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# *Aida* as a Drama: Opera *Aida* Directed by Olivier Py and Noda Kabuki Version of *Princess Aida*

Chieko Hiranoi

## **1. Classics in Modern Society**

This year 2016 is the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare's death, and various related events have been organized worldwide, especially in the United Kingdom. For instance, Shakespeare's Globe made a series of short films abridged from every work of Shakespeare titled *The Complete Walk*, which surely reminds the audience of 'The Complete Works' of the great poet and dramatist. The title was originally the name of an event, in which members of the audience walk and visit each location along the South Bank and Bankside such as in front of National Theatre, in front of Tate Modern, on the riverside opposite Royal Festival Hall, to watch originally made short films mainly composed of excerpts from the Globe performances, silent movies and newly shot location films for this event. This was a free event provided on the 23rd and the 24th of April in commemoration of Shakespeare's birthday as well as his death. Edinburgh International Festival also offered three programs of Shakespeare among its nine theatrical events, *Richard III* by Berlin's Schaubühne Theatre, *Measure for Measure* from Britain's Cheek by Jowl and Moscow's Pushkin Theatre and a French adaptation of *Twelfth Night* by the company Eat a Crocodile. As theatre is a genre which cannot be established without an

audience, innumerable innovative attempts and twists have come onto stage to attract people, even if their original works are what are supposed to be 'classics.' Thus, anniversary events and festivals related to or including classics are welcomed not only by theatre professionals and academics but also by a general audience.

Among such theatre works, there must be some shows which evoke controversies for being oversimplified, 'hit-driven,' 'superficial,' and so on. On the other hand, if classics continue to be presented on stage exactly the same from generation to generation as they were written as literary works, the general audience might lose interest and motivation to pay for a theatre ticket. If a modern theatre concentrates only on carefully tracing translated words of an ancient Greek drama exactly as it is written in its remaining literary resources, what kind of audience can understand the characters and share their conflict and emotion from such a production like a series of recitation of words with stage costumes ?

While stylized acting has been passed down in Japanese traditional performing arts, European classic drama has a tradition of recreating stages based on original literary works. The author will discuss a reasonable range of production styles and adaptations of Verdi's *Aida* especially in relation to its original dramaturgy.

## **2. *Aida* as an Opera**

### **2-1. Overview**

*Aida* is often referred to as one of the masterpieces in the style of 'grand opera,' characterized by spectacular stage design and historical implications. It was first performed in 1871 at the Cairo Opera House, which opened with Verdi's *Rigoletto* in 1869. *Aida* was originally supposed to be performed as an

opening event for the Suez Canal at the Cairo Opera House, which represented Egyptian modernization. However, because of Verdi's initial refusals 'to compose occasional pieces' (Busch, 1978, p.3) and the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) having affected the preparations in a practical sense, its first performance had been delayed until December, 1871. (Underlining was used for emphasis in Verdi's letters.)

The original storyline of *Aida* was written in French by an archaeologist researching on ancient Egypt, Auguste Mariette. Verdi was impressed by the story and made up his mind to work on composing the opera on the basis of the original storyline. The libretto was written in Italian by Antonio Ghislanzoni, with whom Verdi discussed 'theatrical words' (Busch, 1978, p.50) in detail. Verdi said, 'when the action demands it, I would quickly abandon rhythm, rhyme, strophe; I would write unrhymed verse to say clearly and distinctly whatever the action requires' (Busch, 1978, p.50). It is clear that Verdi respected dramaturgy for an opera.

