

# Cooperstown Home Run

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From left, Brandy Lynn Hawkins, Eric Owens and Makudupanyane Senaonana in 'Lost in the Stars.'

*Cooperstown, N.Y.*

For her second season at the Glimmerglass Festival, just eight miles from the Baseball Hall of Fame, artistic and general director Francesca Zambello has hit a home run. Each of the four productions is a solid success, and each has something special that makes it worth a trip to this distant corner of upstate New York.

The high point is Kurt Weill's "**Lost in the Stars**," which has had a limited performance life since its 1949 Broadway premiere. Based on Alan Paton's anti-apartheid novel "Cry, the Beloved Country," this hybrid of opera and music theater is ideally served by Tazewell Thompson's sensitive, understated production; the splendid Glimmerglass chorus, made up of the company's apprentice artists; and especially the towering, heartfelt performance of Eric Owens, this summer's artist-in-residence. Mr. Owens inhabits the role of Stephen Kumalo, the black South African pastor who undergoes a crisis of faith when he discovers that his son

Absalom has killed a white man in a botched robbery. His huge, lyrical bass-baritone expresses the boundless optimism of "Thousands of Miles" and the raw pain of the title song; his body, hunched in shame before the father of the man his son has killed, is equally eloquent. He also makes Maxwell Anderson's text seem dignified and formal, not stilted.

"Lost in the Stars" resembles an oratorio, and the chorus, with the terrific Sean Panikkar as The Leader, brings weight and pathos to the show's great laments and its theme about how fear keeps the races divided. Glimmerglass recruited a large number of black singers, including several South Africans, to its Young Artist program this year—Brandy Lynn Hawkins, who is touching as Irina, Absalom's pregnant girlfriend, and Amos Nomnabo, sardonic as Stephen's brother, John, stand out in solo roles. Michael Mitchell's simple set suggesting the corrugated metal of South African shanty towns, Mr. Thompson's subtle stage direction and John DeMain's thoughtful conducting let the deep emotion of this piece come through.

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Also unusual is Lully's "**Armide**" (1686). This French baroque opera-ballet, requiring a great deal of dancing, is not a natural fit for opera houses, so Glimmerglass recruited Toronto's Opera Atelier, which specializes in such pieces, to remount a production that traveled to Versailles in 2005. "Armide"—the tale of a Muslim princess who uses sorcery to make the Christian Crusader Renaud fall in love with her, only to fall hopelessly in love herself—is much enlivened by the Atelier dancers, choreographed in quasi-17th-century style by Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg, as spirits and demons working the magic of love and hate. Also terrific are Gerard Gauci's sets in the baroque theatrical style of painted flats and decorated with glorious interpretations of Persian-style painting and calligraphy. Costume designer Dora Rust D'Eye contributed jewel-toned gowns and flame-covered unitards.

The musical execution is less compelling. Peggy Kriha Dye brings a plangent soprano and fierce intensity to Armide, and Meghan Lindsay is pertly seductive as her attendant Sidonie and a Water Nymph, but the male singers fail to capture the rhetorical impulse of their vocal lines. The work of conductor David Fallis is similarly underinflected, so long stretches of the opera, while played with assurance by the Glimmerglass Orchestra, augmented by six baroque continuo players, are rhythmically dull.

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Verdi's "**Aida**" is not typical fare for a small (900 seat) house, but the Glimmerglass production, directed by Ms. Zambello, successfully builds on its theme of conflict between the personal and the political, making the intimate scenes the focus. She updates the action to the modern era and emphasizes the war between the Egyptians and the Ethiopians: Lee Savage's set, a dilapidated colonial building, is the headquarters of the ragtag Egyptian army; modern touches include prayer mats, a jeep, assault weapons, waterboarding, and execution

by lethal injection. Bibhu Mohapatra's costumes suggest the status and nationality of the characters.

Conductor Nader Abbassi keeps things buoyant and energetic with crisp tempi; only occasionally does the massed sound of orchestra and chorus overwhelm the small house. Noah Stewart, a handsome young Radamès (the general who betrays his country for love of the Ethiopian slave Aida and pays the ultimate price), displays a bright, penetrating tenor that sounds pushed at its extremes. Daveda Karanas's big, somewhat strident mezzo is perfect for the spiteful Egyptian princess Amneris, interpreted here as the ultimate Mean Girl. Mr. Owens is emphatic as Aida's father, Amonasro. The only weak link is, alas, Michelle Johnson as Aida: her velvety soprano has lovely legato and good control but no heart, and her acting is nonexistent.

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The Glimmerglass staging of Meredith Willson's "**The Music Man**" is a vast improvement over last year's production of Irving Berlin's "Annie Get Your Gun." Idiomatic, lively direction and choreography by Marcia Milgrom Dodge; Grant Wood-inspired sets by James Noone; costumes, updated from 1912 to 1946 (including a plaid zoot suit), by Leon Wiebers; and zippy conducting by Mr. DeMain create the atmosphere of straight-laced, small-town Iowa brought to ebullient life by a shady traveling salesman.

Casting opera singers as leads in musicals is a treacherous business, however. As the fast-talking Harold Hill, baritone Dwayne Croft is solid, if a bit tight and nervous, lacking the con man's total confidence. As Marian the Librarian, Elizabeth Futral carries off the book scenes with aplomb; her songs are weighted with excessive vibrato. But assorted Young Artists do fine work as the barbershop quartet and gossiping town ladies, and thanks to several music-theater performers in the YA program, the dance sequences are bright and accomplished. And it is a treat to hear this classic score with its many references to vernacular American music played and sung with a full orchestra and no amplification, one more thing that makes this Glimmerglass season special.

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