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THEATRE / ART

Triumph in Tragedy

Vision of artist Ferguson innovates grand opera 'Aida'

By Janet L. Farber

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"Aida" — it's the gift that keeps giving. For nearly the entirety of its history, Opera Omaha has offered this Verdi classic as its milestone anniversary present to the community, presented for its 5th, 25th, and 40th seasons. Now, on the occasion of its celebratory 50th season, "Aida's" triumphal return engagement has opened at the Orpheum, running through Sunday, April 13. To keep the passion of this grandest of operas vital, the company has offered an original production for each of the last three occasions. In 1983, Ak-Sar-Ben Coliseum was the setting for the most legendary of these, involving a cast of 400 and live zoo animals, most famously among them Toto, the rampaging elephant. In 1999, a consortium of 12 regional opera houses combined to produce a leaner version that concentrated on exoticism and dramatic performances.

For this Golden Jubilee, Opera Omaha again set its sights on finding a unique approach to one of the most recognized operas in the canon. It had just undertaken an innovative and successful collaboration with ceramic sculptor Jun Kaneko, whose exquisite costume and set designs for "Madama Butterfly" set a new creative benchmark. Joan Desens, then the company's general director, and Stewart Robertson, its artistic director, next approached another of Omaha's finest visual artists, Catherine Ferguson, to apply her aesthetic to the look and feel of another timeless standard.

Ferguson is well-recognized for her work in sculpture and installation, including recent publicly-sited pieces in front of the Qwest Center and the W. Dale Clark library downtown. As it happens, this commission came in the middle of a steady stream of acknowledgement of her continuing artistic contributions. In 2005 she received a fellowship from the Nebraska Arts Council, which awarded a residency and solo exhibition at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts. Early this year, Ferguson also garnered three statuettes at the Omaha Entertainment and Arts Awards, including Best Visual Artist.



"Aida" is set in ancient Egypt and is a tragic story of love, honor, patriotism and their tragic ironies. In its traditional staging, it is an epic, lavish pageant, produced a la Cecil B. DeMille. Just how this opera would make for a harmonious pairing with a sculptor known for her streamlined, introspective and thoroughly contemporary work is not blindingly obvious, yet Ferguson brought much to the table. As a sculptor, she is already attuned to issues of scale and placement, of shaping and containing space. She often uses symbolic patterns and motifs in her works, emphasizing silhouette and stylization, which makes for a perfect analogue with the sharp relief style of ancient Egyptian art. Her installations have a flair for the dramatic, with lighting and sound as important ingredients. Even the human figure has been part of recent explorations.



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When she sat down with Sam Helfrich, stage director for this production, to coalesce their artistic visions for “Aida,” they arrived at an adaptation that was majestic yet simple. Her sets are visually uncluttered, dominated by towering constructions that create bold, graphic statements: among them, giant fluted columns reminiscent of ancient monumental architecture; the repeated motif of the lotus, an Egyptian symbol of life, death and rebirth; and a temple structure inspired by a hieroglyphic form. The performers are attired in character-defining costumes, maintaining a structured emphasis on color, shape and line cutting purposeful silhouettes. Wonderfully sculptural headdresses and subtle nods to couture complete the designs. Bold, solid background color and sharp lighting enhance the dramatic presence of sets, costume and story. An added layer of video graphics, masterminded by Mark Grossardt and Kevin Reiner of Clark Creative Group, are projected onto scrims to animate the transitions between scenes.

Melding a sleek, modern aesthetic to the music of this romantic 19th century opera set in a further bygone era does not at first seem like a natural fit. As Stewart Robertson points out, however, every era creates its own version of Verdi’s vision, inflecting it always with some spirit of its own time, whether intentionally or subconsciously. Once the initial shock of this temporal conjunction passes, the narrative is allowed to grow and its timeless, universal themes are thrust into acute focus. After all, we routinely confer renewed mythic status to our favorite fictional star-crossed lovers — Radamàs and Aida, Romeo and Juliet, Lancelot and Guinevere — who find guises in more contemporary circumstance — Catherine and Heathcliff, Rick and Ilsa, Tony and Maria, Ennis and Jack. The transformational effects of setting and tone on a story’s essentials are the necessary interpretive province of artists and directors. If they are inventive and creative, the original structure is strengthened and broadened, not disregarded or disrespected.

As an experience, this production proves to be richly rewarding. It is grand without frills, which allows the performances to stand in vivid relief. Granted, “Aida” is a bit of a tough opera — militaristic and ritualistic, its story is not terribly nuanced nor is it packed with hit tunes. It wears its heart on its sleeve at every moment; poor Aida has no almost moments of bliss. Yet the comparative starkness of the sets manages to create a space of great intimacy for the principle characters. The deliberately asymmetrical composition of the staging heightens the emotional tenor and the chromatic array of costumes and lighting delivers a regal sumptuousness without extravagance.

Without taking on such challenges, a regional company such as Opera Omaha risks predictability, complacency and creeping obsolescence. To amplify a comment by Robertson, it should be the opera’s role to “find great talent, put it together, light the fuse paper and retire to a safe distance.” It should be safe to come out now, as the fireworks have begun. And they’re pretty spectacular. Bravissimo!

‘VOOM’ over to Joslyn

A new exhibit at Joslyn Art Museum features selected high-definition portraits from Robert Wilson’s groundbreaking series “VOOM Potraits.” A press release describes Wilson as “one of the most exciting and influential innovators in theater, art, and design.”

The video portraits at Jolsyn (23 of the 153 unique pieces that make up the “VOOM Portraits” series) feature larger-than-life-size snow owls presented in high definition on 42-inch monitors and one 65-inch screen, all with Wilson’s signature iconic lighting and high production values. The owls appear stationary, until one blinks or moves. There’ll be plenty to hear, too, as the installation’s soundtrack is of the owls hooting.

Make your own ‘O!’

If you hop over to GoPlaytheO.com, you’ll be able to create your very own piece of O! artwork – much in the same vein as the public sculptures currently on display throughout Omaha.

At the Web site, users can choose from more than 50 graphic tools in categories from sports to

nature, art to food. They can also reshape and resize their creations to certain extents. Once a design is complete, it can be submitted to the “Go Play the O!” online gallery.

Users can also set up individual and personalized competitions for organization such as schools and work environments.

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