*Aida* is a love story which continues to be affected by conflicts between the two countries, Egypt and Ethiopia and also by conflicts within the national hierarchy. Aida is an Ethiopian princess who serves Amneris, an Egyptian princess, as a slave, concealing her original birth and status. Amneris is jealous of Aida, because she suspects that Radames, the Egyptian general and her slave Aida love each other. When her father, Pharaoh announces that she and Radames will get married and they shall rule the country as a reward for the victory led by Radames, she feels delighted. Aida is disappointed by the engagement and follows her father's order to inveigle classified military information out of Radames. The Ethiopian king has been captured by the Egyptian army but he plans revenge. When Amneris witnesses the leak of military secrets, Amonasro and Aida escape but Radames willingly stays to be punished. Amneris repents for her jealousy and tries to save Radames on condition that he will give up his love for Aida. Radames rejects her offer and

obeys the judgement by priests, 'he should be confined underground to death caused by a lack of air.' While Amonasro is killed on his escape, Aida hides herself in the tomb to be with Radames. Radames and Aida are ready to die together in the tomb hoping to gain their peace in heaven, while Amneris prays for the repose of Radames' soul like a requiem.

Verdi's criticism against the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) affected the main concept of *Aida*. This is proved by one of his letters asking Ghislanzoni to revise part of the triumphal scene so that Egyptian theocracy must be glorified. Verdi cited King Wilhelm of Prussia, 'We have triumphed with the help of divine providence. The enemy has surrendered. May God help us in the future' (Busch, 1978, p.61) in the letter, and he also wrote, 'that King who always chatters about God and providence, with whose help he is destroying the better part of Europe. He thinks himself ordained to reform the manners and to cleanse the vices of the modern world!' (Busch, 1978, p.72) to Clarina Maffei, a life-long friend of Verdi, whose salon had contributed to the cultural life in Milan for fifty years.

## **2-2. Previous Performances**

In this section, the author will discuss two stage performances of *Aida* and a movie version to reflect on how artists and general audiences have understood this opera and to form an idea of how they can develop their interpretations of it. How to think about spectacles is one of the key issues when discussing *Aida*, so, the author selected an outdoor festival theatre version, a permanent indoor theatre version and a motion picture version.

### **2-2-1. Verona Outdoor Music Festival 1981**

Verona Outdoor Music Festival is an annual festival in Verona, from the middle of June to the end of August. In 1913, *Aida* was presented at the Arena di Verona in honor of the 100th anniversary of Giuseppe Verdi's birth, which

was the beginning of the festival. Therefore, *Aida* has repeatedly been performed and it is the most frequently staged opera in the festival.

In its 1981 performance, Maria Chiara (soprano), Fiorenza Cossotto (mezzo-soprano) and Nicola Martinucci (tenor) sang the three major roles. The Arena di Verona is the remains of a Roman Amphitheatre, which can accommodate 30,000 people, and opera performances normally use a third of the auditorium as a stage. The venue in itself is a spectacle with historic connotation, and the stage setting for the Egyptian palace in the 1981 show included a central background which looked like a pyramid looking down on the characters on the ground-level stage. This overwhelming image is effective especially in the scenes where private feelings are disclosed in the front stage, producing a contrast between nation and individuals. On the baileys, there are vast numbers of stairs used by a crowd of priests and ballet dancers. The stage formation including characters and crowds is geometric, so that the audience might recognize each setting and each character more easily, despite the scale of the arena and the relatively limited brightness of the late show. For instance, in the end of the second act, the singers, the Pharaoh, Radames, Amneris, Aida, Amonasro, and Ramphis were arranged in line at the front apart from the crowds, to advocate opinions and to express feelings.

Throughout the performance, the proud and powerful Amneris by Cossotto was dominant, and Chiara's rich and beautiful soprano was able to elicit the audience's sympathy (*Aida*, 1981).

### **2-2-2. Milan La Scala 1985**

Maria Chiara sang the part of Aida again at Milan La Scala in 1985, appearing together with the legendary Luciano Pavarotti. Pavarotti's performance reinforced the optimistic, straightforward and simple-minded personality of Radames, while Martinucci's Radames in Verona tended to look serious and narrow-minded. Pavarotti's characterization was more persuasive

to the author because Radames is so optimistic that he believes he can reverse the Pharaoh's decision to take him as the son-in-law and heir if he can defeat the Ethiopian military in the libretto. Also, although Radames loves Aida deeply, he cannot really imagine Aida's conflict between her homeland and her love for him. He is a warrior and general, but not a politician, unlike Amonasro. Pavarotti's depiction of Radames' lament is extraordinary and touching when he realizes he was deceived to leak classified military information for his love for Aida by the sacrifice of his honor and duty.

