

## Aida at Glimmerglass

AUGUST 3, 2012 BY [SUSAN GALBRAITH](#)

The prestigious **Glimmerglass Festival** leads off its 2012 season with an original and stunning production of *Aida*, without one elephant sighted except for a giant be-twigged mother-and-baby topiary on the entrance lawn. Instead, Artistic Director Francesca Zambello has seized on the themes of global conflict and in particular the casualties of war and policies of inequity in this season's line up. Stagings of Verdi, Lully and Kurt Weill all speak in various degrees to today's geo-political situation.

The season also represents a savvy feat in cross-cultural engagement that lends veracity and depth of artistic substance to the productions. For *Aida*, Zambello invited the Egyptian conductor Nader Abbassi to lead the musicians and cast in mining Giuseppe Verdi's opera.

Abbassi's command of this music is unquestionable. The conductor achieves the richest musical dynamics imaginable as he leads the company, shifting fluidly from passion and fireworks in the score to the most delicate of sounds, such as the gossamer murmurings by the full chorus to convey sacred prayer.



Daveda Karanas as Amneris .( Photo: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival)

Zambello directs the work, and while I might split hairs with her assertion that a cast of over forty backed by a 48-piece orchestra still qualifies it as a chamber work, nonetheless, she has used a one-set production to great advantage and focus. Designer Lee Savage has created a playing space that evokes a palace of a once great civilization, now war-bombed and crumbling. (It could have represented one of Saddam Hussein's palaces.) Gone is the bloated spectacle that one associates with this opera of operas. Instead, this production focuses on the human cost of war, and although only approximately five minutes of the score have been cut (in what Zambello refers to as a "face lift" of the opera), the show feels lean and edgy, right from the start.

Act 1 opens after the overture has introduced us to the sweet and plaintive *Aida* theme. It plays back and forth with the stirring triumphal march as a way of foreshadowing the tension between the powerless (Ethiopia) and the conquerors (Egypt.)

A burst of gunfire ensues, and men in vestiges of something we recognize as desert fatigues are blasted across the stage as if spit out of some transport vehicle. These men seemed to represent both military crack down forces of the Arab Spring and US army personnel in Afghanistan. The grunts sit down in their congested holding quarters, lit eerily by makeshift electric lights, and pull out their laptops. As they continue to sit and numb themselves in the oppressive period of waiting that is part of war, the transposition in time is completed. Thus, we are invited to accept the dramatic premise of the production with all its painful resonances.

Images pile up on top of each other with plenty of contemporary media references. Yet thankfully, the singers are allowed to carry the drama without the assault of multi-media footage.

And what a cast! Noah Stewart as the Egyptian military hero Radamès is vocally and physically stunning in the role. Daveda Karanas tackles the role of the Egyptian princess besotted with the virile Radamès and deploys a ferocious, occasionally even abrasive sound while physically holding nothing back. Both share a stylistic way of pushing sound out into the auditorium then extending music-and-emotion with gestures that aggressively carve out the air in front of them.

Karanas gets the unusual pleasure for a mezzo-soprano of “getting the tenor” by sexually mounting Radamès. In the last act, we are transported to a torture chamber where Radamès undergoes waterboarding and then, strapped to a gurney and wheeled downstage, endures further inhumane horrors “in our face.” These performers and director Zambello take us to a most uncomfortable and dangerous place that only live performance can but opera seldom does.



Michelle Johnson as Aida and Noah Stewart as Radamès (Photo: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival)

The fabulous Eric Owens sings Amonasro, King of Ethiopia and, as his daughter, Michelle Johnson steps into the role of the captured slave Aida. This was the first time I have been introduced to the elegant and fluid sound of Michelle Johnson, who won the Grand Prize of the Metropolitan National Council Auditions. Both singers are able to convey the fear of being a captured people alongside a sense of innate cultural dignity.

As in last season, I was also impressed with the singing of the other roles taken by members of Glimmerglass’ Young Artist program. Joseph Barron and Lenora Green as the High Priest and High Priestess used their voices in exceptionally distinctive ways in their roles. Phillip Gay as the Egyptian king pulled off the elegant look a young pharaoh with a voice to match. The chorus kept a richly blended sound throughout, and the dancers, choreographed by Eric Sean Fogel, were beautifully integrated, in numbers that included some marvelous use of shadow-dance.

To my mind, there was almost nary a false note in this courageous production. I will voice a quibble about a few of the choices by the much-heralded Costume Designer Bibhu Mohapatra. Known by rich shoppers of stores such as "Needless Mark Up" (Neimann Marcus) for his extravagant evening dresses, Mohapatra provides Princess Amneris with three changes that were runway fabulous, but I became conscious I was watching a fashion show.

When the slave Aida entered in a white strapless evening dress decorated with scarlet trim that perhaps took its cue from Coptic crosses, I felt she drew the wrong kind of attention. While the get up showed off her beautifully generous chest, nonetheless the effect was more Bergdorff than Addis Ababa and more victorious royalty than outcast slave. The power struggle inherent in the play's central love triangle seemed put out of kilter. I would have opted for more simple drapery to evoke a dignified modesty surely more suited to Aida that would stand in contrast to the red-carpeted Egyptian princess.

Nonetheless, this was a most memorable and worthy Aida, sizzling with dramatic and emotional fireworks. The irony of the bombast of militaristic-driven societies was not lost in numbers like "Return Victorious" after which such sentiment was turned on its head as we were shown the less than glorious sides of war and what war-mongering makes men do to other men.