

ARIAS CARRY

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By James MacKillop

Of all the upstate companies covered by the *Syracuse New Times*, only the Glimmerglass Festival in Cooperstown is a destination. Audiences are national and international as well as local. Producing opera is an insanely labor-intensive operation, and so the cognoscenti understand that you have to travel if you want to hear a certain combination of voices.

Some productions this summer are familiar and highly accessible. One of the big draws is Meredith Willson's affectionate tribute to World War I-era small-town Iowa, *The Music Man* (with performances on Sunday, Aug. 19, and Tuesday, Aug. 21, 1:30 p.m., and Friday, Aug. 24, 7:30 p.m.), which takes standards like "Till There Was You" to new heights. Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* (performances on Friday, Aug. 17, 7:30 p.m., and Saturday, Aug. 25, 8 p.m.) might be one of 25 most popular operas, but Glimmerglass' modern-dress restaging places the Egyptian drama in the context of the Arab Spring.

Against these alluring choices, the *Syracuse New Times* opted for two rarities: Jean-Baptiste Lully's *Armide*, a dance opera not fully staged for centuries, and Kurt Weill's wrenching adaptation of Alan Paton's South African novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*, known as *Lost in the Stars*.

For political and artistic convictions, Kurt Weill (1900-1950) was always bridging the popular and fine arts. His *Threepenny Opera* (1928) might feature "Mack the Knife," but it's still an opera. After fleeing the Nazis of his native Germany, Weill turned himself into an admired American pop composer, producing such hits as "September Song" with playwright-lyricist Maxwell Anderson. The last of his several collaborations with Anderson is *Lost in the Stars* (with an evening performance on Thursday, Aug. 16, 7:30 p.m., and 1:30 p.m. matinees on Saturday, Aug. 18, Monday, Aug. 20, and Saturday, Aug. 25), which opened on Broadway in 1949, running for 281 performances.



Out of South Africa: Chrystal E. Williams with ensemble member Thesele Kemane in the Glimmerglass Festival production of *Lost in the Stars*.
KARLI CADEL PHOTOS

Despite having a heady lead role for a mighty bass-baritone, *Lost in the Stars* has tended to fall between two stools: too formal for Tin Pan Alley, and too pop for the Metropolitan. Director Tazewell Thompson, a former head of Syracuse Stage who has won worldwide acclaim for stagings of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, claims the lead roles for the operatic repertory with pop elements and spoken words among supporting players.

Although an indictment of South African apartheid, *Cry, the Beloved Country* and *Lost in the Stars* (deeply faithful to the book) tell a tragic story that transcends crude propaganda. An unsophisticated rural Anglican priest in the back country, Rev. Stephen Kumalo (Eric Owens), learns that his son Absalom (Makudupanyane Senaoana) has fallen upon bad times. The boy had gone to Johannesburg to work in the mines, traveled with the wrong crowd, and committed murder during an attempted robbery. The victim was the enlightened son of a stiff-necked racist, James Jarvis (Wynn Harmon). Details come from the priest's brother John Kumalo (Amos Nomnabo), a sharper who has adapted to the ways of the city. The impending trial, at which Absalom is likely to be found guilty, sends Rev. Stephen to a crisis of faith, the title aria, "Lost in the Stars," also the most significant departure from the book.

Composer Weill and director Thompson put aside any *National Geographic* visions of South Africa. Michael Mitchell's sets of faux corrugated steel present an industrial society in which traditional people are trying and often failing to adjust. There are no American spirituals and no tom-toms. The early numbers, "The Hills of Ixpo," sung by the narrator-leader (magnificent tenor Sean Panikkar), and "Thousands of Miles," Owens' first solo, draw from Zulu models, a crooning style revived more recently by Paul Simon. Weill also perceived that black workers had embraced American jazz and thus inserts a naughty nightclub song with suggestive lyrics, "Who Will Buy My Juicy Rutabaga?" The tune provides a scorching solo from the bar girl known as Linda (Chrystal E. Williams). The jazzy dance numbers in the first act are inventively choreographed by Anthony Salatino of the Syracuse University Drama Department.

