

There was no room for the elephants

ENRIQUE SACAU

Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* is fiendishly difficult to stage. Directors face many tough choices: to make room (or not) for its Egyptian context in its various architectural and zoomorphic manifestations; to stick (or not) with setting the action in the past (either real or mythological); to focus (or not) on the political dimension of the drama and, if so, how to manage to leave space for the three main characters. It's not any easier to figure out what to do with several musical passages: to dance or not to dance, that is the question.

Complex though it is, directors are expected to take a view and stick with it. Nowadays, their function is to help us understand the opera. This task doesn't entail the search for some hidden "truth" known to the composer and the librettist - in fact, they're increasingly given plenty of leeway to invent and reinvent to the point that when we say "understand", we mean that they are meant to help us grasp their own reading of the piece. They can turn the traditionally "good" character into the baddy, for example, and play with the political situation as they see fit. It didn't use to be like this, but it is a positive development. More and more they are another character in the drama, adding further layers of meaning to make opera more complex and fascinating. They can also choose to do little, but then they ought to be thanked when they do so economically.



In this sense, Francesca Zambello relinquished her duty. At her best, she did nothing. Acts 3 and the second half of act 4 happened as though nobody had directed the show. These are the most intimate moments of the opera and the American director left the characters to their own devices. More could be expected from Zambello, but there was no interference. They sang, mostly very well, and moved about a bit. The

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San Francisco, sábado, 5 de noviembre de 2016. San Francisco Opera. *Aida*. Libretto by Antonio



Ghislanzoni and music by Giuseppe Verdi. Francesca Zambello, Director. E. Loren Meeker, Associate director. RETNA, Artistic designer. Michael Yeargan, Set designer. Anita Yavich, Costume designer. Mark McCullough, Lighting designer. Jessica Lang, Choreographer. Clifton Brown, Associate choreographer. Brian Jagde (Radames), Raymon Aceto (Ramfis), Ekaterina Semenchuk (Amneris), Leah Crocetto (*Aida*), Anthony Reed (King of Egypt), Pene Pati (A messenger), Toni Marie Palmertree (A priestess), Rachel Little and Jekyln Peláez (Solo dancers), George Gagnidze (Amonasro). Orchestra & Chorus of the San Francisco Opera. Ian Robertson, Chorus director. Nicola Luisotti, Conductor. San Francisco Opera co-production with Washington National Opera, Seattle Opera and Minnesota Opera.

Final de la escena II del Acto II de *Aida*.
Producción de Francesca Zambello ©
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Opera

temperature of the drama rose and real people with real problems were presented to us. Zambello let the libretto and the score take centre stage and, though this may sound like an indictment, praise is somewhat being given here.

Shame that nothing of the sort can be said of acts 1 and 2. Zambello still took no view whatsoever. Indeed, her idea wasn't focused on the characters and nor was it political; it didn't happen in Egypt nor anywhere else; wasn't contemporary nor classic. Her *Aida* was simply chintzy. She didn't resort to live animals (something she's done before), but she managed to use every other possible prop that betrayed her horror vacui. There were standards and flags (an unmistakable sign of a director who doesn't know what to do with the stage) and (mostly bad) dancers and children doing silly acrobatics, thrones, a moving prison and of course golden confetti. An astronaut walking through the sets of act 2 might have managed to avoid being spotted. The chintz did nothing for the drama: no space was given to character development and yet the political issues weren't addressed either. Small wonder that I welcomed the bare settings in the second half. If you're not going to do much, at least don't be messy. Zambello's only attempt at subtle sophisticated theatre happened during the trial scene: with the clever use of fabric, she presents the sentencing of Radames as a sort of cobweb in which Amneris is inextricably entangled. Whilst it was too little too late, it worked.



Coreografía de Clifton Brown para *Aida* ©
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Bocetos de Michael Yeorgan para *Aida*.
San FranciscocOpera © 2016 by Michael
Yeorgan

The participation in the design of the sets of contemporary artist RETNA was much ado about nothing. He painted some pretty flats and designed logos for the standards and flags. They were somewhat Japanese, but also Middle Eastern and vaguely African (at times bordering on the style of *The Lion King*, the musical). Pretty, for sure, but their contribution to the production wasn't worth the publicity they received.

Indeed, were it not for the trumpeting of his participation in the show (“provocative visual artist RETNA makes theatrical debut with bold urban contemporary designs”), I'd probably be reporting pretty sets that helped bring colour to the stage - with such high expectations, however, it's difficult not to question the limited boldness and absence of provocation. One could, perhaps, go further and take issue with the pseudo-indigenous quality of the designs which, funny that, were commissioned neither for *Tosca* nor for *Traviata*, but for an opera set in Africa that, in this production, isn't explicitly set anywhere. A western Orientalist fantasy seems to have got in through the backdoor, somehow. Were he alive, Edward Said would have had a field day. But I'll say no more about this. Some delicate lighting by Mark McCullough couldn't quite save this rudderless production.

Musically, it was an excellent evening. Leah Crocetto, singing her first Aida, was stronger as a lyric soprano than when she had to sing low notes, often lacking enough support to

carry the necessary weight. She did sing both her arias fearlessly and with great aplomb, portraying adequately Aida's dilemma – that of choosing between the love of the fatherland (and the father!) and that of Radames. Perhaps there were mild signs of exhaustion that started with her sharp climax of “Oh patria mia”, from which Crocetto's hitherto delicate high pianissimi became more effortful. In all, however, this was a very promising debut with intense singing. Ekaterina Semenchuk as Amneris, by contrast, went from less to more, which is precisely what the role requires. Her attempts at persuading Radames to repent carried rare dramatic depth without histrionics. All this good acting was delivered with a voice of velvety quality, round and with ringing, impressive power. I heard Semenchuk as Amneris in Rome in 2015 and this was, if anything, still better.



Leah Crocetto en *Aida* © 2016 by Cory Weaver/San Francisco Opera



Ekaterina Semenchuk, Brian Jagde y coro
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The consistently all-guns-blazing rendition of the evening was that of Brian Jagde, making a triumphant debut as Radames. From the very first notes of “Se quel guerrier io fossi” it was clear that we were going to attend a performance of a tenor who was ready not to save himself. His phrasing, if a little bit choppy to start with, became increasingly legato, supported by generous breath. Low, medium and high notes – everything was there and delivered authoritatively, Corelli-style. He wasn't just there for the climaxes (*Alagna*) nor did he pull his punches with strangled pianissimi (*Kaufmann*). He sang out to great effect. Jagde was not subtle nor introspective, but heroic, and that rendered his Radames alpha male-ish and,

therefore, somewhat old-fashioned in our age of metrosexual tenors. Jagde was solid to boot and ultimately thrilling. All the low voices were of enormous quality, as was the performance of the chorus.

Nicola Luisotti conducted *Aida* rather matter-of-factly. From the beginning, the tempi were light and the lines were well articulated and balanced. He was there for the singers. With hindsight, I would say that it is difficult to remember anything specific about his conducting, which makes me think that perhaps there weren't any particularly remarkable moments, nor surprises. Praise must be due as all was done, however, by the hand of a most accomplished craftsman. The orchestra, with a couple of notable mishaps of the brass, didn't but contribute to the musical success of an evening in which triumphed *prima la musica e poi... ancora la musica*.