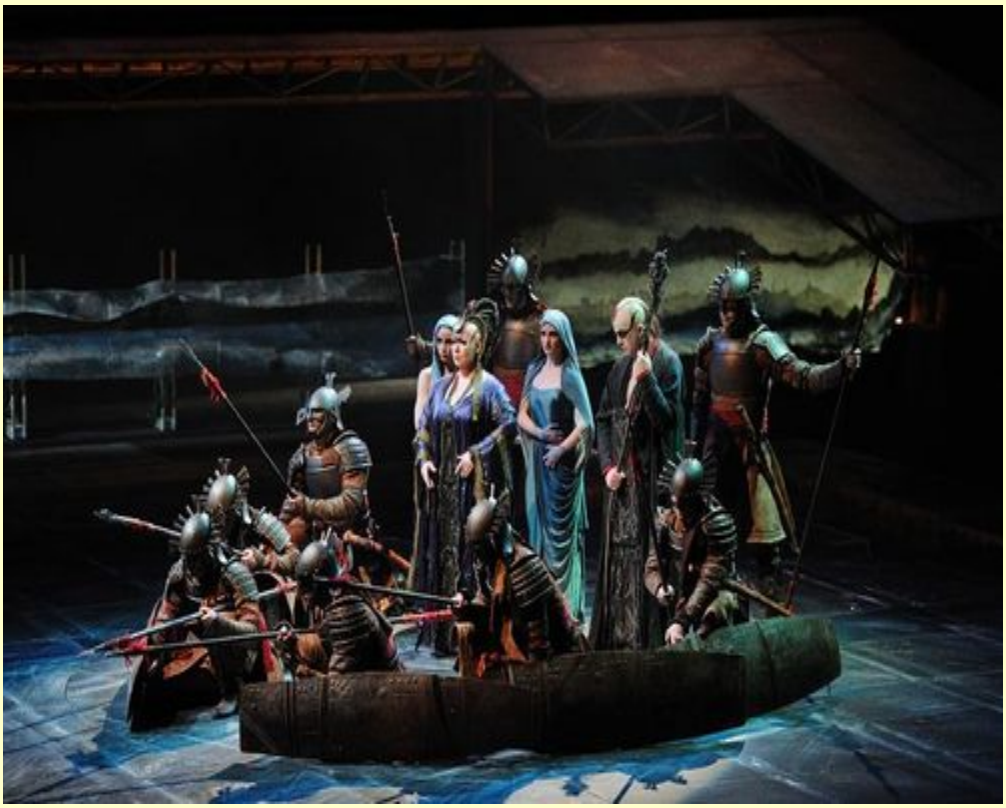
RIMROCK OPERA



Presents

# Aïda

Music by Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni

## Study Guide for Grades 9 through 12

## Time: The dynasty of the Pharaohs
## Place: Memphis and Thebes in ancient Egypt

# I. The Plot

**Act One**

In the royal palace at Memphis, the high priest, Ramfis, informs Radames, a young captain of the guard, that Ethiopia is posing a threat to the Nile Valley. Radames hopes that the goddess Isis will choose him to be the leader of the Egyptian army, believing that a victory over the Ethiopians would enable him to free his secret love, Aïda, the Ethiopian slave of the king's daughter, Amneris. Amneris, who also loves Radames, enters and begins to question Radames, suspecting that he is in love with Aïda. A messenger arrives to announce that Amonasro is leading the Ethiopian army to march on Thebes. Radames is appointed leader of the Egyptian army, and he leads his men in a battle hymn ("Su! del Nilo!"). Amneris is echoed by her people as she cries, "Return Victorious!" Aïda is stunned to hear herself repeat these words, and is left to contemplate her conflict of loyalties. Although her captors do not know it, she is the Princess of Ethiopia and her lover will soon be engaged in battle with her father.