Weill wrote the role of Stephen Kumalo for Todd Duncan, the same bass-baritone who was the title character in the original *Porgy and Bess*. As moving as *Lost in the Stars* is, with an ending on the theme of reconciliation that echoes the last book of Homer's *Iliad*, most audiences will take home Weill's vibrant score, especially Owens' powerhouse solos, such as the plaintive "O Tixo, Tixo, Help Me!," the Leader-narrator's heartfelt delivery of the title number, "Cry, the Beloved Country," and the laments of Absalom's fiancée Irina (golden-hued mezzo Brandy Lynn Hawkins). Weill and Anderson slotted in a smashing scene-stealer for the Reverend's nephew Alex (Caleb McLaughlin, late of *The Lion King*), with "Big Mole," providing comic relief just before the climax.

On the surface, at least the only thing Jean-Baptiste Lully's 1686 masterpiece *Armide* (with performances on Saturday, Aug. 18, 8 p.m., and Thursday, Aug. 23, 7:30 p.m.) has in common with *Lost in the Stars* is the prominence given to dance. In the first decades of opera, after Claudio Monteverdi, there were two schools: the Italian, which triumphed, and the French, which included dancing male and female choruses. Although born Italian (Giovanni Battista Lulli), Lully championed the French, having totally immersed himself in his adopted country and having become a favorite of none other than King Louis XIV at Versailles.



Crusades confidential: From left, Meghan Lindsay, Peggy Kriha Dye and Mireille Asselin in the Glimmerglass/Opera Atelier production of Armide.

Lully's music remains esteemed, but early French opera has not been performed because the notation for the dances of that period has been lost. Indeed, if not for the painstaking effort of Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg of Toronto's Opera Atelier, who reconstructed the choreography from period illustrations and narrative accounts, we wouldn't be seeing *Armide* now. This production has appeared in only three venues: Toronto, Versailles and Glimmerglass.

Philippe Quinault's libretto draws on the late Renaissance bestseller, Torquato Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* (1581), a mixture of fantasy and reality set during the Crusades, in which virtuous Christians contend with exotic, unknowable Saracens or Muslims. The Armide (soprano Peggy Kriha Dye) of the title is a Saracen magician who has ensnared Christian knight Renaud (tenor Colin Ainsworth) with her magic spells. Just as she is about to stab the reviled invader, she finds herself falling in love with him and so casts a spell that he might worship her. Unhappy that Renaud's love for her is forced, Armide calls on the personification of Hatred (baritone Curtis Sullivan) to restore her appropriate disgust for the Christian, but it doesn't work; she is condemned to eternal love. Before she can reach him, Renaud is released from Armide's spells by two of his comrades, and so she is left alone, despairing and unfulfilled.

Despite the plot elements that may sound like fairy-tale hocus-pocus to us, Armide's story clearly represents an analog to what people experienced in life when many marriages were arranged, and genuine emotions were stifled by the obligations of custom and status.

Additionally, the portrayal of the emotional frustrations of a powerful, exotic woman, as well as the knight in bondage, excited the audience's imagination. That's why the story of Armide and Renaud, also known by their Italian names Armida and Rinaldo, became the subject of at least 14 operas over the centuries, by such greats as Handel, Gluck, Haydn, Rossini and Dvorak, right down to 2005.

Two aspects of the production continually surprise. First are the dances, by members of Toronto's Atelier Ballet, that anticipate but are still quite different from what we're used to in the 19th century, *Coppelia* and after. As is fitting with scenes of military conflict, the Crusades, we see assertive men first and the women second. Additionally, Gerard Gauci's quasi-Byzantine sets and Dora Rust D'Eye's costumes are far removed from images of the Islamic world so familiar to us all today. Instead, Armide and her lovely confidantes, Phenice (soprano Mireille Asselin) and Sidonie (soprano Meghan Lindsay), are seen as Western women whose dresses bear unfamiliar patterns of embroidery. Their dresses also come with lower décolletages than Islam would ever allow.

It is expression of emotion in music that draws us to the opera, however, not the most curious of costumes. For that smallish niche of the operatic audience that exults to the rare beauties of baroque singing, *Armide* is a scrumptious treat. Especially to be savored is the moment when Armide acknowledges his love for Renaud. Accompanied only by continuo, Dye's Armide alternates between exulting in Amide's own power and surrendering to overwhelming attraction. Additionally, Sullivan's entrance as the embodiment of Hatred, more than a metaphor, is as dazzling as any seen anywhere this summer.

When you go to Glimmerglass you sit next to people from London, Boston and Albuquerque. Now it's called Glimmerglass Festival rather than opera, but it's still one of upstate's prime cultural assets. And it's still only an hour and 40 minutes from Syracuse.