

# Vision of Hope

Elton John & Tim Rice's AIDA Soars with Music, Humor and Life

By David Freeland

*"Every story...new or ancient, is a tale of love at heart."*

The themes of *Elton John & Tim Rice's AIDA* are as timeless as love itself: Honor, courage, and the strength and goodness at the root of human nature. With colorful scenery, exciting dance numbers, and the unforgettable songs of Elton John, *AIDA* is a musical that uplifts while it entertains, touching audiences long after the applause fades.

"It aims for the heart, as opposed to the intellect," remarks director Daniel Stewart, explaining the show's transcendent appeal. The story of *AIDA*, inspired by the famous Verdi opera, poses the eternal question of how much we're willing to risk for those we love. Radames, an Egyptian soldier, finds his soul mate in a Nubian slave named Aida. But the painful truth is that their countries are at war, and, in the eyes of the world, they are enemies.

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"Radames gets to the point where he says, 'I really want to help you,'" explains Tony-Award winner David Henry Hwang, who co-wrote *AIDA* with Linda Wolverton and Robert Falls. "And she says, 'If you want to help me you have to help my people.' It's an example of how falling in love with someone, beginning to see the world through their eyes, can change the way you see larger issues."



Eventually, Radames is forced to make a choice between love and duty, and the poignant humanity of his struggle can be felt by all of us.

In the words of Stewart, "*AIDA* poses questions that arise in a world where there is war, racism, and betrayal." While much of the show is set in ancient Egypt, he's quick to point out that it's not a history lesson.

"On the contrary, it shows what is similar through all human experience through time. These are the same moral questions any era has to deal with."

In keeping with the show's accessible style, writer Hwang has peppered the book with modern, snappy dialogue that is often extremely funny.

"Life is like that," Hwang explains succinctly. "There are comic moments and all sorts of absurd things that happen in the most serious contexts."

As Stewart explains, "The show is completely filtered through contemporary eyes, because that's what the audience's sensibility is. And then we have Elton John's great up-to-date score, which is a mix of rock & roll, rhythm & blues, reggae, gospel, and other styles."

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show is just as appealing.

"It creates its own language, its own world," Stewart observes. "There's beautiful contemporary dance, as well as references to African and Middle Eastern dancing. It's sort of our collective history as people. We can draw from all periods, and the power of that visual completely belongs in this world we create in *AIDA*."

*AIDA* is that rare show with something for everyone. Production assistant Katie Walters confesses she's always amazed at the reactions of audience members.

"After one show, a woman ran up to me – she was a bit pale and winded – and she said, 'I just want to tell you, that was the best show. My friend is outside crying.' I think the show appeals to everybody because of the universal theme of love that lasts forever."

And while the characters in *AIDA* experience a share of tragedy, Stewart feels the message of the show is ultimately hopeful.

"It's the belief that we as a people will go on. Even though our current circumstance may be enslaved, it's just for now. We will have children, and our actions today need to be concerned with the promise that they will have a better tomorrow."

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