

*Aida* is a practice research project that involved the design of set, costumes and video for a new stage production of Verdi's *Aida*, a key work of the European opera canon, first performed in 1871. The concert staging was commissioned by Opera North for a two-month tour in May and June 2019. My practice research as set and costume designer included directing and orchestrating the content for a videographic montage that was projected throughout the entirety of the opera as a crucial element of the overall spatial design and dramaturgy.

Verdi's opera has come under severe attack from cultural criticism, most prominently from Edward Said, who claimed *Aida* represented aesthetically the warped interests and sensibilities of an imperialist Europe. This posed a major challenge to our choice of dramaturgy and resulted in a realist reading, placing *Aida* firmly within a concrete contemporary context, namely the current war in Syria, whilst freeing it from any exoticizing references.

My practice research involved exploring and implementing formal design solutions that would convey our dramaturgical intentions. It set out to achieve three aims: a. to decolonize *Aida* by creating a *mise-en-scène* free of orientalist fantasy; b. to give the performance political relevance by turning *Aida* into an explicit anti-war piece; and c. to undermine the misogyny inherent in the original. As a result, I developed innovative scenographic methodologies that enabled a new critical space for the reception of this canonical piece. The outcome of my research addressed the interests of a more diverse twenty-first-century audience, who are increasingly engaged with issues of decolonization and inclusion.



During its 2019 UK-wide tour, *Aida* was performed 12 times and seen by 24,000 audience members. The production won critical acclaim and has been invited for future performances by Montpellier Opera House, France and Washington National Opera, US.

*Aida*, Opera North 2019





Joanna Parker





Physical materials which comprise or support this submission can be found inside the box or on the USB drive  embedded in the box's interior lid. For online materials, a live link is provided in a PDF of this publication found on the USB drive embedded in the box's interior lid. Links are indicated by the symbol .

Within this publication, references for components of the submission are found in the right margin using a lettering system A–G. Items marked with an \* are components of the output, all other items are contextual.

- A *Aida* trailer by Opera North 
- B *Aida* production programme produced by Opera North
- C\* Aleppo video files, examples 
- D\* Porcelain video files, examples 
- E Outcome video files, including publicity trailer produced by Opera North 
- F\* Design presentation for Opera North
- G\* Costume design presentation for Opera North

Further information on these materials can be found on the reverse of the box's interior lid.

Joanna Parker

AIDA

Opera North 2019

The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama,  
University of London

AIDA: Opera North 2019

Joanna Parker

ORCID ID 0000-0003-1764-4833

Published by The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London

© 2020 Joanna Parker

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy, or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, Eton Avenue, London, NW3 3HY

[www.cssd.ac.uk/research](http://www.cssd.ac.uk/research)

Series Editors:  
David Harradine, Maria Delgado  
Associate Editors:  
Joe Parslow, Sally Baggott  
Editorial Advisor:  
Tony Fisher

Images:  
COVER, FIGS 4–6 (STILLS) © Joanna Parker and Dick Straker, 2019  
FIGS 1, 11–12 © Clive Barda / ArenaPAL  
FIG 2 (STILL) © Shahida Yakub, 2019  
FIGS 3; 7–10 © Joanna Parker, 2019; 2018

Design: Valle Walkley  
Print: Push / Boss

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-8383968-3-1

Joanna Parker is an international designer and video artist. She is a part-time Senior Lecturer in Scenography at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London.

Commissions include design and video work for Glyndebourne Festival Opera, The Beckett Archive, Montpelier Opera House and a new collaboration for the Burgtheater Vienna with Theatre Rites.

Her research is focused on spatializing the political, and on critical scenographic strategies for contemporary performance.

Acknowledgements: Dr Phoebe Von Held, David Harradine, Maria Delgado and The Research Office at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London. The cast, crew, and management of the production of *Aida* (2019) at Opera North. My creative collaborators: Annabel Arden, Sir Richard Armstrong, and video designer, Dick Straker with whom I have developed a productive collaboration over 6 years of practice, including but not limited to the 2019 staging of *Aida*.

|     |                                |    |
|-----|--------------------------------|----|
| I   | Overview                       | 4  |
| II  | Questions, aims and objectives | 7  |
| III | Context                        | 12 |
| IV  | Methodology                    | 15 |
| V   | Timeline                       | 22 |
| VI  | Findings                       | 26 |
| VII | Bibliography                   | 34 |

## I Overview

Designing *Aida* is a single item practice research project consisting of designs and video content for a concert staging by Opera North in 2019. It is supported by further contextual materials.

*Aida* was performed by eight solo singers, a chorus of 60 and an orchestra of 102 musicians. It was commissioned by Opera North, Leeds, in 2017 and performed between May and June 2019, touring to six venues in the UK:

Leeds Town Hall, Leeds  
 Hull City Hall, Hull  
 Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool  
 Usher Hall, Edinburgh  
 The Sage, Newcastle  
 Royal Concert Hall, Nottingham

Future performances are planned for Montpellier Opera (2021) and Washington State Opera (2022).

The creative team of the production were:

|                                |                       |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Conductor</i>               | Sir Richard Armstrong |
| <i>Director</i>                | Annabel Arden         |
| <i>Designer/Video Director</i> | Joanna Parker         |
| <i>Video Design</i>            | Dick Straker          |
| <i>Lighting</i>                | Richard Moore         |

See [Production Trailer](#) produced by Opera North and the [programme](#) printed by Opera North including an interview with Sir Richard Armstrong, Annabel Arden and Joanna Parker.

This production of *Aida* was supported by public funding from Arts Council England, Leeds City Council, The Emerald Foundation; by corporate sponsor Brewin Dolphin; and by sponsorship from the private sector from The Friends of Opera North, The Opera North Future Fund, Associates of Opera North, The Opera North Fund, The Harewood Circle and The Patrons Initiative, as well as by box office income.

