

Aida - Cadillac Palace Theatre – Chicago, IL - December 1999

Theater Review by Alan Ilagan

It was supposed to be Chicago's theatrical claim to fame for 1999. Christening the newly-renovated Cadillac Palace Theatre, *Aida* was set to take the Windy City by storm in its "World Premiere Pre-Broadway Engagement." There was no reason why she shouldn't ~ a potent romantic story and an impeccable artistic pedigree (including Elton John, Tim Rice, and Chicago's own Robert Falls as director) ~ but she unfathomably fails and, like the title character herself, seals her dismal fate.

"Her name is Aida. Her love is immortal. Her story is legend." So said the hype and hoopla surrounding the latest Disney musical. In what will no doubt be seen, perhaps unfairly, as the follow-up to *The Lion King*, expectations for this brand-new musical are impeccably high. Elton John and Tim Rice team up again and try their best to convince us that this was a musical worth doing, but only partially succeed. While the story is a moving one ("Suggested by the opera" by Verdi, according to the program,) this production's execution often misses that emotional mark.

Aida (played and sung brilliantly by Heather Headley, on whose shoulders the show luckily rests) is a captured Nubian Princess, selected by her captor, Radames, as a gift for his betrothed, Amneris. As Aida and Radames fall in love, and his wedding to Amneris nears, a classic love triangle emerges. When the show focuses on this, it is at its best and most affecting. However, too many interruptions, and a rather banal bunch of lyrics, derail what could be a much tighter, smoother work.

Opening with the Amneris-led ensemble number "Every Story Is A Love Story", we see all the problems of the production encapsulated: in a modern-day museum scene, the statue of Amneris suddenly comes to life and starts singing, at once illuminating a tendency for the show to cross into kitschy-camp territory, but still take itself seriously. This dilemma carries throughout the musical, from an out-of-place drag-queen-like fashion show (complete with hats in the form of pyramids, camels, and cats, as well as a real runway) to the dancing priests (looking like rejects from Madonna's *Blonde Ambition* tour) and culminating with the anachronistic neon-glow of double-sided light-sabers straight out of *The Phantom Menace*.

Along with these incidental missteps lies the deeper problem of this *Aida* ~ the lyrics. The original title-song "Elaborate Lives" (which title was wisely scrapped) is musically moving, but the wordy, and sometimes senseless, lyrics detract from the lush orchestrations. Tim Rice has always displayed a knack for rhyme without much reason, and that trait is in full-effect here with all its lacking profundity. A number of songs, including "Every Story Is A Love Story", "Easy As Life" and "Like Father, Like Son", rely on over-used cliches and simple similes, without taking them to another level.

Even more problematic is the fact that many of the songs don't serve to propel the story. "Another Pyramid" displays the greed of Radames' father, Zoser, but we already

knew he was the bad guy, what with his dark Priest-garb, foreboding staff, spiked hair, and somewhat-fey behavior (a tinge of gayness always betrays the villains in Disney-fare.) “Like Father, Like Son”, a hard-rocker of a song, is supposed to illuminate the differences between Radames and Zoser, but comes far too late in the show to make us care any more about Radames.

In truth, Radames is hard to care for from the beginning. As played by Adam Pascal (doing an Egyptian variation of his far-superior role as Roger in *Rent*), Radames does not elicit the sympathy, or the strength, that is required for his role. Unfortunately, Mr. Pascal is slightly miscast here, and his ill-suited portrayal becomes a one-note performance as he once again plays a reluctant-to-feel guy who is broken open by his love for a girl. On its own, this is fine, but in *Aida* the most crucial aspect of Radames is that he is torn ~ by his love for two women, by the forbidden romance with a Nubian, by his differences with his father, and by his budding social awareness.

Mr. Pascal does not invest Radames with any of this emotionally-ravaged dichotomy. While the show affords him myriad opportunities for looking buff and brawny (indeed, most of his outfits seem intentionally designed to show off his chest hair and pecs,) he doesn’t really do much more than pose. He’s not dreadful, and his initial awakening moments as Aida brings her people’s plight to his awareness are an inspiring, if abrupt, transformation.