**Act Two**

Radames is the victor in the battle. While awaiting his return, Amneris is groomed and entertained by her slaves. In an attempt to determine if Aïda does indeed love Radames, Amneris tells her slave that he was slain in battle ("Fu la sorte degli armi"). Aïda's sorrowful response reveals her secret love. Amneris then discloses that Radames is really alive, but subsequently threatens Aïda, She is to keep her place as a slave and ignore her feelings for Radames. Aïda nearly confesses her royal identity, but instead, pleads for mercy. As Radames returns, a parade and dances celebrate the success of Egypt ("Gloria all' Egitto, ad Iside"). Radames is crowned victor by Amneris and his captives are lead in; these include Aïda's father, Amonasro, disguised as an officer. He warns Aïda not to give away his royal identity, and proceeds to plead for mercy for the lives of his fellow people ("Ma tu, Re, tu signore possente"). Ramfis and the priests suggest that the captives be killed, but Radames asks for the captives' freedom to be his reward. Ramfis suggests that all but Aïda's father be released. The King agrees and gives Radames the hand of Amneris as his reward for victory.

**Act Three**

Ramfis leads Amneris to a temple of Isis on the bank of the Nile to receive a blessing on the eve of her wedding. Her face veiled, Aïda enters to wait in secrecy for Radames. She is immersed in nostalgic thoughts as she longs for her conquered homeland ("O patria mia"). Her thoughts are interrupted by the appearance of her father, who has learned of her love for Radames. He encourages her to betray Radames by tricking him into revealing the Egyptian army's invasion plan. She attempts to decline, but finally agrees as he scolds her loyalties and reminds her of what the Egyptians have done to her beloved homeland. Unaware of Amonasro's presence, Radames appears to Aïda, declaring that he will marry her after his next victory. She instead insists that they run away together to Ethiopia ("Fuggiam gli ardori inospiti"), and asks which route they will take. Upon hearing the Egyptian plan, Amonasro shows himself and declares that he is actually the King of Ethiopia. Radames is horrified by his unwilling act of treason ("Io son disonorato!"), while Aïda and Amonasro try to convince him that it was an act of fate. Amneris discovers them, declaring that Radames must be a traitor. Amonasro lunges at Amneris with a drawn dagger, but he is stopped by Radames. Radames unexpectedly urges Amonasro and Aïda to escape. He then places himself under arrest ("Sacerdote, io resto a te").

**Act Four**

Radames is sent to the Temple of Judgement where Amneris offers him a chance to save himself. She will plead for him if he will forsake Aïda ("Già i sacerdoti adunansi"), yet he refuses, preferring death. Amneris listens as the priests ask him three times to defend himself. Radames refuses to answer and is condemned to death. Amneris, appalled at the consequences of her jealousy, declares that their need for revenge will kill an innocent man.

Buried alive in a tomb beneath the temple, Radames thinks only of Aïda. Suddenly, she appears in the presumably sealed temple basement, having slipped in earlier to share her lover's fate. Radames fails in a final, desperate attempt to remove the stone holding them in the chamber. Resigned to their fate, the lovers bid farewell to the earth ("O terra addio"). Radames faces death with Aïda. Appearing above the vault, Amneris mourns and prays.

## II. The History

How can we tell when in Egypt's vast history *Aïda* takes place? Verdi and his librettist are not specific when they indicate that *Aïda* is set in Egypt "during the time of the Pharaohs"; however, the term "Pharaoh" (which in ancient Egyptian meant "great house" or "palace,") goes back almost three thousand years before Christ. At that time, Menes, who is considered to be the first Pharaoh, united Upper Egypt (the southern desert area) with Lower Egypt (the delta area opening into the Mediterranean Sea) and founded the First Dynasty. Thirty Dynasties and 3,000 years later, the term was still used to describe the Egyptian rulers. Even after Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 332 BC and his Greek general Ptolemy became ruler of Egypt, the term was still used.

Given this information, which temporal indications or hints appear in the opera? Egyptian history is generally divided into three "Kingdoms". These are specific periods when Egypt was united under strong rulers. These periods marked epic individual and collective accomplishments.

**The Old Kingdom** is established in 2700 BC, with the capital city Memphis, in Lower Egypt.

(An intermediate period occurred, during which rival chiefs created great chaos; strong alliances eventually emerged to establish the Middle Kingdom.)