My practice research problematized *Aida*'s cultural value as one of the most popular operas of the European operatic canon. *Aida* tells the story of a displaced Ethiopian princess and captive at the Court of Ancient Egypt. Ethiopia

and Egypt are at war, and the defeated Ethiopia is about to invade its neighbour. Torn between political allegiance to her native country and her secret love for the Egyptian army commander Radames, *Aida* decides to abide by her love. The opera ends tragically with the lovers being punished by way of entombment.

Since its premiere, *Aida* has been restaged innumerable times and has become a celebrated masterpiece of nineteenth-century opera. To give a sense of its sustained success and importance within the Western culture industry, at New York's Metropolitan Opera alone, *Aida* has been performed more than 1100 times. However, precisely in its canonical status, it has also come under attack for allegedly epitomizing and promoting the colonialist, patriarchal spirit of the nineteenth century. Most famously, *Aida* is used as a prime example, by cultural critic Edward Said, to demonstrate how Western culture orientalizes and exoticizes the East; how colonialism functions not only through military intervention, but indeed through cultural reproduction.

My practice research involved theory- and practice-based dramaturgical research into the cultural criticism relating to the opera. The research attended to the search for new forms and experimental methodologies that would develop alternative models of practice in contemporary opera. These involved innovative spatial as well as time-based solutions, which, in their synthesis, offered a new decolonized reading of the piece in terms of race and gender. This research resulted in a critically charged scenographic space for *Aida* that opens the reception of the piece to twenty-first-century political concerns.

## II Questions, aims and objectives

*Aida*, Edward Said famously claimed in 'The Imperial Spectacle', not only represented but reproduced cultural imperialism. Rather than taking issue with the hegemonial conflicts and power struggles of Egypt, its aesthetics served to consolidate and perpetuate colonial dominance of the West over the Middle East (Said 1987: 84). Despite the essay's game-changing significance in the field of cultural theory, opera producers have largely dismissed Said's critique, holding onto a monolithic production style which frames the piece as mythological fantasy, depriving it of any relevance to the realities of the twenty-first century. My practice research, first of all, engaged with Said's critique by carving out a



## I Overview

Designing *Aida* is a single item practice research project consisting of designs and video content for a concert staging by Opera North in 2019. It is supported by further contextual materials.

*Aida* was performed by eight solo singers, a chorus of 60 and an orchestra of 102 musicians. It was commissioned by Opera North, Leeds, in 2017 and performed between May and June 2019, touring to six venues in the UK:

Leeds Town Hall, Leeds  
 Hull City Hall, Hull  
 Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool  
 Usher Hall, Edinburgh  
 The Sage, Newcastle  
 Royal Concert Hall, Nottingham

Future performances are planned for Montpellier Opera (2021) and Washington State Opera (2022).

The creative team of the production were:

|                                |                       |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Conductor</i>               | Sir Richard Armstrong |
| <i>Director</i>                | Annabel Arden         |
| <i>Designer/Video Director</i> | Joanna Parker         |
| <i>Video Design</i>            | Dick Straker          |
| <i>Lighting</i>                | Richard Moore         |

See Production Trailer produced by Opera North and the programme printed by Opera North including an interview with Sir Richard Armstrong, Annabel Arden and Joanna Parker.

This production of *Aida* was supported by public funding from Arts Council England, Leeds City Council, The Emerald Foundation; by corporate sponsor Brewin Dolphin; and by sponsorship from the private sector from The Friends of Opera North, The Opera North Future Fund, Associates of Opera North, The Opera North Fund, The Harewood Circle and The Patrons Initiative, as well as by box office income.

My practice research problematized *Aida's* cultural value as one of the most popular operas of the European operatic canon. *Aida* tells the story of a displaced Ethiopian princess and captive at the Court of Ancient Egypt. Ethiopia



FIG 1 Production image of *Aida*: Aida, the mother, gestural video language and drone footage from Aleppo. Alexandra Zabala as Aida



scenography that would destabilize the canonical orientalist legacy of *Aida*. Second, my practice moved beyond Said's critique by exploring *Aida*'s no less problematic nineteenth-century construction of gender.

1 My primary research aim was to renew *Aida*'s political relevance. Key to Said's critique of *Aida* as an instrument of colonial power is the displacement of the topic of war in Egypt into the mythological context of Ancient Egypt, turning the opera into an escapist fantasy made for a Western colonial imaginary. My objective was to take *Aida* out of an orientalist fantasy landscape and re-situate it in a current context of political conflict that was alive in the audience's mind, specifically the war in Syria, which had direct effects on Europe because of its resultant refugee crisis. By disrupting the escapist effects of *Aida*'s nostalgic setting and plot, I aimed to re-infuse *Aida*'s story with political relevance and draw attention to the predicament and trauma of victims of war today. My aim was thus to transform this piece, accused of using a war scenario only as a pretext for orientalist fantasy, as an actual anti-war piece.

2 Another crucial aim in my research was to develop design strategies to actively decolonize *Aida*'s orientalist aesthetics. Said highlights stage design as a primordial vehicle for orientalist fantasy. As his essay title 'The Imperial Spectacle' suggests, it is in the visual, scenographic aspects in which the opera's imperialist impact is harboured (1987: 94). One of my key objectives was therefore to break the design away from Said's imperialist charge, by undoing the scenographic monumentalism that is usually associated with it. Yet, orientalist exoticization is also present in the composition (for example, Verdi's use of Egyptian trumpets). Whereas it is not possible to change the musical score, my practice research aimed to develop a visual score that would systematically run counter to Verdi's musical and narrative orientalism.