The stage is full of spectacles especially in Act Two, both in scene one and in scene two. Amneris' huge bedroom has a gigantic cage where her slaves are confined and her servants also enjoy bathing in her room, which shows Amneris' status and power as a daughter of Pharaoh, although there is unnecessary nudity as well. The triumphal scene is characterized by its renowned victory march and chorus. In this production, while slaves drag huge colossal heads of pharaoh and hierarch on the stage, a giant cage in which Ethiopian captives are confined is pulled in front of Pharaoh, although living horses or elephants do not appear like in some performances. In this performance, Act Two and Act Four were presented as effectively contrastive. Act Four, scene one takes place in an adjacent room to the subterranean hall of judgement, and Act Four, scene two is the final scene in the crypt. Amneris is isolated from the site of the judgment by an overwhelming wall on the central stage and looks powerless. The final scene depicts Radames and Aida dying in the crypt at the same time as Amneris praying for Radames in front of an altar in the palace above. The show makes the most of its stage to depict such a barrier and a contrast. In addition, in Act One, scene two, it is effective in increasing enigmatic atmosphere and in emphasizing Pharaoh's authority for slaves to revolve a device to raise the rocky temple from underground on to earth (*Aida*, 1985).

### **2-2-3. Motion Picture 1953**

This 90-minute movie can be described as an enlightening version of the opera, *Aida*. Narration explaining its background and major characters' feeling is frequently inserted, and expository sequences such as messengers' arrival and enemies' invasion are also added. This kind of treatment tends to be useless for the audiences who often go to theatre, while it can be helpful for increasing the number of opera audiences.

In this movie, while Sophia Loren plays Aida and a similarly young actor, Luciano Della Marra plays Radames, Renata Tebaldi (soprano) and Giuseppe Campora (tenor) sing for them. Tebaldi was highly acclaimed by Toscanini. Because of the actors' youth, the movie looks as if it were a variation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Radames' optimistic way of thinking might be more probable to such a younger generation.

The movie is a series of spectacles including cruel battle scenes, the triumphal parade and beautiful ballet scenes. It is needless to say that movies can express a wider range of visual scenes than theatre performances. However, in Act Four, scene one, in the sequence where Amneris listens to Radames' judgement by priests and repents of her jealousy, a production in the theatre can depict more profoundly the situation where Amneris cannot access the hall of judgement or cannot save Radames by walls physically rejecting her, in contrast to switching shots and close-ups in the movie. The movie depicts the judgement scene by cameras, but it cannot depict the emotional and physical barrier between Amneris and Radames as deeply as theatre performances visualizing such a barrier (*Aida*, 1953).



### 3. Olivier Py's *Aida*

#### 3-1. Py's Career in Directing Opera

Olivier Py was born in 1965 in Grasse, and studied at the French National Academy of Dramatic Arts (Conservatoire) in Paris. He is a playwright, director, actor and singer. He founded his theatre company in 1988, and he was nominated for the director of National Dramatic Centre of Orléans (CDN Orléans-Loiret-Centre) in 1997. While he directed there some of his own plays such as *La Jeune Fille, le Diable et le Moulin* (1993), which is an adaptation of tales by the Grimm brothers, *L'Apocalypse Joyeuse* (2000) and *Illusions Comiques* (2006), he started to work on directing opera in Nancy and Geneva. During his involvement with CDN Orléans, he directed nine operas including *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Curlew River* and *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Apart from operas, he also directed Claudel's *Le Soulier de Satin* in France, in Geneva and in the Edinburgh International Festival during this period. In 2007, he moved to l'Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe as director and stayed in the position until 2013, when he took the position of director for Festival d'Avignon. This period is characterized by much more directions of other playwrights' works than before, especially Aeschylus and operas. He newly worked on *Idomeneo*, *Lulu*, *Roméo et Juliette*, *Les Huguenots*, *Carmen*, *Il Trovatore*, *Aida* and so on (Cazaux, 2013). In Festival d'Avignon 2016, Py directed tragedies of Aeschylus. His unique career includes a series of *Miss Knife*, where he disguises himself as a woman and sings Brecht and Kurt Weill in Cabaret style.

