

Confrontations

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The thorny questions of interpretation and the complex historical baggage associated with *Aida* have done little to diminish its popularity ... and perhaps that is as it should be: the opera's undeniable qualities – it includes some of Verdi's most lucid late-period writing and offers a nuanced take on the perennial Verdian triangle of love, family and country – have allowed it to function on the level of entertainment, even as its setting and action offer a springboard for inquiries of greater conceptual depth. Certainly the new production at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden did not shy away from difficult themes: the staging, directed by Calixto Bieito, pushed the story's war atrocities and nationalistic pageantry to the fore and gave them an unsettlingly recognisable modern edge; however the succession of intensely-focused confrontations brought to life by the evening's formidable cast ensured that the pleasures of the opera were given equal prominence.



Bieito, *Aida* © 2023 by Herwig Prammer
Berlin, lunes, 9 de octubre de 2023.

Staatsoper Unter den Linden. Verdi: *Aida*. Calixto Bieito, director. Elina Garanča (Amneris), Marina Rebeka (*Aida*), Yusif Eyvazov (Radamès), Grigory Shkarupa (The King), René Pape (Ramphis), Gabriele Viviani (Amonasro), Victoria Randem (Priestess), and Gonzalo Quinchahual (Messenger). Staatskapelle Berlin. Nicola Luisotti, conductor



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Calixto Bieito, director. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, October 2023. © 2023 by Herwig Prammer.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Mr Bieito's staging was how relatively straightforward it was. This is not to suggest it was set in the time of the Pharaohs, nor, for that matter, in any recognisable location beyond the vaguely-defined present day; but for a director whose stagings often thrive on imagery ranging from confrontational to wilfully obscure, his *Aida* was taut, cleanly executed and remarkably approachable. To be sure, much of its militaristic iconography, designed to evoke the horrors of modern armed conflict, infused the action with a sense of constant dread, and some of the ideas that appeared on stage, while obviously well-considered, seemed to come from a complex network of allusion and reference that was not always accessible to the wider audience. Yet the staging as a whole, seemed governed by its own irrefutable logic.

Much of the action was set within a clean, brightly-lit white room. While Mr Bieito had his own extratextual agenda – colonial expansion is bad; unchecked capitalism is bad; wars of

expansion undertaken in the interests of capitalism are definitely bad – his arguments were made more through props, costumes and tastefully restrained use of video projection than through the wholesale transposition of the story into a familiar modern milieu. The first act set the scene with relative subtlety: during the prelude Radamès exchanged his velvet smoking jacket for camo fatigues and his loafers for army boots; assault rifles made a prominent appearance in the solemn preparations for war that concluded the act.

The staging's arguments came into sharper focus during the second act: the confrontation of Amneris and Aida took place in a room hung with innumerable pelts from zebras, leopards and other exotic animals from the plains of Africa. The triumphal march and ballet was accompanied by black and white footage of elephants helping to tow a safari jeep through a river – a brilliantly subtle dig at those attracted to *Aida* solely by the promise of spectacle – and concluded by turning the final chorus into the giddy celebration of a populace preparing to strip a conquered nation of its wealth, its resources and, presumably, its soul.



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Mr Bieito's attempts to highlight the the fiscal roots of military-political conflict provoked predictable amounts of bemusement, dissatisfied grumbling and outright hostility from certain parts of the audience, but the success of his staging lay in the fact that its arguments and its action effectively occupied two separate layers, both equally considered and neither fighting for dominance over the other. If the provocative imagery enriched our understanding of *Aida*'s thematic possibilities, Mr Bieito's handling of the characters made it easy to appreciate the opera as a series of tense confrontations fired by a clearly defined structure of mutually exclusive desires; for all the staging's intellectual investigations, it did not deny us the pleasure of Amneris finessing the truth from Aida in the second act, nor the sequence of betrayals that powers the third.



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The dramatic force of the evening owed much to Mr Bieito's sense of concentrated physical action, but was elevated at every turn by the strength and versatility of the singers; and while the production could boast a distinguished cast, it was Eļina Garanča who, as Amneris, staked out an unassailable position at its moral and dramatic centre. The captivating quality of her performance owed less to raw power than to the endless flexibility and subtleties of phrasing that yielded scene after scene of arresting intensity. She was the dominant force in the first part of the second act, mixing scorn and suspicion with an obvious delight at the emotional power she was able to wield over Aida, but it was in the fourth act that she revealed the full spectrum of her character: the angry

desperation in her scene with Radamès and her tormented anticipation as she awaited the verdict of the priests were all the more powerful for being built upon a foundation of bruised humanity.

Marina Rebeka, in the 'Ritorna vincitor' scene, delineated Aida's inner struggle with great assurance, albeit with little of the meek hopelessness that the scene sometimes invites, and the moment in the second act when Aida discovers that Radamès is still alive was communicated to the audience with all the necessary ecstasy. Her performance, however, seemed to switch into a higher gear in the third act, starting with a deeply moving 'O patria mia' and continuing through a sequence of increasingly charged scenes with Amonasro and Radamès. While she was convincingly spectral in her delicate contribution to 'O terra, addio', it was the tortured passions of the third act that made the greatest impression.

It was apparent from his first appearance that Yusif Eyvazov's impressively large voice required little effort to fill the auditorium; but while his projective power yielded impressive results in the finale of the first act – in which his lines, clear and wholly without strain, floated easily above the massed forces of the choir and orchestra – or in the sextet of the second act, it left little room for the moments of sensitivity that can transform Radamès into something more than just a flawed hero. His 'Celeste Aida' was indisputably mighty, but it conveyed little in the way of tenderness, as though the prospect of military victory and romantic fulfilment were not really all that different. One was more convinced by his surrender to the priests at the end of the third act than his surprisingly full-bodied farewell to the world that concluded the opera. Gabriele Viviani, however, provided the evening with an Amonasro of chilling depth and remarkable agility; and René Pape was a superb Ramfis, endlessly graceful in his phrasing and tone, and wholly commanding as a presence on stage.



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The musical direction of Nicola Luisotti was pleasingly unforced, allowing Verdi's score to rise and fall with few hints of obvious intervention. If there were no conspicuous liberties of pace or phrasing, there were perhaps a handful of moments that seemed to demand a more vigorous approach: the chorus midway through the first act didn't quite capture the nervous excitement of impending war, while the somewhat leisurely triumphal march and ballet in the second act, despite some nice playing from the (onstage) trumpets, never quite caught fire. Such moments, however, were balanced by a natural feel for the dramatic shape of each act: it is doubtful that the musically magnificent third act would have reached such a peak of intensity without Mr Luisotti's assured guidance. For all that Mr Bieito's staging was determined to pursue its own agenda of social and moral decline, Mr Luisotti ensured that the evening remained firmly anchored in the familiar pleasures of Verdi's music.