3 My final research aim addressed the misogynist aspects of gender construction in *Aida*'s libretto and musical composition. Both elements conspire to reproduce a system of gender representation deeply rooted in the patriarchal conditions of Western nineteenth-century society, splitting the vocal range in accordance with a patriarchal model of social relations. A prominent aim in my practice was to interrogate *Aida*'s stereotyped representation of women by reframing the female body through choreographic, spatial and videographic means.

Key questions that drove my scenographic research practice were as follows:

- 1 *How can Aida be staged in a way that it can be experienced as a politically relevant piece; how could it be related to current socio-political concerns?*
- 2 *How can a dramaturgical reading reinterpret this work in ways that rescue it from its imperialist legacy?*
- 3 *How can design strategies be deployed to destabilize the stereotypical construction of gender inherent in the libretto and music? How could our dramaturgy revise the given cast of characters in feminist terms, especially the two female leads, Aida and Amneris?*
- 4 *How can design strategies be deployed in ways that make Aida more relevant to a new and more diverse audience which has historically been excluded from the genre of opera?*
- 5 *If Said condemned the original composer and librettist of Aida for their indifference towards actual power struggles in the Middle East and Africa, how might it be reformulated to deal critically with current scenarios of war and conflict in the Middle East?*

The importance of my research lies in the challenge of carving out an alternative, contemporary design for *Aida* that opposes the entrenched representational traditions that Said had critiqued. Sadly, *Aida* owes much of its success as one of the most loved masterpieces of classical opera precisely to its ossified, cliched formal apparatus, which is deeply ingrained in orientalist aesthetics.

Debates within the cultural sector, and opera especially, have foregrounded the importance of decolonizing performance and reach a more diverse audience.<sup>1</sup> Our version of *Aida* answered this imperative. Having established our aims and questions, we stripped *Aida* of its orientalist appeal and resituated it within the harsh light of a current war scenario. This posed a risk to an opera house that did not want to disappoint traditional audience expectations. Yet in the face of ongoing conflict in the Middle East, the war in Syria and also Yemen, it seemed crucial to imbue our production with concrete anti-imperialist political meaning.

<sup>1</sup> See Pistorius 2019a and 2019b. The Australian Music Centre 'Gender Equity and Diversity in Opera Summit' in December 2019, for example, debated the different areas of arts practice necessitating change, see Holowell 2020a and Holowell 2020b.





FIG 2 Still image of drone footage from Aleppo by Shahida Yakub



The fact that *Aida*'s plot points directly to the story of a displaced victim of war made the piece all the more relevant. It resonated powerfully with Europe's major challenge of the Syrian refugee crisis. Considering that Britain had largely closed its borders to refugees seeking asylum during the influx into Europe<sup>2</sup>, *Aida* offered a poignant story that could provide insight into the predicament of refugees who find themselves displaced in foreign, often hostile countries. This was all the more urgent as Opera North has been granted the status of 'Theatre of Sanctuary' in 2018 by City of Sanctuary, working closely with refugees in the framework of participatory projects and free ticket schemes.

Research in this project was multi-modal, non-linear and collaborative. It arose at several moments during the project timeline. This enabled the aims to be honed through active visually-led methodologies and vice versa. Research occurred in multiple forms and spaces: through reading, in discussion, in the design and video studios and the rehearsal and technical spaces of production. Some of the research was conducted individually, some of it in discussion with the collaborators in the creative team, the director, the videographer and the conductor, as well as a specially recruited team of performers from Black and Global Majority backgrounds.

### III Context

Said's annihilating critique of *Aida* as indifferent to the actual realities of conflict and war, as vacuous and laden with colonialist ideology, still poses the most challenging provocation to any artistic producer of that work within a Western opera house. This, however, does not mean that Said's provocation has necessarily been taken on board. 40 years on, the vast majority of opera productions still choose to indulge in the orientalist postcard fantasy of monumental pyramids, opulent palaces and nineteenth-

2 Over 6.6 million Syrians have had to flee their country since 2011. The UN Refugee Agency also estimates that a further 6.7 million have been forced to leave their homes but remain 'trapped' inside Syria (see USA for UNHCR, 2021). The UK government pledged to resettle only 20,000 refugees in 2015, with 17,000 settled by September 2019 (see Mistry & Wainwright 2019).

century Egyptological ornament that Said had attacked, despite the racist implications such style entails.<sup>3</sup>

1 My practice research contests the canonical model of productions of *Aida* and offers a significant advance, as it incorporates Said's post-colonial critique into the design strategies. In order to confront the critique of orientalist monumentalism, I developed a unique aesthetic that scaled down to the measure of the human body all objects and scenery on stage. Instead of the architectural landscape of opulent palace flats that is usually expected, the set was reduced to the absolute minimum. All architectural references were thinned out and abstracted into a skeletal sketch of mere outlines. The live body of the performer could now be foregrounded, emphasizing human vulnerability and making the story of *Aida* critical and relatable for a twenty-first-century audience.

2 Ralph P. Locke's essay '*Aida* and Nine Readings of *Empire*' (2006) drew our attention to an alternative reading of *Aida*. Locke excavates a statement by Verdi from 1896 which expresses a decidedly anti-colonialist, anti-militaristic position. This enabled us to better meet the challenge posed by Said's essay and reshape *Aida* into a poignant anti-war piece<sup>4</sup> (Locke 2006: 72; quoted from Conati 1984: 351). It opened up a new dramaturgical understanding that catapulted the war scenario into the foreground, rather than treating it as a pretext for operatic spectacle. If war is not usually represented in stagings of *Aida*, but only referred to as an offstage event, my practice research makes a significant difference in the field of opera design by introducing a new critical video layer to the piece, which used explicit video footage referring to a current conflict, namely the war in Syria. By embedding extant documentary footage from Syria from documentary film maker Shahida Yakub, I introduced an entirely new narrative to the libretto, doubling up the nostalgia-charged story set in Ancient Egypt with the harsh realities of violent destruction in a current war that was familiar to a contemporary audience.