**The Middle Kingdom** is established in 2000 BC, with Thebes as the capital. The end of the Middle Kingdom was marked by the emergence of an Asiatic people - called the Hyksos – who conquered and controlled Egypt.

**The New Kingdom** was founded in 1600 BC, and the Hellenistic (Ptolemy) dynasty marks the end of the Pharoahs. (Cleopatra, of Julius Caesar's time was the last surviving member of the Ptolemy ruling class.)

Since Verdi indicates in his first scene that Memphis is the location of the King's palace, we can assume that setting is the Old Kingdom. If so, the great pyramids, a.k.a. wonders of the ancient world, were being constructed outside the very doors of the palaces and temples through which Aïda, Amneris, and Radames walked.

**Geography:** Much of the Old Kingdom culture was a result of the Egyptian topography. Though ancient Egypt was about the size of Texas and New Mexico combined, 99% of the people lived in a narrow strip along the green, fertile banks of the Nile river. This strip stretched almost 800 miles through desert and barren rock cliffs to the Mediterranean Sea.

The Nile, which flooded its banks each year, irrigated the land and deposited fresh silt so that rich crops could be grown. The Nile suckled Egypt into a wealthy, self-sufficient country, with boundaries of mountains and desert to keep her relatively free of invaders. Harnessing the Nile to greatest advantage required real cooperation, however, and uniting under one great leader - the Pharaoh - seemed the best way to achieve it.

**Religion:** The primary spiritual difference between the Egyptians and other early peoples was that, to the Egyptians, the Pharaoh was not just a leader. He was a god. To the early Egyptians, there was no separation between religious and secular life. Everything that happened to them was perceived as the will of the gods. The people prayed to them, worked for them, and gave gifts to them. Since the Pharaoh was also a god, the Egyptians never questioned giving service or gifts to him as well.

In Egypt's early years, many gods were represented in animal forms. These forms included lions, crocodiles, jackals and birds. Later, they appeared with the bodies of men and the heads of animals. Horus, the falcon-headed god - who was always personally associated with the king - is an example. Finally, gods arose in fully human form. One of the first was Phtah, the god of craftsmen, who was the patron of the city of Memphis and believed to be the creator of the universe. In Act I, Scene 2 of *Aïda*, Ramfis entrusts the sacred sword and armor (crafted by Phtah) to Radames (In an unfortunate anachronistic artistic rampage, Verdi refers to the temple as *The Temple of Vulcan*.) Vulcan was a Roman god of a much later period, but he was also a god of metallurgy, hence of craftsmanship.) Normally, in Egyptian Mythology, there were four major deities:

**Re** - the sun god
**Anubis** - the jackal-headed guardian of the tombs
**Osiris** - ruler of the underworld
**Isis** – wife of Osiris, goddess of magic

**Death:** Death was integral to the world view and behavior of the ancient Egyptians. Everything pointed towards the afterlife. If a man enjoyed riches and beauty during his earthly life, he buried his treasures with him to enjoy in his afterlife. If a poor man struggled on earth, his afterlife would be easier and happier. Perhaps one of the reasons that Radames and Aïda speak often of death is that it is the solution to the problem of their forbidden love. The Pharaoh, after ruling on Earth, also ruled both living and dead in the afterlife. Eternity was a tangible concept to the ancient Egyptians; it justified the enormous toil and expense necessary to build gargantuan tombs, pyramids and temples. This, in turn, further justified the transportation of immense stone blocks, cut from quarries with primitive tools, across desert expanses to produce monuments that remain engineering masterpieces.

**Burial:** Great effort was also involved in preparing a body for burial, for the Egyptian belief was that, while the soul left the body at death, it was expected to be able to return to it throughout eternity. Elaborate procedures - some lasting as long as seventy days - were used to mummify the bodies of nobles. Embalmers used salts, spices and resins to wrap corpses in many layers of linen, These corpses were encased in several coffins of successively larger sizes. The process was so successful that many mummies still exist today - in excellent states of preservation. Proper preparation for burial was important to all Egyptians, but especially important to those of noble birth. The burial of Radames and Aïda alive, without this preparation, makes their sentence a particularly cruel one.

