily; the Glimmerglass orchestra used six continuo players with excellent results. A very special evening that won over even the skeptical.

Verdi's Aida needs no push, really: it is one of the core repertory items and even non-opera lovers know bits of it. It is normally thought of as a pageant; in fact, as is discussed in the Glimmerglass program (and elsewhere), it is a very intimate story of a love triangle and pointless revenge set against a background of war. It is a series of arias and duets, really, with only two "grand" choral scenes, and the 900-seat theater turned out to be an ideal venue for this production, which surprised many.

Francesca Zambello directed. As the soft final strains of the prelude die away, a loud explosion is heard behind the curtain. It rises on a bombed-out palace (a practical and useful set by Lee Savage) somewhere in the present-day Middle East. Egyptian soldiers in battle gear, complete with combat boots, are scrambling about; Commanders consult their laptop computers. They carry AK-47s. Energy level is very high. When war is declared, they are vicious in their cries and they stamp their feet. In the swearing-in scene at the Temple of Ptha the soldiers use prayer mats and kneel like Muslims—but the oath is taken on an AK-47.

The Triumphal Scene consists of a few soldiers bringing in loot—a chandelier, a statue, a painting, a grand, ancient vase. A few women dance. The Nile Scene features a Hummer stage left, while a blue curtain acts as the entrance to the temple. And the last-act Judgment Scene has the priests and Radames on stage: Radames' silence is punished by waterboarding, while bound to a chair, back to the audience, twitching and gagging. (One searched in vain for Dick Cheney.) Found guilty, he is strapped to a gurney and given a lethal injection; Aida injects herself during their final duet. (Acts 3 and 4 run together.) Of course, since there is no tomb, the phrase "La fatal pietra sopra me si chiuse" (the fatal stone is closing above me) is translated in the supertitles as "The walls are closing in on me." Metaphor replaces fact.

But we can't help but wonder: If it's Muslim, why are no women in burqas?; if it's a war zone, why is Amneris in a series of evening gowns?; why is Aida in a white and red gown?; why is the Egyptian King not a Mullah of sorts, and dressed as such?; and why would Egyptian Muslims be fighting Ethiopians? Never mind: nothing is absolute and Zambello has succeeded: Aida has become a tragic, very personal story of love, loss, and patriotism. The production is very effective; the audience loved it.

And the singing is top notch. Texan soprano Michelle Johnson—a grand prize winner at the Met auditions—has an impressive sound, with bright, right-on top notes and a well-used chest voice, and phrases intelligently and musically. Her high pianissimos are quavery and she rarely attempts them, but she's a great asset and handles this challenging role well.

Harlem-born-and-raised tenor Noah Stewart—tall, handsome, young, and practically a pop-star in the UK (his somewhat treacly debut CD, “Noah”, filled with religious music, spirituals, songs like “Shenendoah”, and, oddly, “Recondita armonia” from Tosca, is a best seller)—sings his heart and soul out as Radames, and he has a beautiful voice. You hope that he won’t sing this role in a larger house; it is pushing his essentially lyric sound already. But his top notes ring brilliantly, and you only really sense a problem in the passaggio, where pitch slips. With a bit more study and wise role-choices, opera houses will be clamoring for him. He acts up a storm (I hope he’s never asked to be water-boarded again), making up for Johnson’s fondness for not moving.

The great bass Eric Owens, so impressive in the Met’s Ring Cycle, is a ferocious, big-voiced Amonasro, singing as well as he acts, with no terrors for the role’s high F-sharps and Gs. The Nile Scene was riveting. Daveda Karanas, the evening gown-clad Amneris, moves well and sings like her life depends on it: huge volume, though occasionally leaning toward harshness on the top As and B-flats, made the Judgment Scene quite a show, albeit one without the requisite darkness in the low notes. Joseph Barron’s Ramfis grew in stature as the opera progressed; Philip Gay’s King had gravitas. Lenora Green’s High Priestess—on stage during the Ptha scene (hardly possible in the Muslim world)—was beautifully sung.

Egyptian conductor Nader Abbassi led with fervor and true understanding, supporting the individual singers and driving the big numbers to extensive volume, much to everyone’s delight. The orchestra played very well; the chorus was spectacular, particularly the men, who whispered their notes in the Ptha scene.

A special concert on Friday afternoon (August 10), featured mezzo Dolora Zajick and members of the Glimmerglass Young Artists Program. Zajick, a favorite at the Met and elsewhere, wowed the audience with arias from Tchaikovsky’s *The Maid of Orleans*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Khovanshchina*, *Macbeth*, *La favorite*, and *Don Carlo*, her huge sound filling the auditorium. Standouts among the students were mezzo Catherine Martin, who sang a chilling aria from Menotti’s *The Medium*, and Lenora Green, whose “*Senza mamma*” from *Suor Angelica* was a study in lovely singing and powerful concentration. The excellent pianist was Michael Heaston.