3 Locke quotes the following statement by Verdi: "Alas, we [Italians] are playing the tyrant now in Africa — inopportunistly, and we shall pay for it. It is said that we are going there to bring those people our own [Western] civilization. A fine civilization we have, with all its miseries!" (2006: 72)

4 For instance, New York's Metropolitan Opera revived Sonja Frisell's 1988 staging in 2018 which explicitly embraced *Aida*'s escapist orientalism: "The libretto indicates merely that the opera takes place in 'ancient Egypt, in the time of the pharaohs.' This may sound vague, but it was a clear direction to approach the drama as myth rather than anthropology or history." (See The Metropolitan Opera, 2020).



3 The cultural critic Alexander Kluge opened up another angle in our research, which allowed us to explore the hidden potential for social critique in *Aida* (see Goehr 2009). Whilst Kluge's understanding of *Aida* takes on board Said's post-colonial critique, he suggests there is a space of resistance to be explored from within the opera, if indeed *Aida's* patriarchal idealism is refused. This, he suggests, is done by drawing attention to the more hidden gestures of resistance buried within the piece.

In my practice research, close-up views of the body and gestures allowed me to manifest the critical counter-angle physically that Kluge suggests theoretically. This occurred through another layer of footage introduced to the already mentioned video stream. By doubling up the live female performer with close-up video footage of her body as a brutalized subject, I excavated a new space between the sung soprano throughline which aims for the sublime, nostalgia and magnification, and the raw, inchoate experience of the body under duress. I used anti-idealistic framings of the female body that run counter to conventional beauty ideals to counteract the conventional upright position of the soprano female body and show *Aida* instead compressed horizontally; her projected body distorted, battered and flattened. My practice research punctures the sublime catharsis Verdi's music strives for at the expense of the victim. Our strategies of rewriting patriarchal gender stereotypes in *Aida* provide a considerable innovation to the canon, which, on the whole, preserves *Aida's* nineteenth-century paradigm. My investigations advance scenographic practice through new, innovative inter-medial techniques of representation.

4 My contribution to the field of scenography for contemporary operatic performance was also to speak to a more diverse audience in Leeds and on tour. To do so, I responded to the lack of diversity in the casting of the singers and recruitment of other artists and augmented the diversity in the production team by setting up a parallel rehearsal/video studio in which investigation was carried out by a group of invited performers, some from a Black and Global Majority background. The close-up imagery created in collaboration with this group featured footage of slow-motion gestures of resistance, trauma and endurance. The central figure of resistance in the video imagery is a black performer, reminding the audience that today the perils of war and displacement disproportionately affect people of Middle-Eastern and African origin. The innovative achievement in this aspect of my research practice was twofold: it introduced a new method of politicized collaborative

discourse beyond the usual processes of conceptualization in opera production through predominantly white creative teams, and, at the same time, addressed directly the deeply racist narratives of colonialism within *Aida*.

## IV Methodology

My research methodology as a designer within a collaborative production team follows a non-linear, multi-modal model of development, in which intellectual research questions, experimentation with materials and spatial propositions, as well as discussion with key collaborators, continuously cross-fertilize each other and evolve over time.

Spatial methodologies were prefigured by the architecture of the touring venues for *Aida*. In order to increase seating capacity, these consisted in a series of concert halls that were devoid of the conventional proscenium arch. The absence of a proscenium stage was crucial to my methodology in that it already implied a break with scenic monumentalism. The illusionistic framing of a scenographic space behind the proscenium arch, as Verdi had explicitly demanded for his Milan premiere of *Aida* in 1871, was not possible within the aim to undermine *Aida's* monumentalism. These architectural conditions worked to support my intention to place the action into the centre of the space, offering the audience an active witnessing presence (FIG 11). The physicality and vulnerability of the singer was heightened through the proximity between performers and spectators. My first modelled proposition was to place the 60-person-strong chorus as a mirror of the viewing public.

To deconstruct traditional orientalist approaches of designing *Aida*, I undertook different modes of visual dramaturgical research. The findings were discussed with the team and synthesized into spatial propositions through modelling and drawing. Research into nineteenth-century art history and Egyptology was filtered through explorations of contemporary fine art. This process supplied visual references and techniques to capture the actual experience of violence inflicted on the subjective body, in particular the female body. In order to undermine *Aida's* typical monumentalism, scale was an aspect that was rigorously explored. I set myself the challenge that all elements of the set needed to register as domestic and ordinary. For instance, a simple table was investigated in its capacity to function flexibly as a stage for an entire



musico-dramatic journey. At first, it only represented a domestic table destroyed by war. Then it framed the space of captivity. And, finally, it became *Aida's* tomb. It then was tested in its capacity for inter-medial possibilities. Initially, I used my own body to investigate the potential of working with a camera installed underneath the transparent table to capture movement and an image of the body under duress. This use of my own body within the design process attends to and creates alternative methods of collaboration in which the body of the designer actively inhabits a hybrid space between performance and visual representation. In the next stage of inter-medial research, I developed this material through improvisation with the singer playing *Aida*. These approaches offer radical alternatives to conventional hierarchies and genre boundaries in the production processes of opera. They established the performative body as integral to the scenographic contribution to a production.

