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MUSIC REVIEW

## An 'Aida' for Turbulent Times

At Glimmerglass, 'Aida,' 'Armide' and 'Lost in the Stars'



Glimmerglass Festival Michelle Johnson as Aida, and Noah Stewart as Radames, in the festival's "Aida," in Cooperstown, N.Y.

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COOPERSTOWN, N.Y. — A band of Egyptian soldiers, taking refuge in a bombed-out presidential palace after an onslaught by Ethiopian enemies, plots a counteroffensive and chooses a stalwart young army officer as its leader. But that officer has secretly fallen in love with a daughter of an Ethiopian royal family, who has been captured by the Egyptians and is hiding her true identity. When, having led a rout of the Ethiopian invaders, the young officer is caught revealing state secrets to his beloved, he is waterboarded to get the truth out of him.

Is this a news account of an ill-fated love story amid the Arab Spring? No, it is a new production of Verdi's "Aida" set in present-day Egypt at this year's [Glimmerglass Festival](#) here in bucolic Cooperstown.

Directed by [Francesca Zambello](#), now in her second season as the festival's general and artistic director, this topical take on the [opera](#) has been generating hot debate since it opened last month. During a performance on Saturday night — except for the last two scenes, in which Ms. Zambello, who tends to go too far with her concepts, did so again — I found this grim, updated "Aida" exciting and provocative.

This summer Ms. Zambello has chosen works that speak “to contemporary political and social issues,” as she puts it in a news release. As themes go, this one is admittedly generalized. Still, three of the four main stage productions, which I saw over the weekend, grapple head-on with issues of longstanding religious and sectarian conflict, especially “Aida,” a story of love between enemies: Radames, a heroic warrior in ancient Egypt, and a captive Ethiopian princess, Aida.

There were also Lully’s “Armide,” which tells of a Muslim princess and sorceress who falls for a Christian crusader, and Kurt Weill’s musical “Lost in the Stars,” an adaptation of Alan Paton’s novel “Cry, the Beloved Country,” about the struggles of a black priest in South Africa as the system of apartheid takes root in 1949.

How “The Music Man,” Meredith Willson’s enduring tale of a vivacious charlatan who poses as a boys’ band organizer and changes the lives of the gullible townspeople of River City, Iowa, fits in is harder to see. For Ms. Zambello, the show speaks to values of community. But never mind.

The “Aida” production makes gripping use of a set designed by Lee Savage depicting the once palatial headquarters of the Egyptian soldiers. The claustrophobic atmosphere introduces an element of ever-present danger to the intimate scenes that dominate the opera: you never know when another bomb might go off.

Because issues of race figure strongly in three of this season’s offerings, Ms. Zambello assembled a diverse company. Of the 39 performers in the young artist program this summer, 19 are minorities, Ms. Zambello said.

There are moments when the contemporary imagery is stunning and poignant. In the libretto the second scene takes place within a temple where the Egyptians pray to their gods for success in fighting the Ethiopians. Here the Egyptian soldiers, with rifles slung over their arms, take out Muslim prayer mats and beautifully sing Verdi’s chanted choruses in hushed, reverential tones, sensitively conducted by Nader Abbassi (an Egyptian musician who has led the Cairo Opera). The clash of weapons and prayers gets to the maddening issues that still unfold in that war-torn region.

But in the last act, when Radames is waterboarded, the production goes awry. The image is shocking and pertinent. But the priests who grill Radames are not trying to uncover more information, just giving him a chance to defend himself. In the libretto Radames is punished by being sealed alive in a tomb, where, in the final moments of the opera, he discovers Aida hidden: she has chosen to join him in death.

There is not an obvious contemporary equivalent. Ms. Zambello has Radames strapped to a table and given lethal injections. Aida sneaks into the chamber and injects herself. This solution, if not ruinous, is not quite right.

With its 900-seat theater, Glimmerglass has been a place for young artists to take on major roles that would require big, mature voices in a full-size house. The soprano Michelle Johnson mostly fared well as Aida. A lovely, vivid actress with a rich, penetrating voice, she threw herself into this touchstone role, though there were moments when her singing sounded strained.

