



Fascinating Aida

Elton John and Tim Rice's Aida, the latest Walt Disney Theatrical Production, opened in early November at the Cadillac Palace Theater in Chicago, Illinois. Sharon Stancavage talked with the technical team . . .

This fresh look at the classic Verdi opera is directed by Robert Falls, with sets and costumes by Bob Crowley, lighting design by Natasha Katz and sound design by Steve Canyon Kennedy.

In John and Rice's *Aida*, the operatic score has been replaced by a pop score, which was released several months before the premiere of the show. The story begins in the present day and moves into ancient Egypt, retaining many elements of the traditional *Aida* story. "Forget everything you ever knew about *Aida*," advises set and costume designer Bob Crowley. "This isn't a spectacle," he states. "The conversations I had with Bob Falls dealt with telling a love story, and how best to convey it, rather than visualising how we put ancient Egypt on the stage," he explains. Consequently, the spectacle of old has been replaced by ample use of backdrops and

the sparse use of large set pieces that gives *Aida* a very non-traditional, visually clean look.

As set and costume designer, one of Crowley's biggest challenges on this project was to be rid of the preconceptions that audiences have regarding *Aida*. "When you think of *Aida*, you think of all those gigantic productions," he explains. "That was the most difficult part for me - trying to redefine the kind of world that has been so over-designed in the past, with multi-million dollar budgets. When I came to the project, I wanted to clean the visual palette."

For Crowley, colour was the crucial visual element in his set and costume design. "The colours of this show are quite intense - they, together with the texture of the production, give the show a certain exoticism." Crowley's

ancient Egypt is a heavily saturated world filled with intense colours that dominate the stage. "I use very, very hot colours - pinks, deep oranges, intense reds, shades of sand, deep blues and aquamarines. At times, the scenery and the costumes are of the same kind of value, and I've deliberately put one against the other so that you get an incredible contrast."

This version of *Aida* opens in the Egyptian wing of a contemporary museum, where the show also concludes, bringing the story full circle. At this point, the stage is filled with antiquities, many of which are housed in glass cases. "Everything in the cases is later found in the show," explains Crowley. "Including our leading lady, who eventually comes to life," he adds. When the Egyptian Princess steps out of the glass case, the set transforms taking the audience back to the days of the pharaoh. "The side walls turn 90 degrees," says Crowley. "I think it's thrilling for the audience to see a scene change, to see one world disappear and another appear in front of their very eyes - it's part of the magic."



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The lighting of the museum scenes are quite unlike any other part of the show. "The museum scenes lean towards an architectural style of lighting," explains lighting designer Natasha Katz. "In fact, there's very little colour in it at all."

The audience is then taken on a visual journey from the museum to Nubia, where Egyptians, bathed in intense red light, stand atop a large red hanging scenic piece that represents the sails of a ship. The Egyptians take their captive slaves to a visually conceptualised Egypt that is starkly different to previous concepts. The colours are more intense than can be described; the set pieces are minimal, yet when they are used, they augment the look perfectly. "In terms of the technical aspects of the show, it's not that complicated," Crowley explains. "It's quite traditional in its use of flying scenery etc."

Crowley's visual treats include a stylised birds-

eye view of a swimming pool, awash in hues of aquamarine, and a silhouetted row of palm trees with a reverse and repeat, representing a reflection in water. There is also a 34ft wide by 24ft long piece of silk that at first represents the Nile River, flowing below the palm trees and onto the stage where the slave women wash clothes, then later magically transforms into a canopy when the palms fly out, before metamorphosing once again, this time into the tent of Ramades, the male lead. But, scenically speaking, the most visually stunning moment in the show comes when a 35ft long staircase appears in the sky for the finale of Act I. "It's a huge piece that is flown in and jack-knives its way onto the stage," Crowley explains. "As soon as it's in place, people walk down it. Of course, this is done in full view of the audience and it's rather impressive, because they don't quite know what the piece is going to do."