To destabilize *Aida's* original gender construction, we took a dramaturgical decision that the split subjectivity of female characters that is typical of Romantic opera would be dissolved. The patriarchal division between 'virtuous' *Aida* and 'sensual' *Amneris* (*Aida's* love rival) would be reunited within the scenographic space. This design strategy was modelled and storyboarded so as to share it with the creative team. As a methodology, architectural design modelling in miniature became an analytical mode of enquiry; one that enabled the testing of new dramaturgical readings and scenarios that were feminist and anti-monumental. Whilst, in the original script, *Aida* and *Amneris* throughout most of the opera have separate entrances, in our production they were always together on stage. We undertook another re-positioning of female characters in the modelling process. Said highlights as one of Verdi's orientaling maneuvers his introduction of the role of an Egyptian high priestess, when in fact only male priests existed in ancient Egypt. Yet this fictional invention afforded Verdi the opportunity to include sensual dance interludes that required the musical backdrop of an exoticized, pseudo-oriental tonality. In this, the staged othering of women as sexualized objects coincided perfectly with the misrepresentation of the religious practices of another culture (Said 1987: 92-4). We re-formulated the role of the priestess into the mother of *Aida*, a strategy which destabilized the patriarchal order of nineteenth-century opera which consistently foregrounds father-daughter relations and writes mothers out of the plot. With the creation of a new mother figure, a silent maternal witness was on the scene, who comes to watch over the sacrifice of her daughter, providing a disturbing presence (FIG 1).



FIG 3 Alistair Gavin filming of mouth and porcelain for Triumphal March of *Aida*





FIG 4 Still image from the video language — the silent scream of rage





FIG 5 Still image of the gestural language of grief for the mother that replaces 'the priestess' in the original score

FIG 6 Still image of feet filmed for repeated gesture of 'walking away from endlessly — as refugee and survivor of trauma'

In the opera industry, the casting of singers still follows a white bias. The designer and director are not initially involved in this process — which is usually overseen by a casting director with expertise in the singing voice — as they might be in other forms of theatre and dance. In order to create a more inclusive and ethnically richer space of both artistic contribution and representation, I invited a group of diverse performers to participate in an experimental research process dedicated to creating video footage. Their role was not to sing, but to question the post-colonial aspects of the work through discussion and improvisation. This alternative rehearsal space actively provoked questions about accessibility and diversity in relation to *Aida's* narrative and music. As a new participatory design method, it explored the development of a video language featuring gestures of endurance, resistance and oppression that would later on feed our video stream. This new discursive video layer revealed the experience of war in *Aida* as one belonging to Middle-Eastern or African people. In my research for materials that would replicate the qualities of destruction and fragility, I entered extensive experimentation with the material of porcelain. This started with a visit to the studio of a ceramics artist (Kirsten Coelho) and culminated in physical improvisations in our alternative rehearsal space. The performers would explore the sensorial materiality of porcelain — its brittle fragility and the tension of liquid clay on the body. These methods move away from the dominance of a scopic regime in scenographic representation and seek to translate experience through the interactions and relations between different materials, objects, the body and its gestures (see video files from working with porcelain).

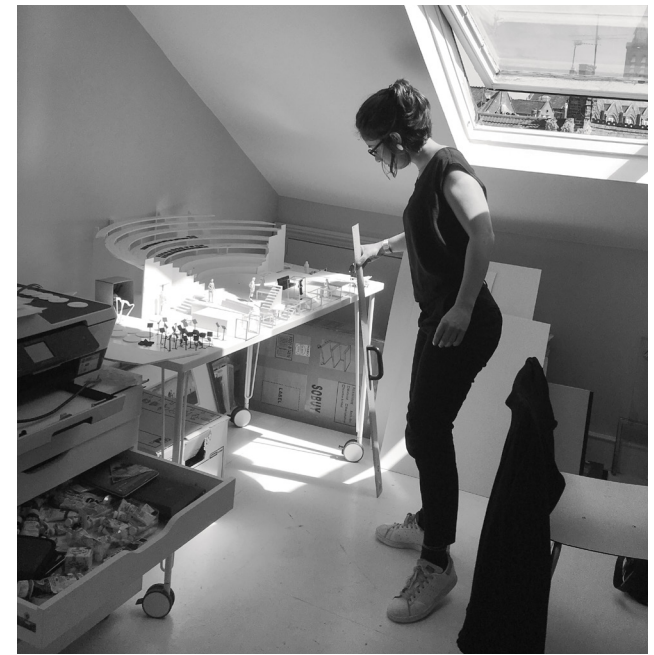
Our aim to turn this opera into an anti-war piece required a number of different strategies and methodologies to reflect the current political context of a war zone. The challenge was to find a visual language that would draw attention to the subjective suffering experienced by victims of war. My initial ideas included the use of extant drone footage from Syria provided by the documentary film maker Shahida Yakub. The footage was filmed in the ruins of a deserted village near Aleppo, moving in and out of the semi-pulverized ruin of a bombed-out home. Excerpts from this footage were used to anchor the reception of the opera in a clearly defined context of a current war zone with which audiences would be familiar. Its role was to undermine any escapism into a remote, idealized musical world that turned war into an aesthetic experience. This category of footage articulated the indexical language of a documentary aesthetic, keeping the represented content rooted in reality (see footage from Aleppo and FIG 2).



I then created a more complex inter-medial video montage, layering the different categories of footage into a video score that would run in parallel to the preexisting musical narrative. This interlinked a. the filmic space of documented reality (drone footage from Aleppo) with b. the pre-recorded gestural footage created in our alternative rehearsal studio with c. the enacted space of *Aida* who would be seen in performance as well as the projections produced through live-capture technology. Different inputs of video would coalesce fluidly between each other. This new video collage, produced in collaboration with Dick Straker, required methods that would coordinate it with the musical score and the physical action on stage. It presents the development of a new inter-medial method that opened up a critical space between the original opera and new counter-narratives mediated through video projections (see the pre-technical rehearsal in the *Outcome* video files).

In order to further refract the different narratives and formats in the space, I experimented with lighting and video projection onto the polymorphous texture of a cloth made from old sail and plastic. This sail became a 'projective sculpture' in the space, vividly performing its own displaced ordinariness. Experimentation was carried out in a separate studio space until an effective methodology was defined, developing new inter-medial projection techniques in which video content and material surface collude.

