

# Winnipeg Free Press

## Call her Aida

### Soprano Michele Capalbo taking on difficult role for the 19th time in Manitoba Opera production

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IN a still relatively young opera career, Canadian-born soprano Michele Capalbo is undertaking the arduous title role of Aida for the 19th time.

Asked why she's repeated the part more than an average of once a year, the dark-haired New York-based singer responds with mild amazement.

Michele Capalbo as Aida and Rafael Davila as Radames in the Manitoba Opera production of Aida at the Centennial Concert Hall.

"Why not?" says Capalbo, the star of the Manitoba Opera revival of Aida opening April 13 at the Centennial Concert Hall. "It's Verdi. I love singing Verdi. That's what I do. The whys and wherefores of whether or not to do it again is not in my thought processes."

Two years after making her professional debut as Helene in *I vespri Siciliani* in Central Park in 1999, Capalbo performed her first Aida at Le Festival de Musique de Strasbourg and was quickly identified as a Verdi soprano to watch -- and then book before the word got around about her thrilling high C note. The constant demand for Aida took her to Toulouse, Mexico City, Santiago, Nice, Toulon (France), Cesena (Italy) as well as Houston, San Francisco, New York, Toronto and Calgary.

"I think I was born to be an Aida," she says, during an interview over tea earlier this week. "I joke sometimes I have Verdi DNA. I don't apologize for it. Some people will then ask, 'So what comes after Verdi?' I say, is there life after Verdi?"

Aida is renowned for its pomp and lavish spectacle, but its essence is an intimate human tragedy built around an acrimonious love triangle involving the Pharaoh's daughter, Amneris, her Ethiopian slave, Aida, and the great Egyptian warrior Radames. Many high-concept productions highlight the difference between the Egyptians and the Ethiopians by having them identified by different skin colours.

"I've been every colour, from shoe-polish black to my white skin," says the native of Kitchener, Ont. "There was a production I did in France, I was bronze with racing stripes of blue. The point was to make a race statement."

The MO production, which closes its 40th season, is traditional and does not make an issue of skin colour. Nor is director Brian Deedrick overlaying Verdi's melodramatic tale with a radical modern re-interpretation in the hopes it resonates in the 21th century.

"I think this is one of those operas that deserves its time and place and history," says the former artistic director of Edmonton Opera. "It's set in ancient Egypt. If you don't put it there, it suddenly turns into an opera about the director and that is anathema to me. I don't think it's right the audience going home singing the praises of the director. Putting Aida in Auschwitz or on the moon is stupid."

That may be true but that doesn't stop directors from attempting dubious revisions that grab attention, if not audiences.

Capalbo was in a 2010 Canadian Opera Company production in which Aida was a dowdy cleaning lady suffering from a chronically aching back. She remembers how hard it was to make herself into a romantic character when wearing a dowdy blue smock and Keds.

"It's difficult to sell," says Capalbo, who was last seen here as Leonora in *Il Trovatore* in 2008. "It becomes about the production instead of the core story. The Nile scene happens in a broom closet. Maybe it should have been workshopped first to see if it works."

Aida offers big vocal display, grand choruses and indelible arias, with the biggest being the showstopper *O patria mia* and its crowd-pleasing high C, which Capalbo has almost made her signature moment.

"Those are the money notes," says the graduate of the University of Western Ontario. "I like hitting those notes. I do something that not everyone can do. I do a nice crescendo that lasts a little longer than it's written. It usually pleases the audience and it is fun to do."

It's a demanding moment for Capalbo during a night of vocal challenges that tests her stamina. She says that she really needs to sing with a chest voice in the bottom range to be true to the text. Verdi, she says, is about singing beautiful melody but being dramatically involved.

"It's about where do I spend the voice and will I have enough to float at the end of the night," Capalbo says.

Deedrick, who directed *Abduction from the Seraglio* for Manitoba Opera in 1995, is helming his 12th *Aida*. He's the traffic cop who will be directing the cast and chorus of 68 singers, over 70 musicians, 22 extras and seven dancers with conductor Tyrone Paterson. The epic scale tops out during the famous triumphal return-from-battle scene when more than 100 people are on stage -- but not one elephant. That fact has become the elephant in the room for many directors.

"I just once want to do a production of this without someone asking if there is going to be elephants," says Deedrick, referring to the fact that massive Italian and Egyptian productions have trotted out live pachyderms. "It's become the cliché joke about it."

A deep-pocketed company can bring out the whole zoo, but what the audience is really craving is an emotional response, he says. The battle of the these three very strong personalities is what engages people.

"*Aida* is really about two girls in love with the same guy," he says. "It's Betty and Veronica wanting Archie to be their boyfriend. It sounds like you are making fun of it, but these are archetypal love stories."

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