

Aida on Broadway: LD Natasha Katz goes Egyptian

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The latest transposition of a classical opera into a Broadway musical (La Boheme/ Rent and Madame Butterfly/Miss Saigon spring to mind) is Aida, the Elton John (music) and Tim Rice (lyrics) collaboration currently on the boards at the Palace Theatre in New York City. This updated version of the Verdi original has more of a rock-and-roll sound than an operatic cadence. It also has a crisp, contemporary look with stylized scenic and costume design by the London-based Bob Crowley, and lighting design by New Yorker Natasha Katz. Their work for Aida won Crowley and Katz this year's Tony Awards for best set design and best lighting design, respectively.

Produced by Hyperion Theatricals (a sister company to Disney Theatricals), the Aida musical concept was first developed in conjunction with the Alliance Theatre Company in Atlanta. Unfortunately this was a troubled production, and Katz was the only member of the design team who made it to Chicago and the next leg of the show's journey to Broadway.

Based on the storyline of the opera, Aida is the story of an Ethiopian princess who is captured by the Egyptians and taken as a slave. She becomes a servant to Amneris, an Egyptian princess who is meant to marry Radames, the prince who is Aida's captor, and then lover. Infuriated with their betrayal, both political and personal, Amneris has Aida and the prince entombed alive and left to die. In this production, their tomb becomes one of the objets d'art in a museum setting, where a present-day Aida meets her Prince Charming as they are attracted to each other once again in another lifetime.

"Even though the Atlanta production was totally different, it was a plus for me to have worked on it since I knew the show, and was intimate with the songs, the dialogue, and the characters," explains Katz. "We began with the idea of rebirth and the possibility of living a second life. This is how the opening was formed. We talked about the look of the show before the scenery was designed, so that we had a feel for the show without the specifics."

To research the show, Crowley used the Egyptian collection at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, and he set the first scene in a museum, much like the Met, where a collection of Egyptian artifacts is on display. "The lighting was keyed off the display boxes themselves, and these are lit from the interior. They are the brightest things onstage, and there is very little other light," Katz says. "It is often dark in a museum to protect the works of art." To give the set the look of an actual room, Katz lit the upstage white wall and side panels with ETC Source Four ellipsoidals (with no color).

In other scenes, Katz used quite a bit of movement in the lighting. "Moving lights were a given in my mind," she says. "The show spans the ages, from early Egypt by the Nile with a fashion show that calls for hard-edged moving lights to a modern-day museum setting," says Katz. "The automated lights are key to giving the show a contemporary look." The automated rig has 79 Vari*Lite(R) automated fixtures including VL4(TM) wash luminaires and VL2C(TM) spot luminaires, as well as VL6(TM) spots, VL6B(TM) spots, and

VL7(TM) spots with zoom optics. Double gobos rotating in opposite directions in the two slots of the VL6s and VL7s were used to create water ripples indicating the Nile.

Some of the 11 VL7s in the rig (including three hung on the balcony rail) were used for color washes, as well as those placed at the ends of onstage pipes for water effects. "These create a dramatic angle from one side of the stage to the other. You can really see the beam of light and the water ripples," Katz notes. "There is a lot of water in this show.

"Yet in some scenes there is not one single moving light," she says in reference to action that takes place on the docks and in the slave camps, the scenes she calls "earthy and the most poetic, where the lighting has an incandescent feel." Katz's light also plays in sync with Crowley's scenic elements. When he provides three sailboats with oversized triangular red sails that practically cover the entire stage, Katz uses them as a canvas to reflect water ripples as well as a way to indicate that it's high noon with a hot sun overhead. Her choice of colors adds yellow (Rosco 312 Canary) for the sun, and a deep red (R25 Orange Red) to highlight the costumes.

Much of the color comes from Wybron Coloram II scrollers. "They are everywhere," says Katz. "Overhead, for sidelight, and front-of-house." There is also a Pani projector (provided by Production Arts) hung dead-center on the balcony rail. This is used to project a large map in Act II.

In the fashion show sequence, Amneris' closet comes to life and her dresses and hats are featured in a fast-paced parade across the stage. This is some of Crowley's most inspired work, with hats that range from large geometric shapes to a camel on a sand dune to accessorize some beautiful, brightly colored gowns with exotic designs. The decor is the inside of a giant walk-in closet with painted vacuformed shoes and handbags in square compartments that are actually light boxes behind a scrim.

The light boxes are lit from the inside using Ardee Lighting Klikstrip, an architectural festoon strip, with MR-11 bulbs focused on the shoes and bags. There are also Vari*Lite units focused on them as well, to add hot neon colors. An upstage cyc continually changes color as well to add to the vigor of the lighting.

"This was very exciting to light. The movement is continuous and there is lots of color-changing," says Katz, who used the concept of a rock concert to light this part of the show. "There are three girls who do a Supremes thing. The moving lights are influenced by the rhythm of the music and the color makes the dresses look great. In this scene, we move away from the reality of the show."