E



FIGS 7-8 Architectural model demonstrating the pared-down anti-orientalist design

v

## Timeline

|      |            |   |
|------|------------|---|
| 2018 | January    | Initial meetings and dramaturgical discussion with the creative team begin, as well as my independent dramaturgical research into critical theory, fine art and visual materials. Studio visit and clay research with ceramicist Kirsten Coelho.                        |
|      | April      | Three-week experimental film workshop, working in the studio with three performers and video designer, exploring clay, gesture, the body, culminating in the filming of footage, producing sample materials for the later shoot as well as for the final video montage. |
|      | April-June | Exploration of the 3d design in the model box. Development of costume designs through 2d sketches.  |
|      | September  | Presentation of design proposal to Opera North.   |



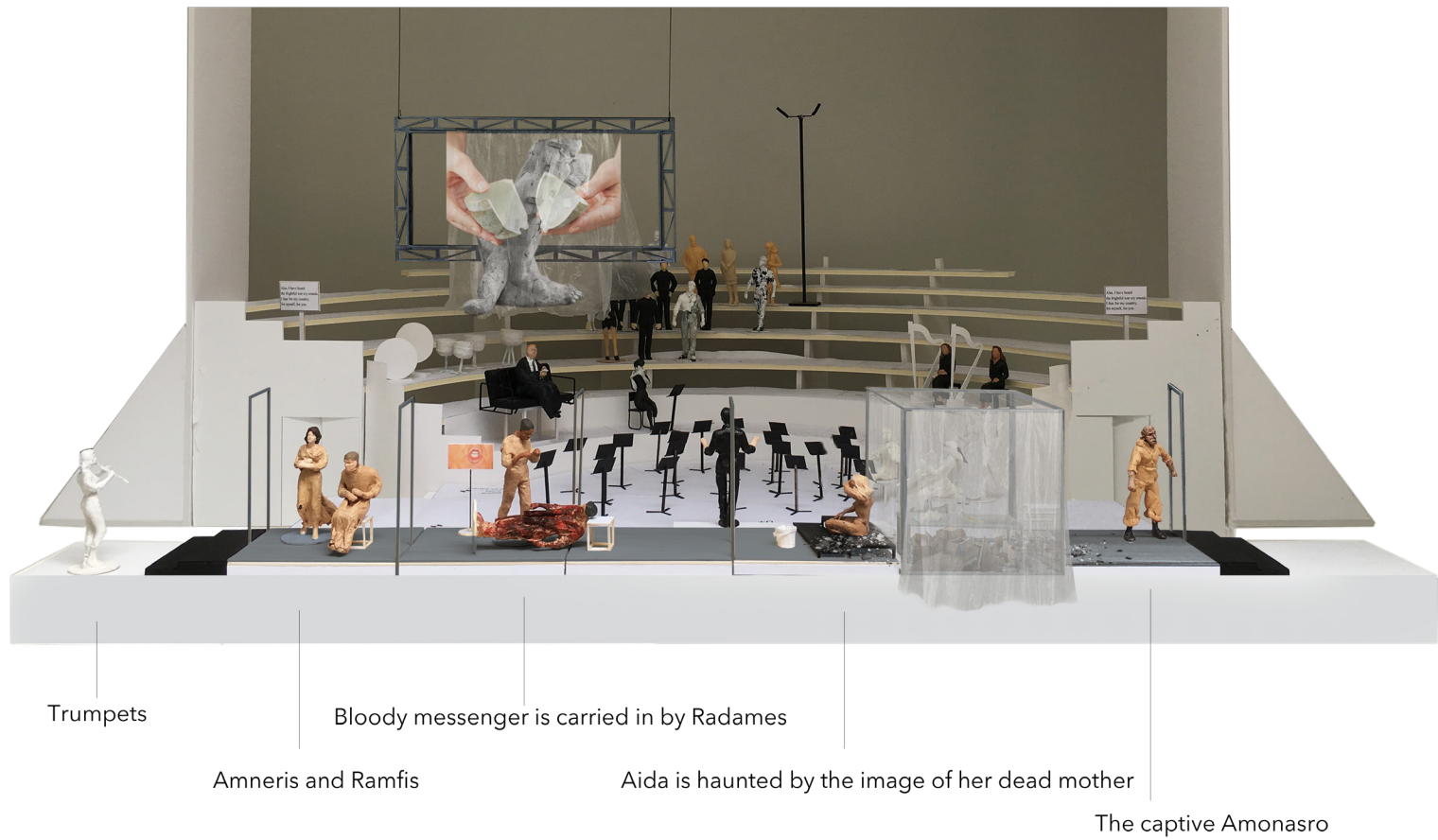


FIG 9 Model shot with Aida and Amneris as mirror image: Act 1.  
Aida's space and bomb crater

FIG 10 Annotated model shot of proposition for Act 3: *Aida* with video



September–December Design revisions and finalization of design in the model. Discussion and further conceptualization. Storyboarding for film footage to build a video score to accompany the musical score throughout the opera, in collaboration with video designer Dick Straker.

---

2019 February Film shoot of final video material.

March–April Elaboration of scene-by-scene dramaturgical changes, coordinating dramatic action on stage in the context of set and props, with the music and the video script we were developing.

April Rehearsal period. Supervision of set and costume construction. Final coordination of the use of set, costumes and props with lighting, music and scene changes (see printed design presentations for the cast and the technical team at the beginning of the rehearsal period).

May Opening of *Aida* at Leeds Town Hall.