#### 3-2. Py's *Aida* 2016

Py clearly wrote that the theme of *Aida* is political violence within a nation, political power connected to religious power, and political violence of conquering nation on the other, in his 'Note sur la Mise en Scène' (Py, 2016). He transposed

the ancient conflicts between Egypt and Ethiopia into Verdi's contemporary national movements in Italy, 'Risorgimento' from 1840 to 1870. The first war of independence broke out in 1840, and the Kingdom of Italy, founded in 1861, annexed Rome in 1870. In this interpretation, the relationship between Egypt and Ethiopia equals the relationship between Austria and Italy. Py also stated that we must understand Verdi's intention to make his artistic work universal by such an adaptation (Py, 2016). At the beginning of Act One, a man with an Italian banner appears and he is beaten nearly to death by some soldiers before the drama. Subsequently, the golden façade engraved 'Vittorio Emanuele, Re d'Italia' appears. Py presented his major concept in the very beginning of the production. Jean-Luc Clairret praised Py's presentation as a great lesson of history (Clairret, 2016).

The Egyptian golden palace surrounding or overlooking characters has been controversial since the first production of *Aida* by Py in 2013. Christophe Rizoud regarded such pomp as useless, while he thought highly of Py's interpretation of the analogy of national conflicts (Rizoud, 2016). The author watched the stage as if this had been a *kabuki* stage with large-scaled settings enabled by its stage equipment such as a rotating stage and floor-lifting system. By rotating the stage on which the Egyptian golden palace was located, the audience felt dazzled, embarrassed or overwhelmed. The golden tank on which Radames stood worked as well. Although *Aida* is originally composed in the 'grand opera' style, its main plot is a personal story of love and conflict. The more grotesque and overwhelming oppressive power is depicted, the more naïve and ephemeral oppressed human love looks. The palace interior was described as a golden frame divided into grids, when people of every status in court gathered on the stage. Clearly, the pharaoh and the priests stood on the highest stage and the lowest stage was filled with soldiers. In the middle stages on each side, there were officials wearing suit and tie. This stratification of people brilliantly expressed ruthless and unfair values in court.

Py's split-level setting of the triumphal march was outstanding, in that it successfully produced a visual contrast of conquerors and victims. While a soldiers ballerina danced with an Egyptian soldier around the Arc de Triomphe on the upper stage, the stage below, which was supposed to be underground, was filled with a pile of corpses. Radames directed his soldiers to carry corpses to the basement, where he died confined with Aida in the final scene. Verdi directed such a treatment of levels in the libretto for the final scene, and Py extended it to the triumphal march. In the final scene, the beautiful and happy duet which shows faintly the couple's suffocation was heard, in contrast with repenting Amneris' prayer for Radames like a requiem recited on the upper stage.

In the previous section, the author wrote that theatrical treatment of the judgement scene is superior to camera works in film-making. The scene depicted by Py was horrible and grotesque implying Ku Klux Klan's lynching with a set of crosses on fire, although neither the trial nor Radames could be seen on the stage. Amneris continued to suffer, prowling in front of huge crosses on fire because of her inability to help Radames and repent of her jealousy against Aida.

