

## **Aida @ Stages St. Louis**

Music by Elton John

Lyrics by Tim Rice

Book by Linda Woolverton, Robert Falls, and David Henry Hwang

Based on the opera by Giuseppe Verdi

Ran June 2 – July 2, 2023 @ The Kirkwood Performing Arts Center

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The first time I saw Elton John and Tim Rice's *Aida* was the Muny's production in 2016, and it was a show that I totally forgot I even watched. If you can believe it, I'm part of the minority of people that think *Aida* is overrated. Nothing about it is particularly striking or even that groundbreaking to me. The setting is bland, the story is boring, and the songs are not very memorable. The reason why I'm even saying all this is so I can say with authority that Stages St. Louis' production took everything I didn't like about *Aida* and made it actually entertaining.

*Aida* is a retelling of the Giuseppe Verdi opera of the same name; this version is told in the form of a pop opera, complete with a framing device of people in modern dress coming together to tell the story. In Ancient Egypt, the Nubian princess Aida and her people have been captured and brought into slavery during a time of war between the nations. Aida, without revealing that she is a princess, stands up for herself and her people in front of Radames, the military leader who captured them. Realizing Aida's courage and tenacity, Radames assigns her to be a handmaiden to Amneris, Radames's fiancée of nine years. As the three of them spend more time together, Aida and Radames's mutual respect starts to turn into attraction. The relationship between the two of them grows closer and closer to the point that Amneris begins doubting Radames's love for her. Soon, the love between the three of them starts to hang in the balance as forces beyond their control conspire to keep them apart and threaten their futures, including those of the Nubian people.

Again, *Aida* is not a very engaging story with a whole lot to talk about, but Stages' production made it an entertaining watch. The three leads carry the show well: Wonu Ogunfowora gives a strong performance as Aida, exerting sheer royal power in both her solos and her partnership with Ace Young as Radames, who does a great job of growing from a cocky military leader to a devoted lover. Out of the three, the best performer is Diana DeGarmo as Amneris, mostly because I'm a sucker for characters who start out really selfish and flighty but grow to be more mindful and empathetic towards the end, and DeGarmo demonstrates that growth in a way I've never appreciated before.

Also excellent are the supporting cast: Albert Jennings as Mereb, the rebellious chief slave to David Benoit's sickly Pharaoh; Ryan Williams as Radames's father Zoser, the Chief Minister who is conspiring against the Pharaoh; Jenny Mollet as Nehebka, a Nubian slave who helps Aida advocate for her people; and Jerome Harmann Hardeman as Amonasro, the King of Nubia who resents Aida's love for Radames. Everyone, including the ensemble, have powerful

pop-rock voices thanks to musical director Erika R. Gamez, and they do fantastic work performing director Luis Salgado's athletic staging and choreography.

What made this production engaging for me was instead of playing the show naturalistically, Stages St. Louis treated *Aida* as if it was a staged pop-rock concert. The scenic design by Kate Rance consists of long neon light rods that form the pyramids and the furniture, and they're even handheld by the cast during some fun dance numbers, augmented by Herrick Goldman's dazzling lights. Brad Musgrove's costumes are a mashup of the aesthetics of both Ancient Egypt and Elton John. Contributing to this pop-rock concert vision are Khadijah Amirah's hair and makeup design, and Bethany "Beef" Gratz's sound design.

Seeing Stages St. Louis' production of *Aida* made me glad that I started Jack Reviews Musicals. If it weren't for this blog, I never would have gotten this opportunity to see a show that I never liked done in a brand new way that made me appreciate it for what it is. It's a production made memorable for a style that I hope is imitated when St. Louis mounts *Aida* again in the future.