F, G

## VI

## Findings

The creative outcome of my practice research was a critically acclaimed production and UK tour of *Aida*, which demonstrated that my design had found potent responses to my initial research questions and communicated these persuasively to our audiences. The outcome yielded the following new insights and findings:

1 Whilst the vast majority of opera productions, especially within Anglo-Saxon culture, still ignore Said's seminal critique and adhere to *Aida*'s entrenched orientalism as a recipe for commercial success, my explicitly anti-orientalist, pared-down design (FIGS 7–10) contributed an innovative alternative to the dominant production paradigm (Wouter 2014).<sup>5</sup> My design had reduced the scenery

<sup>5</sup> One prominent exception to the orientalist prototype was Peter Konwitschny's (1994) Graz production, which set the action in an abstracted contemporary Western interior (see Wouter [2014]). For further information on the production, see Fisher-Lichte 2015 and Risi 2002. Both articles also cover Hans Neuenfels' influential 1981 Frankfurt staging of the opera.

to an absolute minimum. Any decorative abundance and scenic monumentalism that Said had attacked was removed. Attention could now be concentrated on the story and its subject matter. If it was impossible to fully eliminate the orientalist excess embedded in the music, the minimalist visual and performative language could now open up a critical space that juxtaposed the profusion of the music and made room for contemporary references to inscribe the nineteenth-century work. The production run showed that audiences were ready to embrace such an updated, decolonized version of *Aida*.

2 My research aims were further realized by shifting the focus clearly onto the topic of war, not as a backdrop to operatic virtuosity, but as lived experience. By exploring and implementing several innovative videographic and inter-medial devices, I created a multi-layered video stream that referenced directly documentary video material of the war in Syria and the resultant refugee crisis with its subjective experience of violence, trauma, dislocation and captivity. Said's condemning analysis implied that Verdi had supposedly been indifferent to the actual politics surrounding the Middle East and Europe's colonialist influence in the region. The thin Egyptian narrative only served Verdi as a projection screen onto which he could pour the excessive grandeur of his musical vision. We assumed, however, that there was enough substance in the plot for us to turn the opera into an anti-war piece, fostering timely resonances with the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe. The video stream that I created was the primordial medium through which the new narrative was told. My multi-input video montage emphasized the visceral materiality of subjective experience as well as the currency and actual reality of the war in Syria with its resultant refugee crisis, allowing the audience to experience a felt relationship between the singing body, the filmed porcelain-covered bodies, the footage of a destroyed Aleppo and the story of *Aida*. By using design to dismantle the colonial legacy of the piece and drawing attention to the predicament of victims of war and refugees from Middle East and Africa, I made this opera relevant to contemporary concerns and rendered it more accessible for diverse audience. Reactions from the press as well as audiences demonstrated that our aim to employ *Aida* in the service of social critique was recognized.

3 My third research aim had been to explore and employ scenographic means for a feminist revision of *Aida*'s nineteenth-century patriarchal gender paradigms. In collaboration with the creative team, we discovered that



we could use movement, costumes, video and dramatic interaction to reinterpret the given cast of characters. The role of the high priestess was reformulated into the mother of Aida; Radames, who is originally characterized as a triumphant war hero, was revised into a soldier suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The most conspicuous feminist intervention in terms of scenography was achieved by creating a unified space for the two lead female characters, Aida and Amneris, who are conventionally represented as antagonistic and irreconcilably different. My design was unique in that it presented the two women as sharing one space, united by the same pressures and challenges of patriarchy. I thereby contributed a new feminist reading to a canon which still holds widely onto the misogynist parameters of the nineteenth century. My aim of delivering visual counter-points to the musical idealization in *Aida* was realized through specially developed inter-medial video techniques that retraced the raw, subjective experience of violence related by *Aida*.

My practice research, comprising costumes, scenery and a set of newly developed techniques of videography, led to an innovative critical scenographic idiom through which *Aida* could be experienced in a new light, with sharpened relevance, and thereby be made accessible to a more diverse audience. This project enabled a radically new reinterpretation of a canonical opera. It demonstrated that scenography is capable of functioning as a separate, critical intertextual layer to the work.

*Aida* had 12 performances, touring the UK through Leeds, Hull, Edinburgh, Manchester, Newcastle and Nottingham. It reached a total audience of 24,000. The director, video designer and I discussed our approach to *Aida* within a pre-performance talk at Leeds Town Hall at the start of the tour, which was attended by 1000 audience members. The creative team was also interviewed for an article, included in the accompanying programme of the production of which 2000 copies were sold. A few days before the opening, I conducted a further one-day practice-based workshop with Syrian refugees, in which the participants explored the themes of *Aida* through their

FIG 11 The audience as witnesses: placing the action into the centre of the space. Michael Druiett as the King of Egypt, Petri Lindroos as Ramfis, Alessandra Volpe as Amneris, Rafael Rojas as Radam, Alexandra Zabala as Aida









FIG 12 Eric Greene as Amonasro, Aida's father, brings the video language with live porcelain to the stage. His whitened hands are held to the audience while the clay crumbles.

own stories, and a one-day observational workshop, in which participants had an opportunity to attend, observe and discuss the dress rehearsal. The workshop was attended by 15 participants and organized by Opera North's Encore Scheme for community groups and organizations who wouldn't habitually engage with the company and its work. Opera North was awarded Theatre of Sanctuary status in 2018 in recognition of its commitment to making refugees feel included and giving them a sense of being valued through increased access to music, drama and opera. My design was discussed by collaborator Dick Straker at the *Staging Mixed Reality* conference in March 2020 at the Clore Studio, National Theatre, a Theatre Design Symposium organized by University of the Arts London, attended by 300 conference participants. His paper was filmed and is available online [\[1\]](#). *Aida's* production trailer [\[2\]](#), which shows footage of the production design, has been viewed by approximately 12,000 people. Opera North's website [\[3\]](#) provides documentation of the production on their archival pages, featuring production photos of my design.