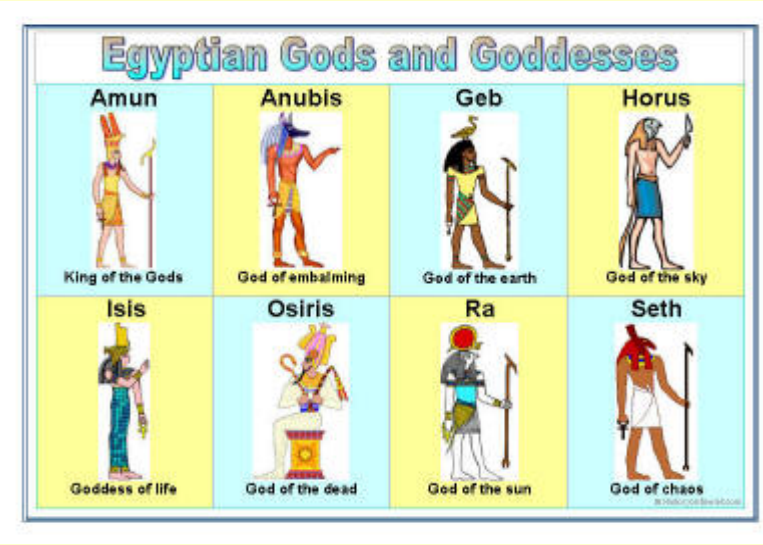
**Architecture:** The religious emphasis on the afterlife is further reflected in Egyptian architecture. Only temples and tombs were constructed or carved out of stone, so that the god or human they honored would be honored forever. The ordinary building material in

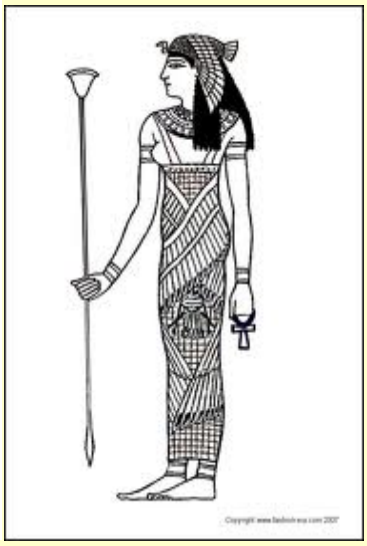
ancient Egypt was mud brick, baked in the sun. It was readily available, lasted at least a lifetime when cared for, and could be used for a simple one-room hut or a palace of a hundred rooms. There are many reasons to believe that the palaces of the Pharaohs, though none have survived, were as elaborate in their mud brick construction as the stone temples. The walls - like the walls of the tombs - were plastered and beautifully painted with scenes of everyday life. Furniture was beautifully appointed with gold, ivory and precious stones. There is no question that the fictional Pharaoh, Amneris, and Ramfis dwelled in luxurious surroundings, dressed in opulent fabrics, and exquisitely crafted necklaces. The jewelry also included bracelets and rings of gold and jewels.

**Artistic Style:** Although we have pinpointed Aïda's setting as the Old Kingdom, the scenic designer is faced with unique challenges in replicating Egyptian palaces and temples. The Egyptian art and architecture that was established during the Old Kingdom remained largely unchanged for 3,000 years. In relief carvings and wall paintings, figures are frequently depicted with head and legs in profile but shoulders and torso in frontal pose. Minimal attempt is made to illustrate depth. Statues have a block-like shape with flat surfaces to allow for hieroglyphic writing. There were a number of reasons for this continuity of style. Most art was religious and therefore bound by religious conventions. Each Pharaoh was the chief patron of the arts and his demands took precedence over individual artistic creativity. The Egyptians by nature were artistically conservative. During the brief reign of the Pharaoh Akhenaton - a progressive-minded leader - some art did become more naturalistic, but after his death and the return of the standard religion, art reverted to archaic forms.