"From a lighting standpoint, Egypt has a very strong colour palette," explains Katz. "I use a lot of oranges and a lot of yellows. It's clear, it's bright and it feels a little more polished . . . more saturated and vibrant than the museum scenes, or the scenes in the Nubian slave camp." For the Egyptian scenes, Katz has relied on Rosco 312, Rosco 22 and Rosco 23. Visually, the lighting, rather than simply completing the set, becomes a design element in itself that is just as important as the scenery. Katz also uses a total of 79 Vari-Lite luminaires, including 11 VL7 spots, 24 VL4 washlights and 20 VL2C spots with control via an Artisan console. "I use the moving lights in almost the entire show," Katz explains. "I think the VL4s are certainly right for the show. The VL7s have incredible zoom optics and they work quite well." Her use of gobos throughout the show is fairly conservative, but effective.

When the action isn't taking place among the visual opulence of the Egyptian royalty, the performers are in a

stark Nubian slave camp that provides an unsettling contrast between wealth and poverty. "The Nubian slave camp is definitely earthier than Egypt," Katz explains. "The camp uses more earthy tones so there's little colour in those scenes, there's a lot of Lee 154, and that's pretty much it," she adds. Another factor in the Nubian slave camp is the lack of moving lights. "When we get to the Nubian slave camp, I don't even turn the moving lights on," says Katz. "I primarily use ETC Source Fours - they feel much more natural than any of the moving lights will ever be, because the moving lights don't have incandescent bulbs in them. The minute you turn on a non-incandescent fixture in an earthy sequence, you feel like you're in the present day, and I didn't want it to feel that way."

Katz also makes use of a variety of house lighting positions, including a 60ft balcony rail, four box booms, five Lycian Starklite 1272 spotlights and a 70ft truss. "The truss is at a 45 degree angle to the plaster line, and is located about 30ft from the stage," she says. The truss is filled with an abundance of ETC Source Four units, as well as two VL7s. "We've assembled a truss that gives us the exact same positions that we're going to have at the Palace Theater in New York," says Katz. "The angles at the front of house vary so much that the whole feel of the show can change. We definitely didn't want to go through that."

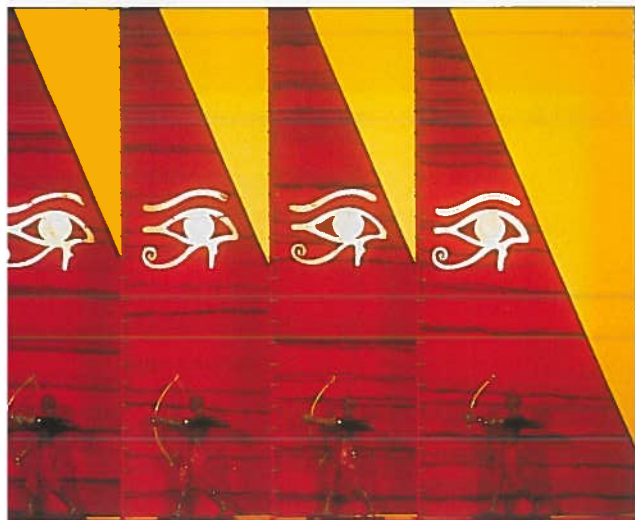
While Crowley had the task of overcoming the expectations of Aida, the biggest challenge in the project for Katz was one that was purely technical. "Upstage is a cyc, with a bounce drop two feet upstage of it. The cyc is 40ft high and 30ft wide, and normally you need four to five feet between the two drops to hang lights. We only had two feet," Katz admits. "I ended up using Par cans with scrollers that are on 10" centres and they completely ring the entire cyc. They're in two circuits, so I ended up using around 200 units."

While Crowley and Katz were dealing with their complex elements, sound designer Steve Canyon Kennedy had challenges of his own. "The most demanding part of any production is the changes that take place every day," Kennedy explains. "The orchestrations are changing daily, as is the dialogue and you don't get a sense of any kind of continuity."

The system that Kennedy designed for Aida is slightly larger than what is typically found in a musical. "It's

not your typical Broadway show - it's a LOUD Broadway show," he says. "We're dealing with pop music with heavy orchestrations and electronically-generated sound, so the sound system is really more for the band."