The importance of this version of *Aida* is evidenced by a sold-out production run. As a result of its success, the production was invited to open the autumn season of Montpellier Opera in 2020, a revival which had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 crisis. Further performances are planned at Washington State Opera in 2022. *Aida* was reviewed by more than 20 national and regional papers, receiving 5 stars in a review by *The Times* and several 4-star reviews (e.g., *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*). Reviewers engaged with the research imperatives. Tim Ashley in *The Guardian* reflected on the staging as challenging how *Aida* is viewed through 'terms of epic grandiosity', suggesting that the staging 'hauls the opera out of ancient Egypt and into the present' (Ashley 2019). Hugh Canning in *The Sunday Times* recognised how the staging 'cuts to the bare bones of the drama' (Canning, 2019), where Rupert Christiansen in *The Telegraph* noted the concert staging succeeded in 'unassertively suggesting an analogy between these tale of Pharaonic Egypt and contemporary conflicts in the Middle East' (Christiansen, 2019). These reflected the research aims to renew *Aida's* political relevance and find strategies to decolonize its orientalist aesthetics. Richard Wilcocks further highlights this when proposing 'This welcome, radical interpretation of *Aida* is in the spirit of the times, leading us to reflect upon the current situation in the Middle East, yet still allowing us to be enthralled by Verdi's music' (Wilcocks, 2019). He goes on to observe that the use of projections in the design 'give the impression of the body as a site of conflict'



(Wilcocks, 2019), reflecting the use of scenographic and video-graphic practices to draw attention to the predicament and trauma faced by victims of war.

## VII Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor W. 1984. *Musikalische Schriften VI: Gesammelte Schriften*, 19 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp)
- Ashley, Tim. 2019. 'Aida review – Opera North rethinks Verdi's epic with formidable results', *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/may/02/aida-review-opera-north-town-hall-leeds-annabel-arden-alexandra-zabala>> [accessed 10/02/2020]
- Beckett, Samuel. 1994. *How it is* (New York: Grove Press)
- Calvocoressi, Richard and Mark Stevens, Lauren Mahony, Jenny Saville and Sally Mann. 2018. *Jenny Saville* (New York: Rizzoli Publications)
- Canning, Hugh. 2019. 'Opera review: Aida, Opera North; Paul Bunyan; Semele', *The Sunday Times* <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/opera-review-aida-opera-north-paul-bunyan-semele-vs2fh7b6b>> [accessed 10/02/2020]
- Christiansen, Rupert. 2019. 'Aida, Opera North, review: a triumph of music-making from a powerhouse company', *The Telegraph* <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/opera/what-to-see/aida-review-opera-north-town-hall-leeds-triumph-music-making/>> [accessed 10/02/2020]
- Conati, Marcello (ed.). 1984. *Encounters with Verdi*, trans. by Richard Stokes (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press)
- Fisher-Lichte, Erika. 2015. 'Scandalizing Orientalism: The Aida Productions by Hans Neuenfels (1981) and Peter Konwitschny (1994)', in *Opera Exoticism and Visual Culture*, ed. Hyunseon Lee and Naomi D. Segal (Oxford: Peter Lang), pp. 163–78
- Goehr, Lydia. 2009. 'Aida and the Empire of Emotions (Theodor W. Adorno, Edward Said, and Alexander Kluge)', *Current Musicology*, 87: 133–59
- Holowell, Sonya. 2020a. 'Opera Summit: Decolonising the High Arts, part A', *Resonate Magazine*, Australasian Music Centre <<https://www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/article/opera-summit-decolonising-the-high-arts-part-a>> [accessed 03/03/2020]
- Holowell, Sonya. 2020b. 'Decolonising the High Arts Part B', *Resonate Magazine*, Australasian Music Centre <<https://www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/article/decolonising-the-high-arts-part-b>> [accessed 03/03/2020]
- Kluge, Alexander. 1990a. *Die Macht der Gefühle* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp)
- Kluge, Alexander. 1990b. 'Kluge on Opera, Film, and Feelings', trans. by Miriam Hansen and Sara S. Poor, *New German Critique*, 49: 89–138
- Kristeva, Julia. 1996. *Readings of Exile and Estrangement*, ed. and intro. by Anna Smith (London: Palgrave Macmillan)
- Locke, Ralph P. 2006. 'Aida and Nine Readings of Empire', *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, 3(1): 45–72
- Mistry, Pritti & Dan Wainwright. 2019. 'Refugees fleeing Syria to UK: 'We're not trouble'', *BBC News* <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-49599377>> [accessed 10/02/2020]
- Pistorius, Juliana M. 2019a. 'Inhabiting Whiteness: The Eoan Group *La traviata*, 1956', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 31(1): 63–84
- Pistorius, Juliana M. 2019b. 'Predicaments of Coloniality, or, Opera Studies Goes Ethno', *Music and Letters*, 100(3): 529–539
- Risi, Clemens. 2002. 'Shedding Light on the Audience: Hans Neuenfels and Peter Konwitschny Stage Verdi (and Verdians)', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 14(1/2): 201–10

- Said, Edward W. 1987. 'The Imperial Spectacle', *Grand Street*, 6(2): 82–104
- Said, Edward W. 1994. 'The Empire at Work: Verdi's *Aida*', in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books), pp. 111–32
- The Metropolitan Opera (2020) *Aida*, The Metropolitan Opera <<https://www.metopera.org/user-information/old-seasons/2020-21/aida/>> [accessed 1 December 2020]

USA for UNHCR. 2021. 'Syria Refugee Crisis Explained', *USA for The UN Refugee Agency* <<https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>> [accessed 18/01/2021]

Verdi, Giuseppe. [1871] 1989. *Aida* (UK: Dover Music)

Wouter, Capitain. 2014. 'Performing the Orient: On Edward Said's *Aida*' <<http://culturalmusicology.org/performing-the-orient/>> [accessed 25 April 2020]