
Opera Warhorses

An appreciation and analysis of the 'Standard Repertory' of opera

Role Debuts All Around in Intimate “Aida” – Glimmerglass Festival, July 23, 2012

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The premiere of Verdi’s “Aida” took place in a Cairo opera house which was approximately the same size of the Glimmerglass Festival’s Alice Busch Theater. That being so, the Festival’s general and artistic director Francesca Zambello could see no reason why “Aida”, which most opera-goers associate with large scale productions, could not be done effectively in small venues.

Since I personally have argued that “Aida” is a work that contains actual conversations between the principal characters, who listen and respond to each other (see my extended comments at [**Team Verdi: San Diego Opera’s Praiseworthy “Aida” – April 23, 2008**](#)), I came in concurrence with her idea that “Aida” is, despite the opportunities for razzle-dazzle theatrics in the Triumphal Scene, an intimate work. And, since I’ve argued that a small theater, with the right voices and an inventive choreographer, could actually perform Ponchielli’s “La Gioconda”, one of the ultimate Italian grand operas, as well as “Aida”, the Glimmerglass Festival seems as good a place as any to perform Verdi’s masterpiece, the way that Francesca Zambello wishes to see it done.

[*Below: the Triumphal Scene; edited image, based on a William M. Brown photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Opera Festival.*]



The production does include some Zambello razzle-dazzle of its own, and, I suspect, invites the scolding of purists (I’ve not read any other reviews) for such familiar Zambello devices as time-shifting and introducing current social policy debates into contexts not considered by composer and librettist.

I'm sure some will indict her as well for a couple of surgical incisions that snipped three minutes from an opera that no one else ever cuts. But these cuts, which will be discussed later, are in the ceremonial sections of the score. Every word sung by every principal is not only sung, but sung well.

The production was the opportunity for role debuts for every member of the cast.

Noah Stewart's Radames

Of the principal artists, the person farthest along his career path is tenor Noah Stewart.

[Below: Tenor Noah Stewart as Radames; edited image, based on a Karli Cadel photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Opera Festival.]



I had been impressed by his work in his mid-20s while an Adler Fellow at the San Francisco Opera. (See **The Remaking of San Francisco Opera, Part I: Glass' "Appomattox" – October 14, 2007** for a report of his creation of a character role in Philip Glass' impressive documentary opera.)

His San Francisco assignments also included his appearance as Malcolm in Verdi's "Macbeth" (**Hampson Transcends Quirky "Macbeth" in S. F. – November 18, 2007**). I noted at the time that this relatively small role was one of the earliest major assignments for Jess Thomas 50 years prior, who was to go on to be one of the 20th century's greatest American *heldentenors*.

There was obviously a prediction in the Jess Thomas observation. Stewart is debuting as Radames in his early

30s – one of the heavier tenor assignments in the Italian repertory – with a voice that seems larger than the opera house in which he is singing.

Yet his voice retains its lyrical quality, and he is good actor, capable of performing in highly physical stagings. He has recently added Manrico in Verdi’s “Il Trovatore” to his repertory and will be singing Don Jose in Bizet’s “Carmen” as well.

While, of course, not wishing to see his repertory expanding into areas earlier than his voice is ready for them, one cannot resist thinking of his performing the *jugendlicher* Wagnerian tenor roles, such as the title role in “Lohengrin” and Siegmund in “Die Walkuere”, before too many years pass.

Daveda Karanas’ Amneris

One of the role debut artists who already has Wagnerian experience is Daveda Karenas, like Stewart, a former San Francisco Opera Adler fellow, who has performed the Waltraute roles in both “Die Walkuere” and “Goetterdaemmerung” with great distinction. She proved an admirable Amneris, with a large voice, secure throughout its range. She also acted well.

[*Below: Daveda Karanas as Amneris; edited image, based on a Karli Cader photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Opera Festival.*]



Michelle Johnson's Aida

Because I was attending the fourth performance of this production, each of the cast members had had the experience of three previous performances of the opera, except for Michelle Johnson, who, under doctor's orders, had sat out the early performances, with Adina Aaron substituting for her.

Therefore, the performance I attended was Johnson's actual role debut. The soprano, trained at Philadelphia's prestigious Academy of Vocal Arts, displayed a voice ready for this demanding role. Her voice was rich in dramatic intensity, yet capable of floating the soft, high phrases that characterize this conflicted character's introspective moments.

[Below: *Aida* (Michelle Johnson, left) stands with her father, Amonasro (Eric Owens, center) who has been captured by the Egyptian army; edited image, based on a Karli Cader photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Festival Orchestra.]



Eric Owens' Amonasro and Young Artists Cast Members

Eric Owens takes on a baritone role, which lies higher than most of the roles with which he is associated, yet proved to be a strong Verdi singer, especially effective in his duets with Johnson's Aida.

Stewart, Karanas, Johnson and Owens, even in role debuts, are obvious strong Verdian singers. However, what is worthy of note in this production is the strength of the remaining roles, the largest of which are Ramfis (Joseph Barron) and the King of Egypt (Phillip Gay).

Both Barron and Gay are members of the Glimmerglass Festival Young Artists' program, as are the singers of the two small roles (Clay Hilley as the Messenger and Lenora Green as the High Priestess.)