Another one of Crowley's inspired moments comes when the action moves to a spa within the palace. A pair of painted drops (one placed 6' downstage in front of the other) defines this royal aquatic playground. Not only is the aqua-and-white color scheme a knockout, but the drop is a stunning overhead view of a round swimming pool surrounded by turquoise tile. "There is an upstage drop painted like the water while the front drop is the painted pool deck," says Katz, who explains that the pool drop has a hole in the center.

Between the two drops, Katz uses R83 Medium Blue in striplights on the floor and overhead to light the upstage drop, and for sidelight on a sculpture of a swimmer poised on the pool's ladder. The front drop is lit with Rosco Double Gobo Rotators with dark blue Devon glass filters, and some of the Vari*Lites out on the balcony rail.

To light the massage tables sitting in front of the drops, Katz used deep color in the moving lights to bring out the costumes, blended with light lavender (R54 Special Lavender) in the sidelight to make the princess and her ladies-in-waiting look pretty. "There is a really beautiful cast with many various skin tones. The show celebrates that beauty and they all look good in the light."

The deep square box that serves as a tomb for Aida and the prince is lit with MR-16 lamps tucked away within the box. "You really want no light at all in there but that doesn't work very well theatrically, so we hid the source," notes Katz.

The conventional lighting rig was supplied by Four Star Lighting, with the Vari*Lite automated lighting system provided by VLPS New York. The show is run on an ETC Obsession 1500 console for the conventional fixtures and an Artisan(R) console for the Vari*Lites, with one switch closure that pushes the go button on both desks at the same time, with VLQ(TM) running the Artisan. "The cues have to happen together," says Aland Henderson, who handled the Vari*Lite programming for the show. "Two operators could not be precise enough, especially when there are 80 to 90 cues in one musical number."

Henderson also notes that Katz relied more on the heavy saturated dichroic colors for the dance numbers, with more traditional theatrical or pastel shades for the non-musical moments. "She wanted the Vari*Lites to be very sharp and contrast with the conventional lights used in the slave camp. There is a distinct feel for the good guys," he points out. "We also used shutter cuts in the gobo slots of the VL6Bs and VL7s, including a 3/4 circle and a rectangle for strong paths of light, then used the zoom optics to size them in."

Katz also worked with her associate LD Edward Pierce, production electrician Salvatore J. Restuccia, and board operator David Trayer on this production. "I couldn't have done it without them," says Katz, giving kudos to her crew. "We were lucky to have a 15-day tech period with the cast onstage in Chicago. Then we had another nine days in New York since there were lots of changes in the script that called for lighting changes as well. We were fortunate to have that time in New York."

Katz layered and textured the lighting in certain scenes, such as the slave camp where she uses lots of gobos to add an earthy feel that is different from the harsher light of the Egyptian world and the fast pace of the fashion show. "Bob's brief was not to build a single pyramid," she explains, allowing that the creativity of the sets led to more color and more unusual angles in the lighting.

"Bob said to 'go for it' and some very creative ideas can come from that," Katz adds. "That is the poetry of Bob Crowley's sets. The light on the actors is bright and clear so they stand out from the colorful world around them."

PRODUCER Hyperion Theatricals

LIGHTING DESIGNER Natasha Katz

SCENIC AND COSTUME DESIGN Bob Crowley

ASSOCIATE LIGHTING DESIGNER Edward Pierce

VARI*LITE PROGRAMMER Aland Henderson

BOARD OPERATOR David Trayer

PRODUCTION ELECTRICIAN Salvatore J. Restuccia

CUSTOM SMOKE EFFECTS Chic Silber

LIGHTING SUPPLIERS Four Star Lighting Production Arts/PRG VLPS New York

LIGHTING EQUIPMENT (11) Vari*Lite VL7s (20) Vari*Lite VL2Cs (24) Vari*Lite VL4s (8) Vari*Lite VL6s (18) Vari*Lite VL6Bs (3) Lycian 1290 long-throw 2.5kW xenon followspots (2) Lycian Starklite 1272

followspots (519) ETC Source Fours (167) Altman PAR-64s (41) Lighting & Electronics Mini-Strips (72) L&E single-cell Baby Broad Cys (42) Rosco Double Gobo Rotators (286) Wybron Coloram II scrollers (4) Wybron CXI color-mixing scrollers (16) Diversitronics ESM Strobe Caps for Source Fours (1) Robert Juliat 714 SX 2,000W tungsten ellipsoidal (1) Pani compact 2.5k projector with douser and slide changer (2) Strand Cadenza effects projectors (10) ETC Sensor 96x2.4kW dimmer racks Ardee Lighting Klikstrip MDG Max3000 Atmosphere generators for custom smoke effects Vari*Lite Artisan control console ETC Obsession 1500 control console

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