

## Glimmerglass Festival Summer 2012 – *Armide* and The Music Man

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

Composer Jean-Baptiste Lully provides the season with a sharply contrasting piece that tickles at the theme of geo-political and racial conflict without amplifying it directly. Lully, who wrote in the seventeenth century for the French court, created *Armide* to satisfy the tastes of a baroque audience who loved spectacle, magic, and court dance, which was at that time under Louis XIV gelling into the classical form which we know today as ballet.



Jack Rennie as Love with Peggy Kriha Dye as Armide and Curtis Sullivan as Hatred  
(Photo: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival)

The libretto for *Armide* takes as its central plot the conflict between the Christian west and the Muslim world just after the turn of the first millennium at the time of the First Crusade. Director Marshall Pynloski creates heroic stage pictures with comic portraits of dutiful if vainglorious knights, and contrasts this culture with the eastern exoticism of Armide's world, including sorcery and unbridled (feminine) sexual passion.

However, the socio-political backdrop fades as Pynkoski focuses on the individual love and power struggle of Armide (Peggy Kriha Dye) and Renaud (Colin Ainsworth.) Both are beautiful performers, further matched also erotically with androgynous "cross over" looks, and gifted in the rarified vocal style of baroque opera. They also are gifted with the talent to breathe life and naturalism into the heavily formal, gestural idiom. The tension between passion and formality creates charged theatrical excitement.

Members of Canada's [Opera Atelier](#) have joined forces with Glimmerglass to co-produce this work. Under the choreographic direction of Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg, members of the Atelier Ballet are at their best when they brilliantly recreate the classical dance style with their tight Cecchetti footwork, noble carriage, and elegant port de bras. Two Canadians, Mireille Asselin and Meghan Lindsay, have joined Glimmerglass Young Artists program for the summer, and both displayed shimmering voices and the exquisite deportment of baroque opera that hopefully will continue to expand the Glimmerglass movement palate.

## The Music Man

In the rather spectacular and diverse line up of Glimmerglass 2012 season examining music-theatre as a “vehicle for social awareness and change,” the choice of *The Music Man* continues to mystify. Perhaps it shouldn’t for, as any rep theatre or opera company will tell you, guaranteeing “butts in seats” has to play a part in a season’s equation for a company’s solvency, and be a draw for the uninitiated.

Having just seen a rather tame and even somewhat lame production at Arena Stage this past season, I will admit the show’s heavy sentiment and thinly veiled American jingoism is not to my personal taste, however I was curious to see how Glimmerglass might refit the work to amplify the season’s theme.



Elizabeth Futral as Marian Paroo  
(Photo: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival)

From a production standard, there were several aspects to recommend the show. The orchestra, under the baton of John DeMain, got the show off to a spritely start. Right from the whistle-and-snare-drum get-go, DeMain maintained the marching band feel-goodness of Americana. The salesmen pulled off the opening number, my favorite, with tight rhythmic accuracy in what might be considered the first “rap.” The Barbershop Quartet delivered their harmonies well throughout.

I even was charmed by the first act’s look, which included a Grant Wood inspired backdrop and painted Main Street facades by set designer James Noone. Costumes by Leon Wiebers included a nod to Cooperstown (according to my favorite T-shirt “a drinking town with a baseball problem”), planting in the chorus a young little leaguer amidst the hatted and mostly gloved women of small town America in the 1940’s.

Dwayne Croft, who originally hails from Cooperstown, uses his considerable vocal heft and international reputation to bring star power to the role of Professor Harold Hill. In watching Cindy Gold, who plays Widow Paroo, you can clearly see a singer-actress who knows how to create a full musical-theatrical life on stage with blarney and unabashed bluff. Wynn Harmon is delightful as Charlie Cowell, the fast talking, stuff-that-metaphor “You’re the raspberry in my wisdom tooth” salesman.

