

# Energetic Aida at Glimmerglass

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By Jane Dieckmann



As the opening production of its 2012 season the Glimmerglass Festival is mounting Verdi's magnificent "grand" opera *Aida* for the first time. Sunday afternoon's matinee was a rousing presentation, more boisterous than reflective. As can be expected, the musical performance was outstanding, especially on the part of the two singers playing the roles of Aida and her father Amonasro. The opera, in Italian, with English projected titles by Kelley Rourke, is being presented here in a shortened form, the original four acts having been trimmed and divided into two parts.

*Aida* was composed by Verdi not, as was widely believed, to commemorate the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 – among the most important and consequential historical and political events of the late 19th century – but for the new Cairo Opera House, which had been constructed by the khedive of Egypt to show off the importance of the city to the world at this momentous time. Another Verdi opera, *Rigoletto*, was performed at the grand opening. The khedive persevered, however, in his plan to have a new Verdi opera for his new opera house and persuaded the eminent French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette – in charge of the collection at the Louvre, no less – to create a scenario that Verdi liked. After much haggling and some delay, Verdi completed *Aida* in the fall of 1871. The eagerly awaited premiere was postponed as the costumes and sets that had been created in Paris could not be transported to Egypt because of the Franco-Prussian War. The premiere finally took place on December 24, 1871.

The composer had become much interested in things Egyptian. He experimented with musical effects that were supposed to be part of ancient Egyptian style. Instead of basing the opera on a literary text, as was usually done, the original scenario was turned into a French prose libretto, and then into Italian verse by Antonio Ghislanzoni. Verdi planned a lot of the text, and created several scenes himself.

This original story is about both a tragic love triangle and a brutal war. The triangle story involving the captured and enslaved Ethiopian princess Aida and the Egyptian warrior Radamès (in love with each other), plus the Egyptian princess Amneris, whom Aida serves and who also loves Radamès, was very effectively presented in this production. The story of the Ethiopians at war with the Egyptians fared less well.

The festival's artistic and general director Francesca Zambello is also the director of this production, and she has assembled an outstanding cast of singers. They were admirably led by conductor Nader Abbassi, head of the Cairo Opera, who clearly knows and loves this music. He has conducted *Aida* more than 200 times and in many different places. Even more interesting, he is conducting here in a venue almost the same size as his opera house in Cairo. From the very beginning – the opening prelude with its poignant melodies played by the upper strings was magical – he brought out the music's contrasting emotions, and the orchestra sounded superb throughout. Michelle Johnson, scheduled to perform the role of Aida, was unable to sing because of a vocal chord ailment (she will be returning to the production very soon). She could not have had a better replacement than soprano Adina Aaron, whose confidence and understanding of the role were compelling. Her

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tone was strong and clear, her high pianissimos were exquisite, and her portrayal of Aida's anguish and struggles was deeply moving. As the hero Radamès, tenor Noah Stewart sang with ringing tones (alas, the final notes of the famous aria "Celeste Aida" were cut off by enthusiastic audience response) and gave an energetic portrayal. He has a beautiful voice, which sometimes got away from him, but he is clearly an artist to watch. As the princess Amneris, mezzo-soprano Daveda Karanas gave a very convincing performance. She sounded shrill occasionally, but she is lithe and slender, really the best-looking Amneris I have ever seen, and she gave this difficult role considerable variety.

As the high priest Ramfis and as the King, bass-baritones Joseph Barron and Phillip Gay, both Young American Artists, gave these roles the needed pomp and formality. And then there was bass-baritone Eric Owens, who along with Aaron stole the show in the Nile scene. We are so lucky to see someone of his caliber – after all, many critics felt he also stole the show in the Met's most recent production of the Wagner Ring cycle. He has a powerful voice and a powerful presence, and he made a perfect Ethiopian king and domineering father.

A great deal of credit should go to David Moody, who directs the choruses at Glimmerglass. The choral work was beautifully balanced and right on spot, especially the men's choruses. The scene of the men in prayer before the battle was an admirable example of sotto voce ensemble singing—one hardly knew where the sound was coming from.

Director Zambello set this production of Aida in some sort of Middle-Eastern war zone. After the quiet prelude, the curtain went up to a surprising opening, and this concept of violence was extended throughout. The aggressiveness of youthful warriors was convincing, and many weapons were brandished. A modified Egyptian-looking temple wall with pillars, designed by Lee Savage, served as one set, which was quickly and sometimes ingeniously modified for various scenes. The duet between Aida and Radamès in the Nile scene had them climbing on and off a jeep. Costumes, designed by Bibhu Mohapatra, varied widely. The apparel of the soldiers fit the modern war concept, the leaders wore ancient Egyptian-style shields. Amneris appeared in beautiful fabrics, as if dressed for a cocktail party, while Aida wore what looked like a prom dress from the '50s, hardly what you would expect for a slave.

Although this is an opera with mostly intimate scenes, the larger ensembles seemed overly loud and often chaotic. Most troubling with this emphasis on the violence and cruelty of war was the introduction in the trial scene of modern interrogation techniques, which the audience witnessed. While Puccini wrote torture scenes into his operas, we don't ever see them. Verdi did not write such scenes, so why is one mounted here? And as for the close of the opera, one wonders why the death of the two lovers was presented this way. Isn't death by suffocation enough? We all can understand its horrors and the tragic conclusion. Verdi's intention in the end was to convey a message not of human cruelty and war, but rather of hope for peace.

This production will surely bring us to reflect on important social and political issues of our time.

Clearly the singing and acting is on a very high level. Especially remarkable is that all the principals in cast are Americans. If you are looking for a traditional *Aida*, you may well be surprised. If you are looking for excellent singing and acting, as usual you will find it here.

*For more information on performances and tickets, contact [www.glimmerglass.org](http://www.glimmerglass.org).*