With such an excellent cast at every level at this festival alone, the often expressed doubts that the world will have enough good Verdi singers in future years seems to me a misplaced concern.

[Below: Phillip Gay is the King of Egypt; edited image, based on a Karli Cader photograph, courtesy of the Glimmerglass Opera Festival.]



Notes on the Production

Francesca Zambello's theatrical style yields many insights, often quite unexpected, into the familiar operas of the operatic repertory. We know when she time-shifts, we are likely to get her views on mankind's current condition, almost certainly with a hint at what she believes can be done better.

"Aida" is presented as a unit set, and swift and always clever scene changes move us in and out of the structures the men and women of this story inhabit. Radames is a streetwise warrior, all *machismo* and hormones, obviously used *tomano a mano* combat.

No sooner has the prelude finished that we have a bomb-blast that scatters those Egyptians who are Radames' fellow urban guerillas. If our thoughts turn to what is happening on the streets of Syria this Summer of 2012, I suspect we are on a track that Zambello intended.

[Below: Radames (Noah Stewart, front, holding assault rifle); edited image, based on a photograph, courtesy of Glimmerglass Festival Opera.]



In previous reviews I have often made the point that when we attend performances of “Aida”, or of Saint-Saens’ “Samson et Dalila” or Verdi’s “Nabucco” that are set in the time periods intended by those composers and their librettists, the forces that the good guys are fighting are extinct ancient Nubian, Assyrian or Gazan religions – none that are represented in the Middle East of today.

But when the Egyptians pray at their temple, in Zambello’s time-shifted Egypt, all the men bring in prayer mats and ritualistically submit themselves to calls for prayer (joined by their King) in the scene in which Radames is chosen commander. It is possible to associate this activity with a modern religion well represented in its variant forms in the contemporary Middle East.

But in a Zambello production, whoever is in power is responsible for the consequences of the abuse of that power. In the triumphal scene the Egyptians carry the works of art they have plundered from the Nubians.

But Zambello’s greatest indictment of those in power is the system of capital punishment that ensnares Radames, who has sneaked out of his wedding ceremony to Amneris to sit in a Jeep with Aida looking over the maps of the mountain passes that the Egyptian army will use. Of course, he is guilty of revealing military secrets, an act of treason, and that is a capital crime.

In a Zambello production, we are confronted with the challenge to think about the moral issues raised by the situations that the operatic plots of the standard repertory. Radames inadvertently reveals state secrets. He has admitted to treason, and refuses further communication. The priests that govern that society want to go beyond a simple admission of guilt.

Since it appears obvious that the general of their forces is in a conspiracy with their enemy's leader and family members, the forces of the state feel they are required to use torture (here repeatedly flooding Radames' face with water) to determine the extent of their enemies' capacity for harming the state.

Here Zambello has departed from Verdi, but who knows of what he would have approved and what not. He meant for his operas to have dramatic significance, and that suggests that the audiences should reflect on the drama they are seeing, as *well* as the beautiful voices.

The opera ends in what is surely the most famous example of state-imposed capital punishment in all of opera. Burial alive in a tomb is what Verdi prescribes, but Zambello introduces the issues surrounding the modern practice of lethal injection.

[*Below: the head priest Ramfis (Joseph Barron) uses torture in his questioning of Radames (Noah Stewart, edited image, based on a Kali Cadel photograph, courtesy of Glimmerglass Opera Festival.*]



Final thoughts on this production of “Aida”

For one even to comment on whether entombment of a living person to die without food or water is more or less humane than lethal injection, I suspect, makes Zambello's point. “Aida”, as she phrases it, is “not about pyramids and elephants”. Even if Verdi does not really address torture in the Judgment Scene, the opera that Verdi wrote *does* raise fundamental concerns about government policies about capital punishment.

My preference is always to see uncut productions, but, in the context of this staging, one sees why Zambello has snipped a few moments out of the score. If the Temple Scene in which Radames is invested by Ramfis (presentation of an assault rifle seems to meet the symbolic purposes in this realm) is cast as a Muslim prayer ceremony, then the staging of dancing priestesses would create conceptual dissonance in her dramatic vision.

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(Another snip is the musical phrase consisting of about a dozen notes in the Triumphal Scene that we associate with the entrance of the priests, apparently because her staging did not require priests to move at that moment. Since three nights later at another opera company, I was observing a performance of Verdi's "La Traviata" – every staging of which is an adventure into which traditional cuts of previous centuries are observed and which opened – the Glimmerglass "Aida" cuts, which I suspect many in the audience were not even aware, did nothing to harm the overall piece.)

I like traditional productions and I also like non-traditional productions that enhance one's insights into the score. With a standard repertory opera of which a large percentage of the audience is familiar, an intelligently conceived update can be a rewarding experience.

This is not a production that would work as the core "Aida" production in the repertory of a major international opera house, but, in a festival setting, it's a wonderful, thought-provoking exploration of the darker sides of Verdi's masterpiece. And, for those who are just there for the singing, it's a beautifully sung, Festival feast for the ears.

The conductor was the Egyptian Nader Abbassi. Lee Savage created the sets, fashion designer Bibhu Mohapatra the costumes.

I recommend these performances and this "Aida" production unreservedly.