

Glimmerglass Opera Brings Contemporary Edge to Classic ‘Aida’

By Liz Keill

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Michelle Johnson as Aida and Eric Owens as Amonasro with members of the ensemble in The Glimmerglass Festival production of Aida. Credits: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival

COOPERSTOWN, NY – Under the guidance of Artistic Director Francesca Zambello, Glimmerglass Opera has produced a diverse season, ranging from Jean-Baptiste Lully’s “Armide” to Verdi’s “Aida” and for more recent times, Kurt Weill’s “Lost in the Stars” and Meredith Wilson’s “The Music Man.”

Perhaps the most controversial, certainly in terms of staging, is the 1871 “Aida,” set in contemporary times, with soldiers and rifles, and even waterboarding. But what does it all mean?

Director Zambello may see this choice as a political statement, although there would be no reason for waterboarding Radames, as he has already confessed. Much of the setting is in a bombed out temple, while some costumes reflect a Greek motif and then we have Daveda Karanas as Amneris in a glitzy evening gown. Noah Stewart in the lead has said he sees parallels in the story’s love affair amidst warring factions in Egypt. Michelle Johnson plays Aida with intensity and grace. Eric Owens is her father Amonasro, who convinces her to find out the Egyptian army’s plans from her lover. It’s all a little obscure, but no matter how this opera is staged, you can’t beat Verdi’s music. The chorus, in celebration, swells and builds to a supreme height. The conductor is Nader Abbassi.

“Armide” also deals with culture clashes, in this case the Christian knight Renaud and the Muslim world of Armide. Their sensual relationship is vividly portrayed behind a scrim. Colin Ainsworth is superb as Renaud, with his strong tenor dominating the action. Peggy Kriha Dye is Armide, a beautiful young woman, also delivers a stunning performance. The opera is directed by Marshall Pynkoski and conducted by David Fallis. An intriguing addition to “Armide” is the use of choreography beautifully rendered by Jeannette Ljeunesse Zingg, enhancing Lully’s music through graceful dancing and bold, colorful, costumes.

“Lost in the Stars,” recently done at City Center in New York City, displays the talents of artist in residence Eric Owens. The title song, alone, is lyrical and haunting, combining Weill’s music with Maxwell Anderson’s book and lyrics. The play is based on “Cry, the Beloved Country” by Alan Paton. This is a co-production with Cape Town Opera set in South Africa, Directed by Tazewell Thompson, the plot revolves around a robbery gone wrong and the tension between father and son. Makudupanyan Senoana is the young man who is caught with the ‘wrong’ crowd, panics and shoots a man. Owens as his father, Stephen Kamto, is a preacher who is torn between defending his son and encouraging him to be truthful about his role in the crime. Owens is powerful in both his rich bass-barritone and his searing portrayal of a

man whose world is shattered. Wynn Harmon as James Jarvis, father of the man who is killed, brings great compassion to the role. John DeMain conducts.

Fortunately, all is not dark during this festival season. “The Music Man” fairly jumps for joy as Professor Herald Hill convinces small town residents in Iowa that their children can all become musicians in a marching band. Cooperstown resident Dwayne Croft plays the slick salesman who warns the town folk that there’s “Trouble in River City.” Alghou Croft doesn’t quite convey the slick charm of Robert Preston, so indelibly linked with the role, he brings his own convincing aura to the part. Eventually love wins the day when he meets librarian Mary Paroo, sung with a delightful lilt by Elizabeth Futral. Their longing is especially moving in “Till There Was You.” Bringing down the house is 10-year-old Henry Wager as her brother Winthrop when he sings “Gary, Indiana.” And, of course, “Seventy Six Trombones” is enough to get everyone clapping, stomping and singing along. As artistic director Zambello has said, bringing children to this infectious production is helping to build a future audience. Conductor John DeMain and director Thompson have shifted the scene from 1912 to about 1946, which works equally well.

But operas aren’t the only attraction in the Glimmerglass season. This year, Estelle Parsons and Ruth Bader Ginsburg were both guest speakers. Kim H. Kowalke also appeared, with a wealth of published articles on Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya.

The 2013 season will include Lerner and Lowe’s “Camelot,” in honor of the 50th anniversary of John F. Kennedy’s death. The musical was long associated with his years as President. Also on the agenda are Richard Wagner’s “The Flying Dutchman,” Guiseppe Verdi’s “King for a Day” and “Passions,” featuring both “The Little Match Girl Passion” by David Lang and “Stabat Mater” by Giovannia Battista Pergolesi.

For more information on Glimmerglass Opera, nestled on the shores of Lake Oswego, call 607-547-2255 or visit Glimmerglass.org.