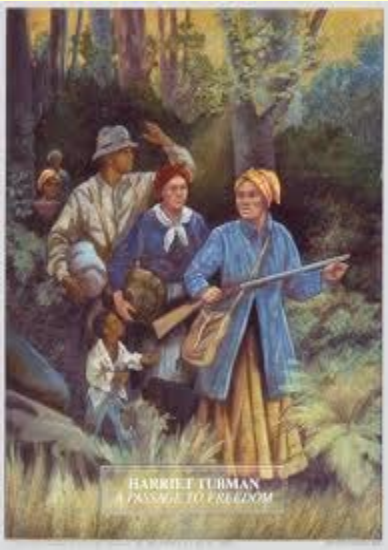
Akhenaton was succeeded by an unimportant and short-lived boy king whose name, thousands of years later, would become one of the best-known in the realm of Egyptian art and history. This boy was Tutankhamen, whose tomb was discovered in 1922, almost untouched by grave robbers. The priceless treasures that were buried with him gave the world a new perspective on an ancient civilization. The new artifacts augmented the existing collection that had been assembled from grave-robbers, and they exponentially enhanced modern comprehension of Egyptian art.

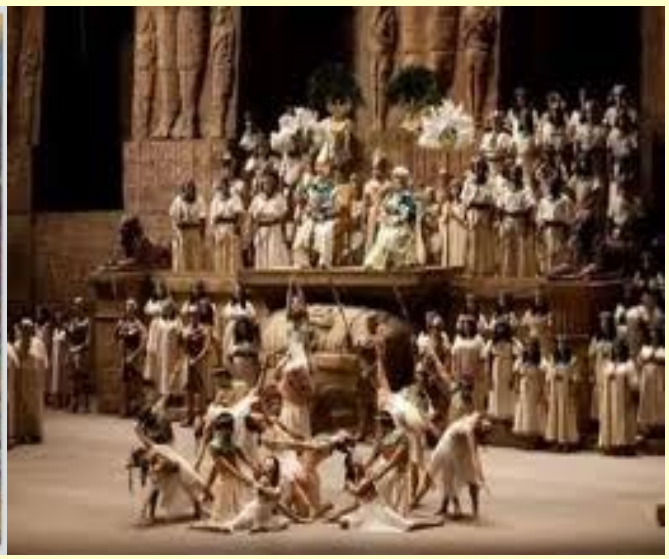
It may seem odd that these stylistic traditions - with minor variations - could remain unchanged for 3,000 years. It is nonetheless an art form that has been, is and will be invariably recognized as idiomatically Egyptian.



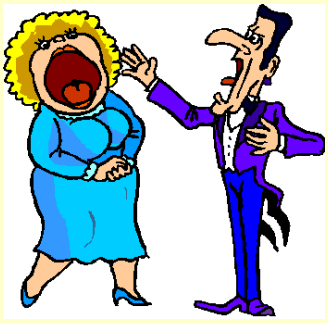
**Slavery:** Composer Giuseppe Verdi took an enormous risk in tackling the slavery issue, especially with respect to Central European and North American political sentiments. Commissioned in 1871, a mere ten years after the beginning of the American Civil War, the opera *Aïda* heightened the fury of many Southerners who opposed Union reconstruction efforts. Three levels of irony would be apparent to any late 19th Century American – Northerner or Southerner - witnessing the first European performances. The first and most obvious irony is that the entire plot centers around an Ethiopian slave who rose to challenge Egypt, just as Harriet Tubman and many others risked their lives and challenged higher authorities during the American underground railroad. The second and perhaps even more transparent irony is that a conquered nation or culture typically becomes more dangerous on the heels of a military defeat. Strong Confederate sentiments existed well after the final shots of the Civil War were fired in 1865. The James and Younger gang tragedies – which emphasized ex-Confederate vigilantes' passions in their search for revenge - was one such example of resolute, indignant and bitter Southern sentiments in the aftermath of the so-called "War of Northern Aggression" (American Civil War). The James/Younger destructive heyday (1871-1876) occurred during the timeline of Verdi's opera, *Aïda*. The third and most tragic irony or parallel was that the former American Confederates – though single-minded and courageous – were on the patently wrong side of the moral and ethical spectrum of the slavery issue. American sentiments were not the only source of political volatility during the early days of Aïda, given its particularly explosive social and moral content. According to John Mangum, a Ph.D. candidate in history at UCLA, *"Aïda's premiere, originally scheduled for January 1871, was postponed by historical turmoil beyond its creators' control. The Franco-Prussian War and the upheaval of the Paris Commune that followed, made communication between Mariette(the librettist) and Verdi (the composer) difficult. The Cairo opera house had to settle for Verdi's Rigoletto for its opening. The work(Aïda) was a triumph when it premiered in Cairo on December 24, 1871, proving worth the wait. Aïda debuted in the European capitals and in New York during the next five years, and it has held the stage, and the rapt attention of audiences, ever since."*



