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Arts & Leisure

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Onstage by Juan Antonio Lanuza

Atlantis' *Aida* warmly received

Elton John and Tim Rice's *Aida*, which is one of Disney's first ventures into Broadway musicals, has been a big hit in both the US, England and 20 other countries, and now also in Manila.

The show opened in New York on March 23, 2000 and ran for 232 weeks (1,852 performances). It then had at least a two-year run touring the US. It won the 2000 Grammy Award for Best Musical Show Album, the Tony for Best Score for Elton John and Tim Rice, Best Lead Actress in a Musical (Heather Headley), Best Lighting Design (Natasha Katz), and Best Set Design (Bob Crowley). The musical's book was written by Linda Woolverton, Robert Falls and Philippine-born David Henry Hwang.

The show is based on Verdi's opera *Aida*. The musical originated from a children's storybook version of Verdi's opera written by soprano Leontyn Price. Disney acquired the rights for a proposed animated feature film. However, development of the film was shelved, but the source material evolved into the stage version.

Atlantis Production opened *Aida* (directed by Chari Arespacochaga) at the Carlos P. Romulo Auditorium at the RCBC Plaza on June 24 during an evening of very bad weather. Was it worth going to the theater that night? YES! YES! YES!

The play starts in the Egyptian wing of a modern museum where a man and a woman touring the exhibit catch each others eyes. A statue of Amneris, a female Pharaoh, comes to life and transports the couple to ancient Egypt. There Radames, captain of the Egyptian Army, and his men are returning from an expedition to Nubia, Egypt's longtime enemy. He is captivated by one of the women captured by his men, namely *Aida*, who tries to free herself by out-dueling one of his soldiers. Radames is betrothed to marry Amneris but is smitten by *Aida*. He gives *Aida* to Amneris as a handmaiden. The two women become very close. This leads to complications.

Aida is an epic tale of love, loyalty, betrayal and forgiveness. The last trait is shown when Amneris convinces her father to let *Aida* and Radames die in the same tomb, an act of mercy for two people she has come to love. As the lovers are dying, the scene darkens and Amneris sings a beautiful song as we are brought back to the contemporary museum we saw at the beginning. The spirit of Amneris reveals that as she became Pharaoh, the lovers' deaths gave birth to a reign of peace between Egypt and Nubia. She watches as the modern man and woman are strangely drawn to each other. They are the reincarnation of *Aida* and Radames, finding each other in a new beginning.

The functional and colorful set plus the very colorful costumes made for good viewing.

The music was slightly more modern than that of *The Lion King* which I saw last week in Singapore, but still was pleasant. When you have a singer who not only has a great voice but has excellent diction like Ima de Castro, that is an extra blessing for the audience.

Ms. De Castro as *Aida* was sensational. She sang with the clarity one is used to hearing from singers who have gone through training for an Andrew Lloyd Webber/Cameron Mackintosh production. It turns out she played the role of Kim in *Miss Saigon* for four years in Asia, Dublin, Portugal and the UK. She was in the Manila production during the musical's later run at the Main Theater of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) when I saw her perform three times and she was splendid as Kim. Likewise she was splendid as *Aida*. She has a beautiful voice of an impressive range, sings with feeling, and you can understand the words she sings. We hope she is used more for future musicals in Manila. What a talented person she is!

Myke Salomon, a graduate from La Salle Greenhills, brings some previous stage experience (La Salle Greenhills Cue Drama Club, Repertory Philippines, Spotlight Artists and PETA) to the role of Radames. He has very good stage presence and a good singing voice. He will be seen in future musical productions.

Rachel Alejandro was very well cast as Amneris. She has the perfect stage presence for the role, sings with conviction, and acts very well. We will miss her when she makes her home in the Big Apple.

Hajji Alejandro, Rachel's father, returns to the stage as Zoser, Radames' father. Though the role was not very long, he made the most out of it.

Alys Serdenia was very good as Nehebka. She was as good as in *Legally Blonde* and *A Little Night Music*.

