

When *Aida* Conquered The Silver Screen

The 1953 motion picture is considered today a landmark in the opera-film genre

ALAMY

Released in 1953, Clemente Fracassi's cinematic version of *Aida* has been almost forgotten; however, it has acquired cult status among opera fans. Its fame among connoisseurs is due to some aspects that render it unique: it was the first opera film in color and, even more impressively, it featured *two* divas portraying the title role—a young and then unknown Sophia Loren, in her first performance using her popular stage name, and soprano Renata Tebaldi, at the peak of her career, lending her voice to the lip-synching Italian actress.

"The grandest of all grand operas!"—as one of the advertising tag lines for Fracassi's film proclaimed—was perfectly suited for the big screen, with a plotline highlighting the tensions of the personal versus the political, and with its unparalleled scenic and choreographic potential. Produced by Oscar Film and distributed by CEI Incom, Fracassi's *Aida* had a successful debut in Italy and was one of the top ten most viewed films of 1953. It premiered in the United States the following year where, as in Italy, it received mostly positive reviews in major media outlets, from *Variety* to *The New York Times*.

The film was acclaimed for its agile cinematography, its flamboyant theatricality, and its democratizing mission of bringing operatic works to a wider public. However, there were differing and

sometimes unfavorable opinions, especially regarding the editing choices of music supervisor Renzo Rossellini. For instance, some critics found unforgivable the reduction of Verdi's grand opera to a mere 95 minutes—cutting out entire numbers and shortening others—as well as the interjection of a voice-over narrating pivotal plot developments. And yet, even the most critical voices acknowledged that the vocal performances in the film were superb, as well as the conducting of Giuseppe Morelli who led the Chorus and the Orchestra Sinfonica della RAI in the film's soundtrack.

In the late 1940s and early '50s, the opera-film genre was at its climax: in 1953 alone, the same year in which *Aida* was released, two other opera-inspired films made the box office top ten in Italy, Raffaello Matarazzo's *Giuseppe Verdi* and Carmine Gallone's *Puccini*. The commercial success of these films was due to new technologies which made it possible to achieve spectacular effects that attracted new audiences—who often could not make it to the opera house for economic or geographic reasons—to movie theaters.

Like many other films based on operatic works, *Aida* was not filmed in an opera house. The shooting took place only partly on location and, mainly, in the Scalera studios in Rome, under the supervision of production designer Flavio Mogherini. Orientalist tropes in the

set design and costumes, as well as the use of blackface (for the title role, for instance), are exploited in this production, reflecting ethnocentric biases. The choreography was created by Margarete Wallmann, who had been serving as ballet director of Milan's Teatro alla Scala since 1949. For this production, she choreographed the ballet of the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma in elegant harmony with the architectural elements of the King's palace in which most of the film is set.

The casting of Sophia Loren in the title role is striking. Her affinity with the operatic world was not new. In 1952, under her first stage name Sofia Lazzaro, she had starred in a black-and-white film adaptation of Donizetti's *La Favorita*, directed by Cesare Barlacchi. As was the case with *Aida*, she had been dubbed by a singer, soprano Palmira Vitali Marini. In her autobiography, Loren speaks with passion about the demands of portraying Aida, a role that required not only memorizing her lines but also syncing them to the recording. She recalls not having much time to familiarize herself with the libretto: "to be able to concentrate and learn my part quickly and thoroughly, I would lock myself inside the small office of the production studio, in the freezing cold of winter." She also describes the difficult conditions in which the cast and crew found themselves: "Neither the office nor the set had any heating, and it was so cold that I could see my breath. So before each take, they'd make me chew ice to lessen the puff of cloud that emerged whenever I'd say my lines. And they had one of the stagehands follow me around with a hair dryer out of range of the camera's frame!" Her comments shed light on the Italian film industry in the decade after the end of World War II. Even for an ambitious production such as that of a film-opera, practical difficulties remained.

While being candid about the challenges she faced preparing for this role, Loren also shows profound respect for the soprano: "Providing Renata Tebaldi's voice with a body was a special emotion for me, and one that would be hard to repeat. In the end, we were like one person." Her comments highlight one of the distinctive features of this film: a harmonious relationship between Loren and Tebaldi comes to the fore, allowing the character of Aida to truly shine.

The actress was not the only one to acknowledge that special affinity. Tebaldi, as

well, recalled the exceptionality of the encounter between her vocal rendition and Loren's interpretation when, years later, she commented fondly on Loren's performance: "Sophia was very beautiful [...]. When I previewed the film for which I sang the title role, I was amazed at her ability. The voice dubbing was not noticeable, not even in close-ups!" Loren's interpretation also earned the praises of Vittorio De Sica, who would later invite her to star in several of his films, including his Academy Award-winning *La Ciociara* (*Two Women*, 1960).