Josh Walden’s choreography was effective and he himself delightful to behold on stage. He led an ensemble of able, fresh dancers that included the standout Angela Beasom, who also turned heads with her lithe body and expressive line in *Aida*. Elizabeth Futral is as adept an actress as she is an opera singer, a woman to my mind of enormous artistry and both physical and vocal beauty. She has moments in this production where, as Marian the Librarian, her radiance shines through. Yet, at least in the performance I saw, she seemed a near casualty in this production with a distinct disconnect between the twang of her character’s speaking choice and her usually bell-like singing going reedy or getting swallowed.



Josh Walden as Marcellus Washburn and Dwayne Croft as Harold Hill  
(Photo: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival)

But none of this disturbed me so much as my bewilderment at some of the choices made by director Marcia Milgrom Dodge. Given the seasonal theme at Glimmerglass, why did Dodge choose to set the play in the 1940's? And, by setting the town up with more women than men and the quartet being introduced in World War II uniforms, why didn't she use this period to examine freshly the transition of values regarding race and social mores that war forced on American society?

Cast as Mayor Shin's daughter's boyfriend, Tommy Djilas might very well have gotten a horrified rise out of the Mayor, so why keep it at sitcom level? Why not let lines like the Mayor's response to his daughter going out with him, "I'll have him horsewhipped!", really carry some horrific racist punch? And what if the barbershop quartet, dressed in military uniforms, had very pointedly used its ensemble made up of different races to depict the false racial divides of men who never would talk on the street but to argue and condemn each other but — through music and the military (both reflecting some historical accuracy) — have learned to deal with each other and set the landscape for a post-war America? In both instances, Professor Hill's open-minded interactions might have given this character another layer of complexity. And if race and ethnicity were part of what the audience was expected to be really super sensitive to in 2012 at Glimmerglass, why blur the distinctions by blind casting the mayor's wife?

The show might have knocked out of the park our most comfortable and saccharine-rich, feel-good understanding of this musical. Instead, Dodge dodged the issue and succumbed to serving the show up as a "valentine to America's past." Would she'd borrowed some of the Zambello grit and relevancy.

Above and beyond this season, Francesca Zambello, at the helm of Glimmerglass, has chosen a path for this company to invigorate opera by integrating several different genres of musical theatre in the repertoire. It's a noble mission and one I applaud for the future of the form. Admittedly, it adds several challenges to the company and strains the resources of orchestra and singer-actors. But if 2012 is an indication of how well the Zambello stamp can shift the direction of opera and cross-fertilize, she is leading the charge into some very exciting times.

Generally, the company has been very successful in its programming. This includes Zambello's strategic invitations to star opera singers, offering them opportunities to play in cross-over mountings of mainstream American musicals. Last year, Deborah Voigt, with that rare, Wagnerian-sized vocal instrument, packed guns and houses in *Annie Oakley*, and this summer Dwayne Croft marches with his hometown band in *The Music Man*.

### **Concluding thoughts on the Glimmerglass season**

This current season is in many ways both daring and enthusiastically received. The shows should be drawing huge crowds of young, multi-cultural "citizens for art." The stories and the sure direction have an immediacy that both the avant garde and  
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uninitiated opera audiences would be excited to cheer. How to overcome the false perception that opera is only for its white haired patrons is a challenge that Zambello and crew (and the opera world in general!) still struggle to surmount in the twenty-fifth anniversary of this most distinguished music-theatre complex.

As Zambello continues her mission to cross-train artists to appreciate and perform successfully in the different demands of opera, musicals and cabaret, it is exciting to see her design program after auxiliary program that reaches out to bring in the audiences to understand better both the needs and the opportunities inherent in the cross-pollination of music-theatre genres to insure a robust music-theatre century.

If every singer in every role is not one hundred per cent successful, then at least there is here a lab of enormous worth where risks are taken. Glimmerglass is that enviable place where top artists are invited to try the untried and young artists are stretched to develop new capacities. Both are supported yet challenged in that place between getting lost and reaching for the stars. What could be a better sign that great things can happen in the world of music-theatre in the 21st century?

The Glimmerglass Festival continues through August 25th. Make your way to the lovely Lake Otsego and the charming town of [Cooperstown, New York](#). Fill your day with shows and pre- and post- show programs. Be sure to leave time to make a pilgrimage to [Ommegang Brewery](#) for post-theatre beer tasting.