Another revelation that evening was Josh Santana as Mereb. He sings and acts like a



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veteran stage performer. I hope he is utilized more in future musicals.

The ensemble was composed of some performers who have excelled in major roles (Felix Rivera, Alan Alojipan, Jenny Jamora, Johan de la Fuente and Carlos Canlas). They were brilliantly trained in the dance sequences using the interesting choreography of Cecile Martinez.

Special credit has to be given to director Chari Arespacochaga, scenic designer Faust Peneyra, lighting designer Dong Calingacion, costume designer Twinkle Zamora and vocal coach Manman Angsico for doing their jobs extremely well.

At the end of the show the audience gave them a well deserved standing ovation.

I do not know why some persons attending shows such as this one insist in talking during a performance. Three elderly women seating to my right on my row insisted in talking until I shouted "Silence, please!" Just after I utter those words and they stopped talking, Ima de Castro commenced singing — beautifully — "Easy as Life," a song that was worth the whole show. It would have been a shame if we would not have been able to appreciate how extraordinary Ms. De Castro's interpretation of the song was because of the annoying talking of these ladies.

The show runs until July 10.

WHAT'S ON IN MANILA?

- **Repertory Philippine's** Children's Theater presents *Seussical* from Aug. 13 until mid-December. Call Marie Talay at 571-6926 or 571-4941 to reserve seats, to block buy seats, or purchase shows for fund raising.
- Due to the heavy rains on June 23 and 24, the PhilamLife Auditorium was flooded and the June 25 recital of **pianist Lorenzo Medel** had to be postponed to June 30, 7:30 p.m. He will play compositions by Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, Prokofiev and concertos by Bach and Liszt. Free admission.
- **Kultura Filipino**, a glimpse of Philippine culture through traditional dances and songs, is presented every Tuesday and Thursday (buffet at 6 p.m. and performance at 7 p.m.) at Barbara's Restaurant, Intramuros, Manila. This costs P495 net per person. For reservations, call Barbara's at 527-4986, 527-4090 or 527-3893.
- **The Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber** will be brought to the Cultural Center of the Philippines' Main Theater by Citibank for a 13-show run starting June 24. Book at TicketWorld through 891-999 or www.ticketworld.com.
- **Stages** presents *The Light in the Piazza*, starring Karylle, at the Meralco Theater commencing July. For inquiries, call Stages at 818-1111 local 225.
- **Atlantis Productions** presents a number of productions this year starting with Elton John and Tim Rice's *Aida* at the Carlos P. Romulo Auditorium, RCBC Plaza, Ayala Ave., Makati from June 24 to July 10. This will be followed by *In the Heights*, Lin Manuel Miranda's Tony Award winning musical (Bobby Garcia directs). Performances are at the Carlos P. Romulo Auditorium from Sept. 2 to 18. Bobby Garcia and Chari Arespacochaga will then direct the Broadway Musical of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* from Nov. 18 to Dec. 11 at the Meralco Theater with Erik Santos as the Prince and Rachelle Ann Go as The Little Mermaid. Finally, the highly successful musical *Next to Normal*, starring Menchu Lauchengco-Yulo, will have a repeat run at the Carlos P. Romulo Auditorium from Oct. 7-16. Do not miss this one if you are a lover of serious theater. For inquiries and reservations, call Claire at Atlantis at 892-7078/840-1187 or visit www.atlantisproductionsinc.com.
- **Cirque du Soleil's Varekai** is showing at tents being put up in front of the Quirino Grandstand in Luneta, Manila. The show runs until July 24. Regular and VIP seats may be purchased online at www.hoopla.ph or at www.cirquedusoleil.ph. For inquiries, call 669-2222 or 775-0939. VIP guests will start their experience at the Tapis Rouge Tent where they will enjoy hors d'oeuvres and wines provided by the chefs of the Manila Hotel. They also will receive a special Tapis Rouge gift.

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