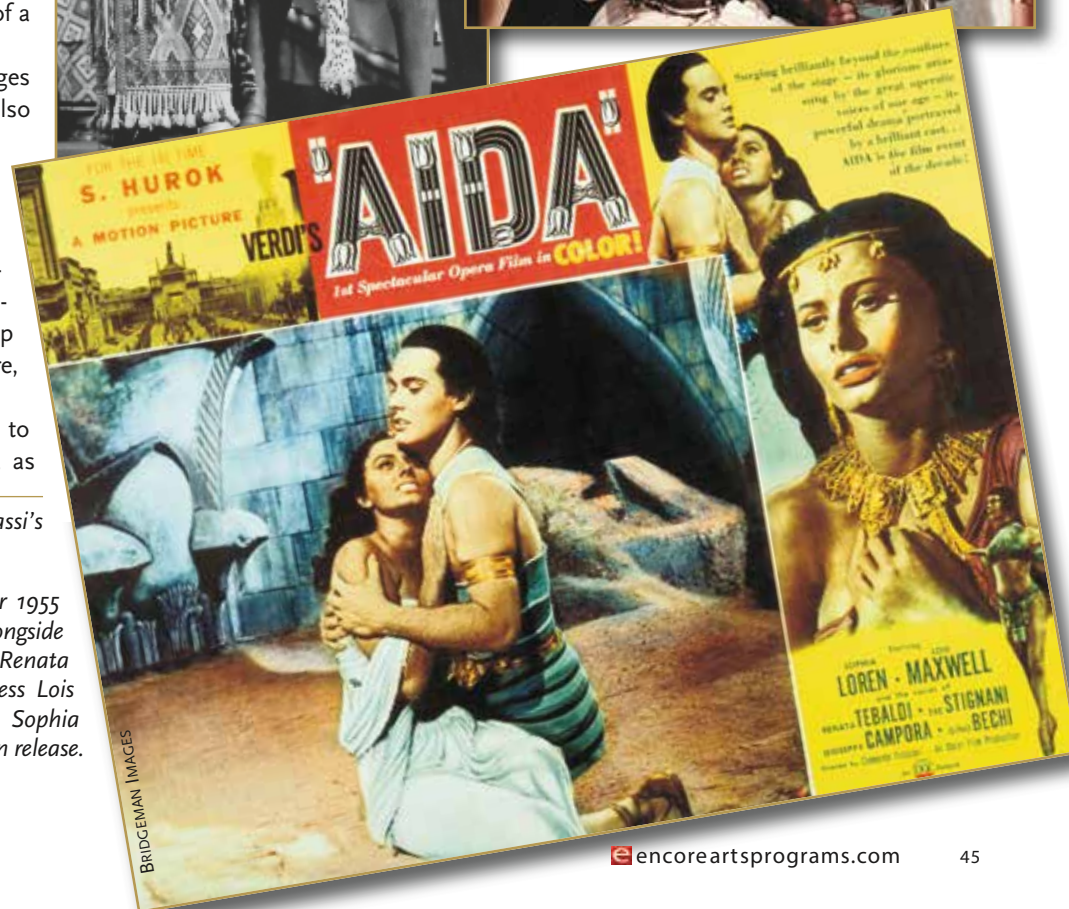
The presence of the Italian diva is not the only reason this film is remarkable. Together with Loren we find another rising star, Canadian actress Lois Maxwell who, in later years, would be known for her portrayal of Miss Money Penny in fourteen of the James Bond films. Living in Rome at the time, Maxwell was cast as Amneris, lip-synching the voice of mezzo-soprano Ebe Stignani. Stignani's Amneris also represents an exceptional vocal treat: the Egyptian princess was one of her signature roles and she had recorded it just a few years earlier, in 1946, together with Maria Caniglia and Beniamino Gigli, directed by Tullio



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Left: The Act II Triumphal Scene in Fracassi's 1953 film *Aida*.

Right, clockwise from top: Seen here in her 1953 San Francisco Opera appearance as Aida (alongside Leonard Warren as Amonasro), soprano Renata Tebaldi lent her voice to the '53 film; actress Lois Maxwell as Amneris and the 19-year-old Sophia Loren as Aida; a poster for the film's American release.

Serafin; and then again in 1952, in an acclaimed rendition conducted by Alberto Erede, featuring Mario Del Monaco and Tebaldi herself.

