

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

BY FRANCESCA ZAMBELLO

As an opera lover, *Aida* is part of the fabric of my being. I first experienced it with huge forces, but as I have come to work on it many times as an adult, I realized it is actually a chamber piece with a huge Triumphal Scene parked in the middle of the story. As a director, I know you need some spectacle, but what is crucial to me in this opera is to dig into the intimate scenes where the conflict of the four main characters drive the drama forward: Aida, the Ethiopian slave in captivity; her father, Amonasro, King of Ethiopia and a prisoner of war; Amneris, daughter of the King of Egypt; and Radames, Egyptian warrior, all caught in a love triangle and a bitter war.

The most famous scene of the opera, the Triumphal Scene, is where we think of the hordes and the elephants, but what is more powerful is to focus on the four individual dramas. There are very few moments when the characters of *Aida* sing solo pieces. But when they do, we feel a struggle inside each of their introspective moments. With so few arias we are always experiencing the grand emotions of love and war through duets and trios. The story brilliantly sets the individuals and their passions against the context of a society out of their control. I call this the "duty versus desire" problem, something most people are always confronting. Here, though, the stakes are very high.

When we went to work on the designs, we chose to collaborate with Marquis Duriel Lewis (aka RETNA). His work is inspired by calligraphy and hieroglyphics, using bold colors and shapes to evoke a mythic past with a contemporary edge. RETNA created a series of structural works, paintings, and images which set designer Michael Yeargan turned into the theatrical spaces. With costume designer Anita Yavich, we tried to complement the power of RETNA's work with a rich color palette and costumes which felt like another time and, in other ways, very recent. The movement of the dance uses the language of war and religious ritual.

As I write this in the middle of the rehearsal process, I am still convinced that *Aida* is a chamber opera. The protagonists and their complex and heartrending personal traumas set against the background of war and religious absolutism make for a passionate Verdi score and drama. This opera lives in a world of emotions, of individuals faced with love, duty, jealousy, and hatred, as well as individuals caught up in emotions they cannot master, and that lead ultimately to a tragic end. The end feels like Wagner's *Liebestod* as Aida and Radames are joined in an eternal death.

## ARTISTIC DESIGNER'S NOTE

BY RETNA (MARQUIS DURIEL LEWIS)

I was in Miami one afternoon with a longtime art dealer of mine, Marsea Goldberg. She had just gotten off the phone with Francesca Zambello. Marsea was very excited and told me that the artistic director of the Washington National Opera had expressed interest in meeting with me about a possible collaboration for the opera *Aida*.

All of a sudden the images of ancient Egypt coming to life onstage enveloped my mind. My past influences that I had seen in books, museums, and in my mind started to unravel visually. The honor and bewilderment that I felt knowing that my symbols had communicated the past and that I was now being asked to participate in *Aida* were just beyond me.

We ventured to Washington, D.C. to meet this ambassador of the arts, Francesca Zambello. I had no experience with opera, but I recalled moments in my childhood when I starred in a few plays and my excitement grew as I realized I was never far off my mark.

Having my artwork, much of which is based on the structure of Egyptian hieroglyphics, used for *Aida* turned my entire concept of my career full circle, marking a milestone in my career and artistic and spiritual development.