**Left Photo: Via the underground railroad, Harriet Tubman leads Southern slaves to freedom.**

**Right Photo: Unfortunate Ethiopian slaves are put on display by their Egyptian conquerors.**



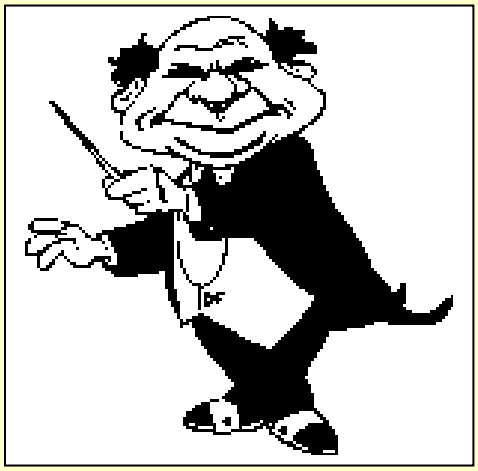
***Operatic Guidelines*** **by Artistic Director, Douglas Nagel**

**The Operatic Voice**

A true (and brief) definition of the "operatic" voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is "born," while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is "trained." The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operas do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. This is the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice "type" and the selection of repertoire (see definitions) for which the voice is ideally suited.

Opera singers develop a certain style (sound) of singing that is very different from what is usually heard on the radio or television. Although opera has been performed since the time of the early Greeks, the methods used in contemporary opera singing have a history that traces to the fifteenth century at its earliest. Opera singers do not all sound the same. They sing as differently as people speak; but within those differences, there are six basic "types" or "ranges" of operatic voices:

| | |
|---|---|
| Soprano | The highest female voice |
| Mezzo-soprano | The medium female voice |
| Contralto | The lowest female voice |
| Tenor | The highest male voice |
| Baritone | The medium male voice |
| Bass | The lowest male voice |



The style we call "operatic" or "classical" singing developed in Europe a few hundred years ago. It is characterized by a large vocal range, as well as increased volume and projection capabilities. Opera singers can project their voices whether they are very quiet or very loud, even without a microphone! This is the main difference between opera singing and popular singing. Opera

singers must learn to breathe properly, using the natural resonance of their chest cavities to project their voices.

Since operas are written and performed in many different languages, singers must study foreign languages and translate their parts so they understand the words they are singing. The languages in which operas are written will be discussed by the singers. Which ones can you think of?

How do people understand what's going on if it's in a different language? Well, when the operas were written, they were designed for people who spoke those languages. So, if a librettist wrote the words for an opera performed in Italy, he knew that everyone in the audience would understand it in Italian. These days, it is helpful  if the audience speaks the language used in the production, but it is possible to understand the story without speaking the language. That's why there's music--so the audience can hear how the characters feel; thus, people can understand what's going on in the story. More recently, opera companies have started using supertitles to help the audience understand what's happening onstage. Supertitles are translations of the libretto which are projected above the stage.