Loren's *Aida* and Maxwell's Amneris offer the strongest dramatic performances in the film, giving life to the tragedy of the two women. Perhaps the most touching moment is the confrontation in Act II, in which Amneris tricks Aida into revealing her forbidden love for Radames, whom Amneris also loves. (Italian actor Luciano Della Marra portrays Radames in the movie with tenor Giuseppe Campora singing the part.) "Figlia de' vinti, il suo dolor m'è sacro" ("Daughter of the conquered, to me her grief is sacred"), Amneris utters softly at the beginning of the scene, as if whispering to herself and showing pity towards the fate of the Ethiopian slave. And yet, a close-up of Maxwell's Amneris, sitting on a sofa in her chambers and surrounded by her servants, unveils a different dimension: Amneris' gaze is stern and menacing. She stands still while following Aida with her eyes, as the latter approaches her to adorn her with a golden necklace. Enveloped in cold shades of turquoise, Amneris is fierce and determined. Aida, in contrast, moves across the room, her eyes lowered, and her figure is characterized by warm colors, yellow and orange tones. A princess enslaved by the Egyptians, she seems to inhabit a different world until Amneris' words about Radames' presumed death bring her violently back to the reality of her captivity. Tebaldi's and Stignani's voices paint the aural space with emotional drama and make this scene one of the most powerful in the film.

After its triumphant Italian release, the film received the attention of international distributors. *Aida* reached the United States thanks to the efforts of renowned impresario Sol Hurok and it was distributed by I.F.E. Releasing Corporation. One of the most influential and respected music professionals of his day, Hurok was particularly proud of his achievement of bringing this *Aida* to the American public: "This is the first time in my career that I have presented a motion picture. I have done so because I believe that this film has made a spectacular advance in translating opera from stage to screen."

The New York release of *Aida*, on November 11 at the Little Carnegie Theater, was heralded as a special event by the American press. The reason was because of a fascinating coincidence: just a few days earlier, on November 8, a live telecast of the opening night at the Metropolitan Opera, also featuring scenes from Verdi's *Aida*, was screened in 32 theaters across the country. The two events represented an important occasion for presenting operatic works to a wider audience and inspired a reflection on how the cinematic medium could convey opera performances. In reporting the double-event of Fracassi's *Aida* and the live telecast from the Met, respected movie critic Bosley Crowther wrote in *The New York Times*: "This amazingly convenient opportunity to see and compare within three days the best that the present technical facilities of the two media of theatrical transmission can avail provoked some striking reminders of the basic nature of the art of cinema, to which it is reasonable to imagine that the producers of theatrical telecasts eventually aspire."

Since no official soundtrack was released, the only way to enjoy this excellent performance is to watch this cinematic incarnation of *Aida*. To 21st-century sensibilities, accustomed to breathtaking special effects and extravagant productions, it is perhaps hard to imagine what tremendous emotional impact a film such as *Aida* might have had on spectators in the 1950s. Yet, watching this movie, and witnessing the actors' performances brought to musical life by the memorable renditions by Tebaldi and her colleagues, we are reminded of the many shapes in which opera can be a vehicle for poignant, captivating storytelling—through different media and across generations. 🌟

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More about *Aida* and Opera on Screen

RECORDINGS & VIDEOS

Clemente Fracassi's *Aida* (DVD, Qualiton, 1953). There are no subtitles for the sung parts, but English subtitles are available for the narrating voice-over.

Aida (CD, Decca, 1952). Even if no official soundtrack was released for Fracassi's *Aida*, two of the voices from the film, Renata Tebaldi (*Aida*) and Ebe Stignani (*Amneris*), are among the leading singers of this recording. Conducted by Alberto Erede and featuring the Orchestra dell'Accademia di Santa Cecilia, this rendition was praised for the intensity of Tebaldi's and Stignani's performances. It also includes the excellent Mario Del Monaco as Radames and Aldo Protti as Amonasro.

Aida (DVD, Arthaus Musik, 1986). While the quality of the recording lacks technical sophistication, this film version remains a spectacular achievement. Directed by theater legend Luca Ronconi, it features an exceptional Luciano Pavarotti as Radames. Conductor Lorin Maazel, who leads the Orchestra and Chorus of Teatro alla Scala, offers a nuanced and intense reading of the Verdi score.

Aida (DVD, Deutsche Grammophon, 1989). From the Metropolitan Opera, this Emmy-winning production has strong performances by Aprile Millo in the title role and Plácido Domingo as Radames, with Dolora Zajick as a touching and powerful Amneris. James Levine conducts the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus.

BOOKS

Ken Wlaschin, *Encyclopedia of Opera on Screen* (Yale University Press, 2004). This is a comprehensive guide featuring an alphabetical list of major operas and singers from 1896 to the early 2000s. While the volume does not contain a detailed analysis of each specific work, it remains an important source to learn about operas filmed for the small and big screens.

Marcia J. Citron, *When Opera Meets Film* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). This fascinating work will be of particular interest to those who are curious about learning how operatic and film works can influence each other aesthetically and imaginatively.

Louis Bayman, *The Operatic and the Everyday in Post-war Italian Film Melodrama* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014). Focusing on both famous masterpieces (such as Luchino Visconti's films) and lesser-known works, this insightful and accessible study addresses the operatic dimension in Italian cinema.