

## Amid gigantic cast, one voice soars - Latonia Moore is an Aïda for the ages

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor  
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With all the uncertainty in today's world, it's comforting to know some things never change. Like here in Texas, we always do it up big. Wedding showers, theme parties, opening nights – we know how to put on a show.

When it comes to splendor and spectacle, The Dallas Opera's current production of Giuseppe Verdi's *Aïda* honors our Lone Star traditions with glorious sets, a world class orchestra, over-the-top costuming, a huge chorus of quality singers and stellar performances by Latonia Moore, Antonello Palombi, Lester Lynch and Orlin Anastassov.

Friday's opening night, sold out performance filled the stage – and the acoustically perfect Winspear Hall – with all of the things we've come to expect from grand opera, yet managed to deliver the smaller, more intimate story – a tragic triangle that ends with lovers buried alive in an airless tomb.



No spoilers here. Everyone knows the plot. Ethiopian princess Aïda has been captured by the King of Egypt. She falls in love with Radames, the captain of the guard. Things get even more complicated when the king's daughter, Amneris, also falls in love with the soldier. Amneris holds all the cards in this struggle and she is not afraid to use them.

□ *Aïda* debuted on Christmas Eve, 1871, at the Khedivial Opera House in Cairo, although the composer was dissatisfied with the performance and considered the La Scala's production in Milan on Feb. 8, 1872, the real premiere. According to Wikipedia, *Aïda* has been performed more than 1,100 times at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, making it the second most frequently performed work behind

*La Boheme*

The opera is best known for its grand march at the end of Act II. Some companies employ camels, elephants and donkeys in the triumphant processional welcoming the returning victorious Egyptian army, including its leader, Radames.

TDO chose not to use live animals, but they were hardly missed. Thanks to clever staging and huge sets, the hall overflowed with singers, chorus members, priests, sword bearers, attendants to the royal court and prisoners of war.

From the moment the curtain rose on Michael Yeargan's monumental sets, everything seemed to fall into place.

Tenor Antonio Palombi (Radames) made a name for himself several years ago at La Scala when he was tapped to walk on – in his street clothes – from the wings in *Aïda*'s first act. The

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original star stormed off in a huff after the audience booed his execution of the famous aria, *Celeste Aïda*

That night, Palombi proved he had what it took to carry the part and has since enjoyed a vigorous schedule singing Ramades and other leading roles in *Othello*, *Tosca*, *Macbeth* and *Madame Butterfly*

. He returns to TDO next year as Calaf in *Turnadot*

From the moment he began *Celeste Aïda*, Palombi poured himself into the role of the conflicted warrior, at once loyal to his king and country, but totally committed in his love for the exotic Aïda.

Palombi's aria carried such a depth of soulful sweetness that it almost erases the memories of performances by Luciano Pavarotti or Placido Domingo in the role. The final note cracked my heart wide open with its beauty.

I thought, well, it's downhill from here. Man, was I wrong.



Latonia Moore's performances should come with a warning: Watch out for fireworks. Brilliant, bright, glorious, blinding light takes flight each time Moore sings.

Unlike her costar, Moore didn't have to do a walk-on to win the role, but she did make her Metropolitan Opera debut in March without a full rehearsal. She was a last-minute replacement for Violetta Urmana.

"I was able to go up [to New York] for a performance. The audience was overwhelmed and her ovation went on for quite a long time," TDO Assistant Conductor Michael Heaston said in an interview earlier this year.

After seeing Moore's performance, it's easy to see why the knowledgeable – and sometimes tough – New York crowd and critics embraced her.

The Houston native has such presence, such command of her gifts and such effortless acting skills that, despite being on the stage with more than 100 others, you cannot pull her eyes – or ears – away from her. During the opera's big moments, when everyone is singing in full voice (at the top of their lungs), Moore soars over them all, lifting her voice to the rafters – with dazzling results.

TDO's lucky to catch Moore at this point in her career because, mark my word, before too long, her name will be on the list with Leontyne Price and Maria Callas as the great Aïda of her generation, and she will be booked years into the future.

In the third act, Moore's interpretation of the tortured aria, *O patria mia*, where Aïda is forced to choose between love for her father and her love for Radames, could be used to teach a master class.

Baritone Lester Lynch came close to stealing the show with his passionate portrayal as Aïda's father. He was at once regally proud and paternally protective, a fine line to walk.

Bass Orlin Anastassov delivered an impressive performance as Egypt's high priest. His stern demeanor did not leave him, even during curtain calls.

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The production was not perfect, however.

As Amneris, mezzo-soprano Nadia Krasteva, while in fine voice and stunningly beautiful, needs to book time at a dance studio and take some movement classes. She spent most of the evening bent at the waist, herking and jerking around in agony. Her final scene, ascending stairs as she realizes she has sealed the fate of her love, was actually painful to watch.

Choreographer Kenneth Von Heidecke had a tough challenge. Not only were his dancers confined to a very small space amid scores of singers, they had to perform on a raked (angled) stage. The ballerinas were quite lovely, but when the men came in, the number fell apart. There was little unison in the corps. While a few were able to pull off light and airy leaps, others just clunked up and down. Lifts that came late in the number wobbled so much I thought surely someone was going to hit the boards face first.

Some costumes seemed oddly out of place. The King's robe, for instance, looked more comical than royal. There was tittering around our seats when he turned around, displaying the colors of a pale, pastel peacock, rather than a brightly colored one.

These minor distractions seemed only to amplify the passion Palombi, Lynch, Anastassov, the orchestra and chorus brought to the performance. Along with the stunning Miss Moore, they elevated this Texas-sized *Aïda* into the rarified air that is grand opera at its finest.

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Click in for clips of [Moore](#) and [Palombi](#) .