

OPERA REVIEW

In Tiny Quarters, Pomp And a Grandness of Spirit

By ANNE MIDGETTE

Opera inspires a rare kind of fanatical love. There are many small theater companies in New York, but I know of none solely devoted to producing, say, the works of Shakespeare in lovingly homemade productions. Yet there is a long tradition in this city of a genre a friend of mine has dubbed "garage opera," meaning opera produced in very small spaces by people who love it so much they have determined to find a way to make it themselves.

A precedent was set by La Puma Opera Workshop, where in the 1960s an eccentric diva of a certain age, Olive Middleton, reigned as a near-atonal Tosca, Norma and Sieglinda. (Aural documentation is available at www.collup.com/olive/olive.html.) But today, the granddaddy of the small companies is the Amato Opera on the Bowery, now in its 58th consecutive season, where the venerable maestro, Anthony Amato, still leads his ensemble: electric piano, a smattering of winds and a cast of singers that changes at every performance. And to show that the love of Italian opera trumps reason, their current production is a revival of the grand opera "Aida."

In Amato's heyday, there were few places where young singers could perform, and you could hope to catch a promising voice on the way up. Today, the opera world is rife with apprentice programs and other opportunities. Amato's cast on Sunday afternoon included exactly one promising young singer, Peter Campbell as Ramfis. The rest were of a certain age and uneven vocal estates, and for the first two acts, the main thing communicated was that even spirited singing along from the conductor cannot replace the salutary ef-

"Aida" continues on Saturdays and Sundays through March 19 at the Amato Opera, 319 Bowery, at Second Street, East Village; (212) 228-8200.



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fects of adequate rehearsal.

Yet love did conquer. In Act III, "Aida" changes gears from mass spectacle to intense character opera with voice-shredding music, and it seemed unlikely that any of the principals would emerge standing. But for all their limitations, Aida and Radames, in particular, knew something about singing. They marshaled their resources and got all the way through the darn thing, high notes and all, with many a wobble but nary a (major) crack, and left their hearts on the stage in the process. Good? No. But it was touching.

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