Amneris singers tend to be more widely noticed than the title role because of the character's irresistible emotion, strong will power and solid pride. Some audiences might say the title should be *Amneris*. Such an advantageous impression applies to the Amneris singer, Daniela Barcellona in this performance. On the other hand, despite being a supporting role, Vitaliy Bilyy presented a powerful, persuasive and dignified Ethiopian king, Amonasro, who has a dauntless fighting spirit for his nation. Such an interpretation is valid, because the Ethiopian king must be representative of the opposing power to Egypt, even though he is defeated.

## 4. Noda Kabuki *Princess Aida*

### 4-1. Noda as a Kabuki Playwright

Noda Hideki was born in 1955 in Nagasaki, Japan. He started to write drama for a drama club in high school. The first work is an absurd drama about crime and punishment, *Ai to Shi o Mitsumete* (1972) and the other work to notice during this period, *Hikarigoke* (1973) deals with cannibalism. He founded *Yume no Yumin-sha* in 1972 as a student theatre company in the University of Tokyo, then continued it as a professional theatre company in 1982 after the final performance of *Nokemono Kitarite* in Komaba.

He wrote more than 20 plays during the professional decade of *Yume no Yumin-sha* mainly for his company, including *Koyubi no Omoide* (1983), *Hanshin* (1986) and *Nisesaku Sakura no Mori no Mankai no shita* (1989). He also wrote and directed three adaptations of Shakespeare from 1990 to 1992. The works written for *Yume no Yumin-sha* are characterized by rapidly changing scenes with energetic physical movement like athletes and speech plays with intertwined words.

Although *Yume no Yumin-sha* had been one of the most popular theatre companies among younger generations, Noda dissolved it in 1992 and left for London to study UK theatre and to join their workshops, supported by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan. Noda's creative style came to respect plot and theme in presentation after the study in London, keeping its physicality and verbal play. This is clearly shown in the works like *Pandora no Kane* (1999) and *Oilu* (2003), which depict violence and absurdity of wars, especially in terms of the atomic bombing. Noda has delivered such works through NODA · MAP, a production system and company he founded in 1993, recruiting actors via workshops for each performance, influenced by theatre-

making in London. Noda has worked on internationally cooperative performances *Akaoni* (1996), *The Bee* (2006) and *The Diver* (2008). He is the artistic director of Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre, and continues to produce new works.

Noda wrote and directed three kabuki pieces, *Togitatsu no Utare* (2001), *Nezumi-kozou* (2003) and *Aida-hime* (2008). *Togitatsu no Utare* and *Nezumi-kozou* are adaptations from original kabuki pieces, and *Aida-hime* is also an adaptation, which is a transposition from Verdi's opera. He created his kabuki world cooperating with the late Nakamura Kanzaburo XVIII, and he wrote each protagonist especially for Kanzaburo XVIII. As already noted above, Noda created more than 60 works as playwright and director. Unfortunately, Kanzaburo XVIII passed away in 2012 and *Aida-hime* is the final work for Noda kabuki. Unlike Py, Noda has directed only two operas to date, *Macbeth* and *The Marriage of Figaro*.

#### **4-2. Noda's *Princess Aida* 2008**

Although Noda succeeded in describing each protagonist of tragedies with comic contrivance in his adaptations from kabuki, his transposition from Verdi leaves an incomplete and unsatisfactory impression.

Noda transposed the setting of ancient Egypt into the period of Civil Wars in Japan, with the conflicts between Egypt and Ethiopia replaced by the provincial battles between Mino and Owari. He explicitly made his protagonist Nou-hime, a daughter of the lord of Mino, Saito Dousan. In his kabuki piece, the main story is similar to Verdi's *Aida*. *Aida-hime*, a princess of the province Owari is captured and serving Nou-hime in Mino and she and a samurai warrior of Mino, Kimura Damesukezaemon, love each other in secret. The major differences are transposing the high priest, Ramfis into a pair of false shamans who deceive people of money by trumped-up oracles, and Nou-hime asking them to predict Damesukezaemon for the victorious general.