His intended, Amneris, is played, for the most part winningly, by Sherie Rene Scott, another graduate of *Rent*. From her first character song “My Strongest Suit”, where she tells why she is “first in beauty, wisdom, and accessories”, Ms. Scott manages to deftly navigate the precarious distance between vain vamp and betrayed lover, without falling fully into either stereotype. She also provides much of the show’s humor, all the while revealing a tinge of insecurity that gets the audience on her side too. This is exceedingly important, as Amneris must make a worthy counterpoint to Aida for the story to work, and in this respect the musical is at its most glorious. (The tenderness, and impending impossibility, of a budding friendship between Amneris and Aida ~ both princesses ~ is more compelling than any of the lackluster chemistry Radames has, or doesn’t have, with Amneris.)

The third point of the love triangle, and the undisputed pinnacle of the proverbial pyramid, is the title character herself. With a voice capable of everything from a deep-throated growl to a soft soprano’s coo, Heather Headley as Aida establishes herself as one of today’s foremost leading musical actresses. In so doing, she single-handedly saves the show, while simultaneously drawing attention to its shortcomings. Her portrayal alone is reason enough to pay full-ticket price (and without her it looks unlikely that *Aida* will critically fare well.)

Ms. Headley gives an emotionally-charged performance ~ her voice and intensity push through otherwise-forgettable lyrics and create a spellbinding enchantment capable of moving one to tears. In her big second-act numbers, “Easy as Life”, “The Gods Love

Nubia” and “Written in the Stars”, Ms. Headley displays the raw, aching heart of the show. She offers a thrillingly complex characterization of Aida, as one who acts selfishly, and later selflessly, out of love, and it is this fully-rendered human-voice which we ultimately come to care for the most.

Stylistically, the production is simpler than most of the big-budget extravaganzas out there. (The original malfunctioning pyramid is nowhere in evidence.) Color is the most important set piece ~ rich jewel tones saturate the stage, but sometimes serve to overpower the underwhelming performers before them. There are very few gimmicks here ~ certainly no spectacular visual effects to pull audiences in from around the country ~ and therefore the focus of this musical is for once, rightly, on the music and narrative. When neither of these is in strong evidence, musicals must rely on flashy-trash like flying helicopters, floating mansions, and falling chandeliers. *Aida* gives us neither a strong musical piece or a magical journey, delivering instead a middle-of-the-road production that reeks of compromise and failed ambitions.

It’s not all bad. There are some gems to be excavated from all the faux-Egyptian rubble ~ a few gorgeous melodies survive their limp lyrics (“How I Know You”, “The Gods Love Nubia” and “Written In The Stars”) ~ and the moving performance of Ms. Headley is worth wading through the muck of the remaining musical. However, in and of itself, *Aida* may prove to be the first Broadway flop for the heretofore unstoppable Mouse Machine of Disney. In this instance, they have foregone the grand artistic vision of *The Lion King*, abandoned the familiarity of *Beauty and the Beast*, and created a middling musical that will be judged on its own merits. As such, *Aida* fails, but not without trying.

There remains a chance that with some major revisions, a moving musical voyage can eventually arise. The story, and the best of Sir Elton’s music, are more suited to an intimate chamber-type piece, minus the bombastic rock-opera cuts that detract from the narrative-arc. And if the idea is to take the high-brow serious path (which would seem to be the case here), then the cheesy campiness of the production must be cut as well. (There’s a time and place for lasers and light-sabers ~ ancient Egypt is not it.)

Above all else, a truly great love triangle relies on believable romance among the leads. While Aida and Radames eventually show some spark, we still fail to see (in song or story) how they come to fall in love ~ their first kiss comes out of nowhere, and from that moment on they suddenly risk everyone’s lives to be together. Radames and Amneris may have had their impending marriage somewhat arranged, but there still must be a connection between them to render a romantic triangle fully effective.

Even with these flaws, by the conclusion of the evening, as the walls close in around Aida and Radames, we are left with a small ray of hope ~ that in the end love can overcome anything, if only for a moment, and it is this moment that we must remember and honor. *Aida* has a few of these moments, but to remain remembered it needs a few more.