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"Aida" an impressive end of year piece of theater

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Musicals at Stanford are often a mixed bag, but this is not any one person's fault. Stanford's population is small, and we are definitely not known as a performing arts school. Student talent can also vary over the years.

However, it seems that this tradition has changed: "Aida," the Ram's Head Theatrical Society's spring show this year, not only has a plethora of powerhouse vocal talent, but also combines poetic details to create an overall memorable experience.

Before diving into the actual musical, it is important to recognize that a part of the musical's quality is its source material. "Aida" is a rock musical based on Giuseppe Verdi's opera of the same name. The musical was originally produced by Disney Theatrical, with lyrics by Tim Rice and music by Elton John. The story itself is based upon a children's story by Linda Woolverton, Robert Falls and David Henry Hwang.

"Aida" made its world premiere Sept. 16, 1998 and was titled "Elaborate Lives: The Legend of Aida." The Broadway-produced version debuted on March 23, 2000 and was then titled "Elton John and Tim Rice's Aida." The Broadway show was instantly a success, winning a Tony Award for best score and, to be cliché, the rest is history . . .

Flash forward to Stanford — Ram's Head's latest musical outing showcases the style of Elton John and Tim Rice the way it was written. The story starts off in a modern-day museum setting. Patrons are sipping champagne and enjoying the cultural atmosphere of Egyptian history. The stage freezes as a statue of Amneris, an Egyptian princess, comes to life, and begins weaving the epic love story that is "Aida." Amneris, played by Gianna Masi '11, captivates the audience with her strong vocal talent; and as she begins to sing, the actors and staging take us back in time to the story of Aida in ancient Egypt.

The story begins with Egyptian Captain Radames celebrating the spoils of a victory while on a cartographic mission in Nubia, Egypt's enemy. Three Nubian women are taken by his soldiers and taken back to Egypt. The strength of one of these women sets her apart and captures the attention of the young captain. We soon realize that she is Aida, the princess of Nubia. From this point, the bulk of the story is fairly predictable, as Aida and Radames fall into a forbidden love. The development of their romance is fairly rushed, but this is not uncommon in musicals, where much of the character development is through song, which this performance does well.

As previously mentioned, vocal talent can be hard to come by at Stanford, but thankfully this is not an issue, as Alex Nourishad '09 and Ré Phillips '10 deliver outstanding vocal performances for the lead roles of Radames and Aida. But the vocal talent doesn't just end with the leads. Other notable performers are those who play the characters of Mereb (Julian Kusnadi '11) and Zoser, Radames' father (Benno Rosenwald

‘11). Besides the main characters, many of the others bring great singing parts as well.

The plot of the musical is not incredibly unique — as you can imagine, the love story between Aida and Radames, which is surrounded by conflict, lasts through all trials. The flaws of this story are by no means the fault of the Stanford company, however, as they are better attributed to the source material. Thankfully, the focus of a musical is not its plot. The vocals are well-supported by the orchestra, which does a good job reproducing the rock/opera sounds of Elton John’s musical score.

Now, for those of you who aren’t familiar with the idea of a rock opera, the premise of using pop/rock music in a story that takes place in ancient Egypt might sound off-putting, but it works well because this musical blends both elements of the past and present, which is important in the show’s overall theme — that “love is timeless.” This can be heard in the Egyptian-esque tones that are subtle in songs and the strong ballads that are heavily inspired by the pop/rock background of Elton John. Moving away from the music, the group’s performance also blends the elements of modern and ancient. For example, Aida often speaks like the noble princess she is, but also has a bit of sass and modern colloquial thought.

Besides the dialogue and lyrics, the production is notable in other ways. The staging and setting are well-thought-out, and the use of lighting is particularly well-done in Aida and Radames’ love duet, “Written in the Stars.” The musical itself is weak in comparison to other great Broadway productions, such as “Phantom of the Opera” or “Rent.” Once again, the fault is not the performers’, but that of Elton John and Tim Rice. The lyrics and music are simply not as strong, but Stanford’s rendition of the performance is a good piece of work.

Spring musicals should be extravagant and moving. It should end the year on a high note, showcasing that although a techie school, Stanford has its fair share of performing arts talent. This aim has been something of a hit-or-miss over the past few years, but this year’s Ram’s Head production of “Aida” not only meets all of the expectations of what a spring musical should be, but it surpasses them, combining poetic subtleties with an array of talent to bring us a timeless story about love.

 [aida, stanford theater](#)

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1. Where do you guys find these critics? Someone who uses Phantom/Rent as the benchmark clearly knows very little about theatre, which, of course, gives little credibility to the review...



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