As demonstrated in such revisions, Noda seems to follow the same principle

of his dramaturgy as in *Togitatsu no Utare* and *Nezumi-kozou*, tragedy with comic twists and entertainment. However, it badly affects Nou-hime's characterization in *Aida-hime*.

Amneris is a powerful villain to whom many audiences are assumed to feel sympathy, because she is proud, passionate and independent. As she feels strong jealousy against Aida, she insults and curses Aida in Act Two. In Act Three, she accuses Radames of treachery against the nation, which causes him to let the high priest, Ramfis imprison him, driven by jealousy. However, in Act Four, scene one, on the judgement against Radames, she repents of her jealous and straightforward disposition even if she is rejected by Radames, 'I no longer fear your anger, I only fear your pity' (Fisher, 2001, p. 78). Subsequently, she bitterly criticizes the priests of cruelty and unfairness, 'you detestable animals thirst for blood...you are punishing an innocent man' (Fisher, 2001, p. 81). Her recognition is not correct. Radames virtually betrayed his country by leaking classified military information to a captive and trying to escape from his country. However, Amneris strongly feels responsible for putting him in such a plight and tries to protect him as a princess saying, 'this man you kill, was once my lover' (Fisher, 2001, p. 81). Finally, when she knows she cannot save him, she curses the priests.

On the other hand, Nou-hime resorts to shamans who she knows are deceptive and shameless, making them announce a fictitious oracle in order to give Radames a higher status appropriate for her fiancée. In addition, she tries to witness if either Radames or Aida-hime has given up their love after her father's announcement that she and Radames are engaged and they shall rule the country, by counterfeiting a letter for each of the lovers. Such a trick is not supposed to be made by a well-bred person, still less a princess. Prostitutes in *rakugo* (comic-storytelling, one of the traditional performing arts in Japan) often deceive men of money by writing seductive letters. Small-scale bad guys in kabuki sometimes eavesdrop on private conversation. Nou-hime is finally

betrayed by the shamans and is forced to marry a prince of Owari, Nobunaga, which means banishment from her homeland Mino, after executing such cheap tricks. The same remark as Amneris, 'this man you kill, was once my lover,' sounds just like a bravado from a dependent coward.

In the final scene, while Amneris prays for Radames like a requiem, Nou-hime vents her anger on her homeland without reason by curse, 'a curse on this country! Let heaven's vengeance fall on you! Let conflicts continue hereafter between the two provinces, even if I get married to Nobunaga!' (Noda, 2008, p.287, translation mine). Because of such a series of failure in characterization, Nou-hime becomes just a spoiled daughter who screams for what she wants, not an independent noble who reflects on and struggles with conflicts in her mind. Nou-hime cannot be a tragic protagonist. Such a characterization could be appropriate and effective for a comedy.

## 5. Validity of Adaptations

In discussing adaptations, it is a critical point what a writer changes or modifies in each original work. Py's transposition to Verdi's contemporary was successful in conveying the composer's theme and idea to modern audience. On the other hand, Noda failed in re-creating the major character, although he set Nou-hime, the equivalent of Amneris, as the protagonist. However, Noda's challenge of creating *Aida-hime* might have contributed to increasing the number of audiences for each genre, opera, kabuki and modern Japanese theatre.

In addition, there can be an adaptation which respects and searches for the original treatment. An internationally renowned Scottish playwright, David Greig recreated Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women* for the modern audience, collaborating with director Ramin Gray and composer John Browne in the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh. They recruited its 'chorus' performers

from Edinburgh's local community. Although such citizen participation was the very tradition of Ancient Greek theatre, each participant has their own modern backgrounds and personalities, which caused an explicitly different impression from a group of professional actresses engaged in ordinary performances pursuing high uniformity for 'chorus.' John Browne composed music for the modern English version of *The Suppliant Women* after studying Greek theatre and ancient music including Greek scales and a revived instrument, the Aulos. The composer succeeded in creating 'pop and sacred' music with various kinds of 'chants' in English (Browne, 2016).

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