At least in the early scenes, the tenor Noah Stewart, who has a handsome physique and charisma, brought youthful energy and a bright, ringing sound to Radames. But his voice started giving out halfway through, and it was hard not to worry that this assignment would take a toll.

The mezzo-soprano Daveda Karanas held nothing back in her portrayal of Amneris, an Egyptian princess who loves Radames and discovers that Aida is her rival. But Ms. Karanas’s earthy voice

seemed undersized for the part. The singing of these young principals contrasted with the performance by the towering bass-baritone [Eric Owens](#), singing his first Amonasro, the Ethiopian king and Aida's father.



Karli Cadel/Glimmerglass Festival

The bass-baritone Eric Owens, standing, as Stephen Kumalo, and Caleb McLaughlin as his young nephew in Kurt Weill's "Lost in the Stars."

[Mr. Owens](#), the artist in residence at Glimmerglass this season, was also magnificent in "Lost in the Stars" on Friday night, a co-production with Cape Town Opera from South Africa. With a book and lyrics by Maxwell Anderson, "Lost in the Stars," which opened on Broadway in 1949, would seem to be a second summer musical this Glimmerglass season.

But with the lush, urgent conducting of John DeMain and the full-voiced singing of a winning cast, the production, directed by Tazewell Thompson in a dark, affecting and fluid staging, draws out the operatic resonances of Weill's score. Mr. Owens triumphed in the lead role of Stephen Kumalo, the black priest striving to serve his rural congregation as Absalom, his own son (here Makudupanyane Senaoana, an appealing young South African tenor), falls in with thieves in Johannesburg. Mr. Owens's complete identification with Kumalo comes through in every moment of his searing portrayal.

Mr. Owens's delivery of the spoken lines, touched with a South African accent, was nuanced and powerful. It was unbearably moving to see Mr. Owens's husky body slump under Kumalo's crushing weight of despair as the son, having pleaded guilty to a charge of murdering a tolerant young white man in a burglary gone wrong, faces execution.

"The Music Man" has long divided audiences into camps who either find its tuneful score an irresistible paean to small-town life or squirm as the piece invites us to laugh at the gossiping, small-minded citizens of River City. Count me with the squirmers. Still, on Saturday afternoon,

this production, directed and choreographed by Marcia Milgrom Dodge and conducted by Mr. DeMain, was lively and colorful. And it was a pleasure to hear a musical performed without the amplification long common on Broadway.

The baritone (and Cooperstown native) [Dwayne Croft](#) was a charmer as Professor Harold Hill. The soprano [Elizabeth Futral](#), fresh from her gripping performance of Kaija Saariaho's intense monodrama "Émilie" at the Lincoln Center Festival, brought a soaring voice to Hill's love interest, Marian Paroo, the insightful yet shy town librarian.

Lully's "Armide" is a co-production with [Opera Atelier](#), the Toronto company that has specialized in Baroque operas involving major elements of dance, which are staged with sensitivity to Baroque styles but with new twists. This production, directed by Marshall Pynkoski and conducted by David Fallis, has 16 dancers from Opera Atelier, and the dancing on Sunday afternoon was splendid. During choral scenes the dancers played characters onstage, while a chorus sang from a darkened place in a side balcony.

Peggy Kriha Dye, a soprano, sang the formidable title role with alluring sound and urgency, though her voice is not large, and it tired noticeably. But Colin Ainsworth, as the Christian knight Renaud, seems to have been cast more for appearance than for his voice. Handsome, trim and as agile on his feet as the dancers, Mr. Ainsworth looked terrific. But with his slim tenor voice, he struggled to sing the role.

When the lights went up, and the chorus took a bow from the balcony, it was wonderful to see all the young Glimmerglass artists who had taken part in the powerful productions of "Aida" and "Lost in the Stars."

*The Glimmerglass Festival 2012 runs through Aug. 25 at the Alice Busch Opera Theater, Cooperstown, N.Y.; (607) 547-2255, [glimmerglassopera.org](http://glimmerglassopera.org).*