



Selling pyramids: Aida as pageant at Earis Court

PHOTOGRAPH: DEE CONWAY

Tom Sutcliffe on grand opera as Britain has never seen it before

# Aida's march on the Court

**T**HIS Aida was opera unlike any seen in Britain before, opera as oddly impersonal as those great national occasions, statesmen's funerals, coronations, royal weddings, that we Brits take pride in.

The crowds were sympathetic and politely eager to applaud at any break in a scene — as the right thing to do, regardless of whether merited or timely. They seemed delighted at the mere fact of hundreds on stage getting safely to their correct stations. What's a little out-of-tune, or hard to see, or rough on the ear, when it's such an occasion?

But was it the real thing? People had taken pot luck when they paid their money, apart from a few names they'd heard of and the evergreen reputation of the glorious Verdi. Named singers were either Bulgarian or Italian, apart from Wolfgang Lenz's King of Egypt (German, no great shakes) and a Brit

Messenger. The latter, Adam Fox, trained in Italy, sounded sadly English — even with "enhancement", i.e. amplification, without which no physical show could expand to fill the vast Earis Court space.

The hero of Earis Courts's mega-Verdi on the difficult opening night was the 59-year-old great Italian baritone Piero Cappuccilli as Aida's warlike father.

From the moment of Amoros's appearance in Radames's triumph, beside rather than among a gaggle of almost-black "Ethiopian" extras in cages that opened up out of the stage floor, he acted and sang as if he really meant it. Which was certainly not the impression lent by Nicola Martinucci's Radames, sometimes sharp, sometimes flat, acting wooden and uninterested in anybody else on stage, and pretty diffident even about his own vocalising.

The great triumph scene was surprisingly ordinary, decked with ballet dancers and bounc-

ing girls in black body stockings and fuzzy wigs, and framed with an army of extras marching and countermarching up the 50 or so steps at the centre of the set. No animals. One of the little black samba's skirts came off. It really was the triumph of the body-stocking — so much cheaper than acres of Max Factor body make-up.

Cappuccilli's not a very special actor. But he has class and experience. And he threw himself into the vast pageant without compromise or embarrassment.

The chaos gradually subsided for a 10-minute late start. The lights went out abruptly, after warnings on the PA. There was a lot of PA, especially when the gap after scene 2 began to stretch and stretch, while (presumably) management found out how worthwhile they would have to make it to get Grace Bumbry's substitute, and superior, Ghena Dimitrova to black up for the title role.

The lights rose again after a row of 32 golden-masked

"priests" had shifted uneasily to the front of the stage. Scene changes took place behind a barrage of spotlights directed at the audience that dazzled and obscured our gaze. There was lots of obscuring, though seats behind pillars had not been sold.

Vittorio Rossi's staging was uncomplicated and basic. In ten days there's scarcely time for more. The stars met on stage. Certainly Cappuccilli and Dimitrova were playing it as they went, and it was probably as good as it could have been that way. They both know what it takes — without much rehearsal. The miracle was the disorganisation — the sheer showbiz daring that got 100,000 people to shell out their twenty, twenty-five or even forty-five pounds for remarkably low-fi Verdi. With by no means an all-star line-up.

The playing of the orchestra (LSO) and the singing were both amplified, and maestro Nello Santi had his work cut out getting the priest's chorus

to respond, stay with him, do anything. Santi's style was clean cut. If it was fast it was very fast. If it was stylishly held back and swooped about with Verdian rabato, it was as it should be. Santi held it all together and pressed ahead with vigour when he could. His was the greatest burden.

The instruments tended to sound as if they were inside a box, rather than spread out right at the heart of the hall. The off-stage choruses and ensembles seemed to be coming from one of the Earis Court lavatories, via an old naval speaking-tube. The exciting (it's always exciting) entry of "acoustic" trumpets high up the pile of steps at the peak of the triumphal scene made an improperly glorious contrast with the regular brass tones.

Adriana Posta's Amneris swapped her silver for a black wig once she had got into the third act. Did anybody think it was someone else? Her voice too seemed firmer, less slavish in generous wobble, and fiercer

too. Orchestral amplification also got firmer. Then, Stefan Elenkov's High Priest was vibrant and imposing. If not up Cappuccilli's standard.

The excitement, the proof that even on this absurdly inflated scale something genuinely operatic can survive (if one is sitting near enough to it all, as a critic does), came after Dimitrova's Patria mia, whose top notes she was not well prepared for at such short notice. Dimitrova's singing needs careful running in, massively firm and focused. She seemed a touch thin as Aida here.

But in company with Cappuccilli's Amoros the sparks flew. All 14,500 people quietened. The opera was down to two or three performers, none of the nonsense for which one needed a great space, down to essentials, and the essentials were doing their bit. Mega-Verdi can be real Verdi.

• More performances with various casts tonight at 8, and nightly at 7 until Sunday.

## Tom Sutcliffe on Aida

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