

A fine “Aida” cast gets water-boarded by clumsy staging at Glimmerglass

By Charles T. Downey

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Michelle Johnson and Noah Stewart star in Verdi's "Aida" at Glimmerglass. Photo: Karli Cadel/Glimmerglass Festival

Nestled on the idyllic shores of New York's picturesque Otsego Lake, between the Adirondack and Catskill Mountains and just north of Cooperstown, is the home of the Glimmerglass Festival. With a relatively brief but distinguished 20-year history, this summer festival came under the artistic direction of the American opera director Francesca Zambello in 2010. She opened her second season, quite ambitiously, with Verdi's *Aida*, the grandest of grand operas. For all of the pageantry with which it has been memorably staged over the years, *Aida* can actually work in a small-scale production, without all of the elephantine hoopla, provided it has excellent singers in the four lead roles. On that front, this production, heard Friday night, certainly delivers, bringing together two rising African-American singers with a more established one — bass-baritone Eric Owens, who serves as the season's Artist in Residence. New York-born tenor Noah Stewart, whose good looks and rags-to-riches story have made him PR gold, has the makings of a fine Radamès, with ringing high notes, including a dulcet B-flat at the end of *Celeste Aida*, if with some control issues in those heights. The voice is beautiful in tone, which can be heard in abundance on his embarrassingly corny crossover album (“Noah”) released by Decca this month, although some more finished Italian diction and less obvious acting is in order.

Soprano Michelle Johnson, who hails from Texas, won the Grand Prize at the Met Council Auditions last year, and possesses almost the complete vocal arsenal needed for the title role. Her chest voice was particularly effective, giving powerful emotional intensity to her sound. The top had gusto when it needed it, with only her high pianissimos lacking some luster, with the invocations of *Numi, pietà*, for example, not as resplendent as they could be. Johnson was reportedly put on vocal rest at the start of the run, replaced by Adina Aaron for the first three performances, but she is now back in the title role, with some traces of either fatigue or discomfort.

The prize for extraordinary volume went to mezzo-soprano Daveda Karanas, another Met Council winner, with a searing top that tended slightly toward shrillness, but in a way that was exciting and quite appropriate for the role. Eric Owens brought gravity and dignity to the role of Amonasro, Aida's imprisoned father, with blazing strength on the high notes, even after having sung a concert of music by Billy Eckstine earlier in the afternoon.

What a shame, then, that Zambello's staging made such a hash of the story. She has updated the action from the time of the pharaohs in Egypt to an unspecified Muslim country in the recent past. The intention of such updating is to make the story more relevant to a modern viewer, but it was impossible to place the staging in any context that made sense in the modern world. Muslims worshiping Ptah and other gods, led by a woman muezzin? The single set, designed by Lee Savage, seemed to evoke a bombed-out palace in Iraq or Afghanistan, but Bibhu Mohapatra's costumes featured neither hijab nor burqa for the women. The primary intention of this clumsy setting was for the director to transform the trial scene into a water-boarding session for Radamès. Oddly, in the subsequent tomb scene, he and Aida die from lethal injections, which, as everyone knows, is the form of execution favored by Muslim dictators.

In fact, the only thing Egyptian about this Aida was the conductor, Nader Abbassi, principal conductor of the Cairo Opera Orchestra. With impeccably precise gestures, he navigated pliable tempi for the singers, erring only on the side of too much sound at times. The same enthusiasm made the tutti moments, with all of the soloists and a crackerjack chorus, admirably prepared by David Moody, blasting away at full bore, shake the rafters. The playing in the pit ranged from rather good (the oboe solo in *O patria mia*) to slightly shabby, especially in the strings. Morale in the pit may be low, as renegotiation of the orchestra's contract came down to the wire last month, potentially endangering the season. It does not help that David Angus resigned as music director at Glimmerglass last year, a position that has yet to be filled. In response to a query about how the situation was resolved, a company spokeswoman said "Both parties are currently operating under the current contract, and we continue to negotiate in good faith until an agreement is reached."