For the main speaker system, Kennedy chose the EAW KF 695. "We typically use a smaller cabinet, a Meyer UPA or something similar, but in the case of Aida I felt a more substantial cabinet would be appropriate." The proscenium system consists of four EAW KF 695s, four EAW KF 300s and a further four Meyer USWs. "I like the 695 because of its wide dispersion. With most large cabinets you'd have to



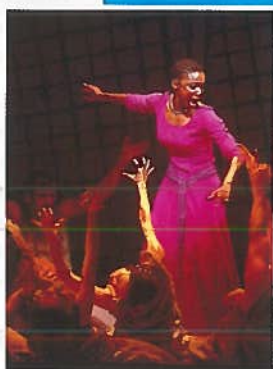
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use two speakers in order to achieve the same coverage," Kennedy comments. There is also a centre cluster of four EAW KF 695s, and two KF 300s, as well as six pairs of EAW JF 80s that are used as front fills. The front-of-house system is completed by a surround sound system, comprising 12 EAW JF 80s located on the sides and in the rear of the audience.

Aida has an 11-piece orchestra, located in the orchestra pit, as well as a four-piece string section which plays in a room offstage. "With all the electronic equipment in the pit it gets very crowded," Kennedy explains. "We wanted a present string sound. By remoting the strings, the other instruments don't get into their microphones, and we gain a great deal of control," he adds. But physically isolating the strings from the rest of the orchestra brought up other dilemmas. "The challenge was establishing good communications between the pit and the string room," Kennedy explains. "They are so isolated that both visual and audio monitoring become crucial."

Overall, the Aida sound design doesn't rely heavily on effects. "I really don't like using much



the music play itself."

Kennedy is also prepared, as are Crowley and Katz, for the move to Broadway in February. "This is the same system that is going to Broadway," Kennedy confirms. "Except that on

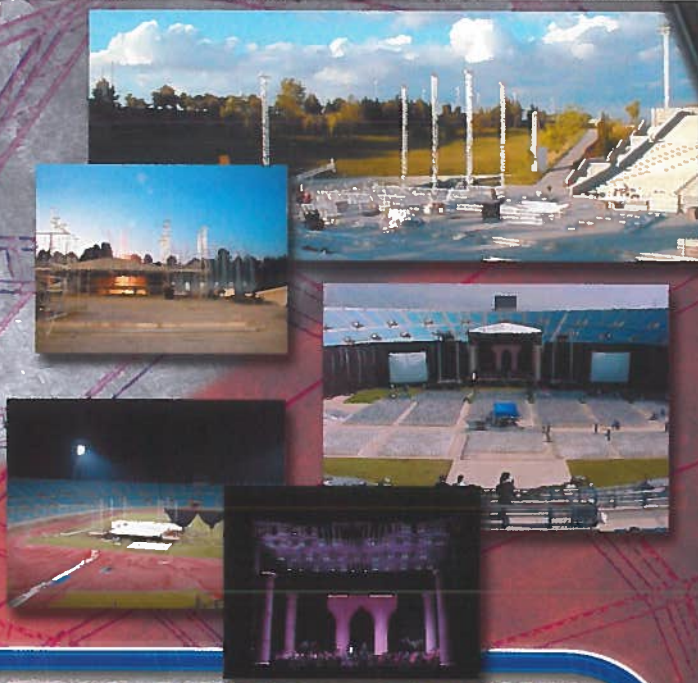
in the way of effects," Kennedy confides. "I use a vocal reverb, a band reverb and one special effects processor. I wanted to keep it simple and just let

Broadway, we're going to add under-balcony and under-mezzanine systems."

In the end, the lovers are doomed, as in the traditional opera. The death scene takes place in a stylised tomb, which was also part of the original museum scene. The audience is then taken back to the museum and the ending is very different to that Verdi had in mind, but is still satisfying. Previews for Aida at the Palace Theater in New York begin on February 25th, with the official opening on March 23rd.



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