

## MUSIC REVIEW : Updated 'Aida' a triumph at Glimmerglass

BY GERALDINE FREEDMAN For The Daily Gazette

COOPERSTOWN — Glimmerglass Opera opened its season Saturday night with Verdi's "Aida." Although the production hosted a string of debuts that included being the first time the company had ever presented the opera, and the performance debuts of Cairo Opera conductor Nader Abbassi, noted costume designer Bibhu Mohapatra and several singers, the show was a triumph from its opening bars.

It's a huge opera that usually involves the accoutrements of pyramids, elephants and the panoply of ancient Egypt.

Director Francesca Zambello decided to change all that not only by updating the visuals, which included military garb and an army staging office with lap tops, but to develop the love triangle that is at the heart of the drama. None of this distracted from the sometimes sensational singing of the leads or the poignancy of their dilemma.

Most of all, the evening was a huge success for Adina Aaron, the soprano who replaced Michelle Johnson on barely a week's notice to sing the role of Aida. Besides having a massively difficult part to sing with arias that sometimes lasted up to 15 minutes, the role required her to be on stage alone to sing them — a formidable acting challenge. Aaron made the capacity crowd believe her. And the control she had of her voice — agile and big enough to even project over the full orchestra and chorus — was most impressive. How many singers can hit those tippy top notes not only at a soft volume but with such delicate finesse? It was magical, indeed. (Johnson is due back for the July 23 performance.)

As her lover Radames, tenor Noah Stewart's acting prowess sold his arias even if his voice was not always up to the task. He was so sympathetic and so passionately intense in his pure ethics as the country's military leader and in his love for Aida that even if his top notes didn't ring, it seemed OK.

Soprano Daveda Karanas as Amneris, the King's daughter who also loves Radames, had a big voice that was equally agile and was supported by a strong acting ability. But on top when her voice soared, the quality of her tone tended toward harshness. Being able to carry over the full ensemble with an edge to the voice works wonderfully well in the many Wagner roles that she sings, but here that sound was not pleasant.

Bass Eric Owens, this season's artist-in-residence and a reigning Metropolitan Opera presence, lent his star power to the role of King Amonasro. His rolling lines, his majestic solidity and his focused acting intensity all convinced. The male chorus and the many Young Artists, especially bass Phillip Gay as the other king, gave ringing support. The many dancers with choreography by Eric Sean Fogel were entertaining and light.

The sets by Lee Savage gave visual credence to the tale. Robert Wierzel's lighting, which ranged from golden glows to a kind of white spotlight, was focused yet it also dazzled when combined with Mohapatra's interesting costumes.

He incorporated some of the ancient Egyptian motifs to good effect and used a color palette of beiges, rose, a gray/green metallic, black, and white that was unusual. When

these combined, especially at the end of Act I's spectacle that Zambello blocked like an oil painting, the visual was all that one thinks of when one thinks of opera.

Most of all, the orchestra under Abbassi was stalwart with very good brass. Abbassi controlled the pace of the show, which never slackened, and allowed his singers room to maneuver.

Other performances of "Aida" are July 13, 15, 23, 27, Aug. 4, 9, 11, 14, 17, and 25.