**Opera Production**

Opera is created by the combination of numerous art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next essential component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible within the operatic genre. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or *dramaturge* who alone - or with a librettist - fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words combine to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor, who, with a team of assistants (*repetiteurs*) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team that manifests the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all collaborate in order to create the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set - which will reside on the stage - recreating the physical setting required by the

storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of theatrical construction. Following the actual building of the set, painters - following instructions from the set designer's original plans - paint the set. As the set is assembled, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to project light onto the stage and the set. Lighting designers define - by virtue of lamp positions - strength, and throw capacity that determine depth, atmosphere and mood. Directors and performers depend on the lighting designer to add a third dimension to the set and the actors. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a "lighting plot" by writing "lighting cues" which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this stage of the production, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Costumes are tailored for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate "period" fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

## Vocabulary

**Aria** (noun) a melody, from opera or oratorio sung by one singer.
**Bravo** (interjection) Italian, meaning "well done," used for a single male performer. "Brava" is used for a single female, and "bravi" is used for two or more people singing together.
**Conductor** (noun) the person who leads the singers and orchestra.
**Ensemble** (noun) a musical passage or piece of music in which more than one performer of equal importance participates at the same time. An ensemble is a group of musicians.
**Libretto** (noun) the text (words) of an opera.
**Librettist** (noun) the person who writes the words for an opera.
**Opera** (noun) a play told through singing.
**Producer** (noun) the person who hires all of the singers and the technical staff; the producer also drafts the rehearsal schedule and organizes all ancillary events involving the production team. The producer arranges the local transportation and housing of all out-of-town artists.
**Recitative** (reh-sit-ah-teev) English adaptation from the Italian *recitativo* (noun) a type of speech-like singing that allows a degree of rhythmic freedom in performance. It is generally accompanied by orchestra, or harpsichord, but can be accompanied by other instruments capable of harmonic support, such as harp or guitar.
**Repertoire** (rep-er-twar) French (noun) the body of literature that is available for performance.
**Score** (noun) the written music for singers and instrumentalists.

**ABT Department of Education and Outreach**
**Questionnaire for Students: The Opera *Aïda***
(Use the back of this form if necessary.)

NAME_____
CLASS_____
SCHOOL_____

1. **Is this your first opera? Y___N___**

   **If you answered "yes", can you name five major differences between a grand opera and a theater or musical theater production?**

   1._____
   2._____
   3._____
   4._____
   5._____

2. **Can you name four Egyptian deities? Can you explain their respective functions in the religion of ancient Egypt?**

   1._____

   2._____

   3._____

   4._____

3. **In your opinion, why does Radames fall in love with Aïda?**

4. **Why does Amneris feel that she has sole ownership of Radames? How does she manipulate the sequence of events in her favor?**

5. **In your own words, describe the effect of slavery on the world as a whole. Try to address the following specific questions: How has the institution of slavery changed social hierarchies and perceptions? Who suffers the most from the subjugation of another race of human beings? (The victors? The conquered people? Society as we know it?) How would our ideal world appear -in the present day - if all traces of slavery were eradicated?**

**ABT Evaluation Form for Teachers**

**Rimrock Opera's *Aïda***

**(Feel free to use the back of this form if necessary.)**

NAME_____
CONTENT AREA_____
SCHOOL_____

1. **Was the 2013 study guide helpful in preparing your students for this year's production of *Aïda*? Y____N_____**

   **How can we improve feedback for future events of this nature?**

2. **Check the item that, in your opinion, directly applies to the instructional value of this production.**

   **A. _____My students were able to enhance their knowledge of Ancient Egypt.**
   **B. _____My students gained a deeper understanding and appreciation of opera.**
   **C. _____My students gained valuable insights regarding slavery and societal prejudice.**
   **D. _____All of these items were equally valuable and applicable.**

   **Please explain the rationale for your response.**

3. **What types of programs would you like to see in future secondary education arts events at the ABT? (Feel free to select more than one response.)**

   **A. _____Operas and Musical Theater**
   **B. _____Stage Plays based upon Literary Masterpieces**
   **C. _____Multimedia Presentations**
   **D. _____Historical Presentations**
   **E. _____Scientific Presentations**
   **F. _____Presentations that Address Current Societal Concerns and/or Trends**
   **G. _____Other (PLEASE EXPLAIN.)**

4. **What other overall/general observations do you have regarding this production?**

**Please return completed forms to Dr. William Mouat, Director of Education and Cultural Outreach**
**P.O. Box 1556, Billings, MT 59103**