

DEI Destroys the Beauty of a Great Opera

Why do music critics bring their politics to bear on precisely that which is meant to transcend our time and place?

By Phyllis Chesler

I have seen *Aida* many times over the years but none with a set so imaginative and none with “acting singers” who so moved me to tears. The opera fan sits there and just knows that the curtain will rise to reveal the same grand set that she’s seen at least ten times – but no. This time, we have two figures in pith helmets (or fedoras) and gear and my heart sinks – Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark are leading us to a lost Egyptian tomb – and then, the magic begins.



The Metropolitan Opera in New York performs 'Aida' (Metropolitan Opera/YouTube)

Here we are, in the 21st century, observing eighteenth and nineteenth century European archeologists, as they descend in both time and depth as they hunt for ancient treasure and knowledge, and we join the explorers as they discover the extraordinary hieroglyphics on all the walls. Yes, one understands – and one is supposed to critique the European “plunder” of Egypt, India, and Greece but really – must I? Even at the opera? Even if I do not agree with Edward Said’s concept of “Orientalism.”

Consider this: weigh it at least. At the time, neither the Egyptians nor the Greeks were capable or even interested in resurrecting their own past, or in reverentially preserving it and making it available to an entire world. Read Bruce Gilley's provocatively titled *The Case for Colonialism* to begin to view history in a more appropriately "nuanced" and balanced way. (The political correctniks demand "nuance" except when it does not fit their narrative.)

Why do I even mention this? Because one of the first reviews of this *Aida* out in the *New York Times* did so – and did so with politically correct savagery. The reviewer is an acolyte of Edward Said and sees the "archeologists parade through, carrying out the antiquities that are simply another more broadly acceptable version of war booty." The reviewer found nothing he liked about the set, the costumes, the choreography and the singing actors – (he only had a kind word for soprano Angel Blue).

But I have nothing but gratitude, even adoration for the conducting (Yannick Nezet-Seguin), the directing (Michael Mayer), the set (Christine Jones), the costumes (Susan Hilferty), the lighting (Kevin Adams), the choreography (Oleg Grushkov), the production design (59 Projection Design), the production consultant (Stephen Pickover), and oh, the singing actors – how they shone for me, and for the packed house as well. (Brian Jagde, Morris Robinson, Elina Garanca, Angel Blue, Krzysztof Baczyk, Yongzhao Yu, Teresa McQueen, Amurtuvshin Enkhbat.) The ovations were thunderous and long.

Our opera stars hailed from Poznan, Poland; Los Angeles, California; Sukhbaatar, Mongolia; Riga, Latvia; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; and from Shanghai, China – in short, from three or even four continents: Eastern Europe, Asia, the Far East, and North America.

This was not enough multiculturalism to feed the ravenous, anti-Orientalist pack.

Unbelievably, the reviewer at the *New York Classical Review* also brought his politically correct lens to *Aida* and describes the archeologists as reflecting “the West’s artifactual rapaciousness.”

Why do music critics bring their politics so obviously to bear on precisely that which is meant to transcend our time and place, bring our own lost loves, our own deaths to mind, in the most haunting and beautiful of ways? In short, to help us experience a moment of eternity, a way to get out of our egotistical ways to become part of something more universal.

In a second *New York Times* review, the director, Martin Mayer, is quoted as saying: “I wanted it to feel as though the hieroglyphics were coming alive.” And yet, Mayer too is also quoted as saying: “Imperialism and colonialism is in the DNA of these discoveries. It’s the cycle of violence against these cultures.”

[The Washington Post](#) reviewer describes the archeologists as “interlopers,” who “snoop and peer and point and scribble,” and go on to “loot the treasures from the tomb.”

I go to the opera for the music, the acting, the magic, and if my hair does not catch fire, I leave after Act One, sometimes Act Two. Yesterday afternoon, I stayed; I was rooted to my chair. I remained even though the walking required tested my every muscle, even on my walker. Oh, how I stayed! I’ve never seen a more moving final Aria than when *Aida* has secretly crept into the tomb meant to bury Radames – the hero-turned-traitor – alive, and together, they sing their impossible love which inevitably leads to their deaths.

An Old Opera From a New Angle

The *Aida* that I just saw featured Brian Jagde, who sang Radames as the robust but tormented hero he is meant to be; Angel Blue was in very grand and soulful voice, and she played *Aida* very differently from all the interpretations I’ve

previously seen; she played her as a slave, abject, bowing to Amneris, the Pharaoh's daughter. Elina Garanca was wonderfully arrogant, clever, insanely jealous, but also heartbroken, pitiful, more woman than ruler-in-waiting.

There's this: the Met's production had me question something that had previously failed to capture my attention. This time, I genuinely did not understand the lengths to which love has driven this tragic triangle. How can Radames really give up the throne for the love of the Ethiopian slave girl? How can Aida give up her life for the love of an Egyptian warrior, the leader of the troops that have bloodily vanquished her people? And Amneris, who was set to rule all Egypt together with whomever she so chose – ow could she give it all up for the love of one man? It truly makes no sense.

But opera at its best is not meant to make "sense." It is meant to sweep us off our feet, enchant us; it is meant to make us feel and believe the most illogical, unbelievable emotions, and to empathize with both kings and slaves.

I am not entirely a novice in these matters. From 1998 to 2001, I was a regular commentator at [NPR's](#) "At the Opera," hosted by the super sophisticated Lou Santacroce. I just called him up to ask him what *he'd* thought of this production of *Aida*. He said, without hesitation: "I thought that Angel Blue was fantastic, the sets were incredible, and it was the best *Aida* in all the times I've seen it." Santacroce saw this live, on January 25th, as it was live-streamed right into his local museum.

But what do we, two hopeless fans of grand opera, really know? We who wear our hearts on our sleeves and leave all politics behind for a few precious hours.

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