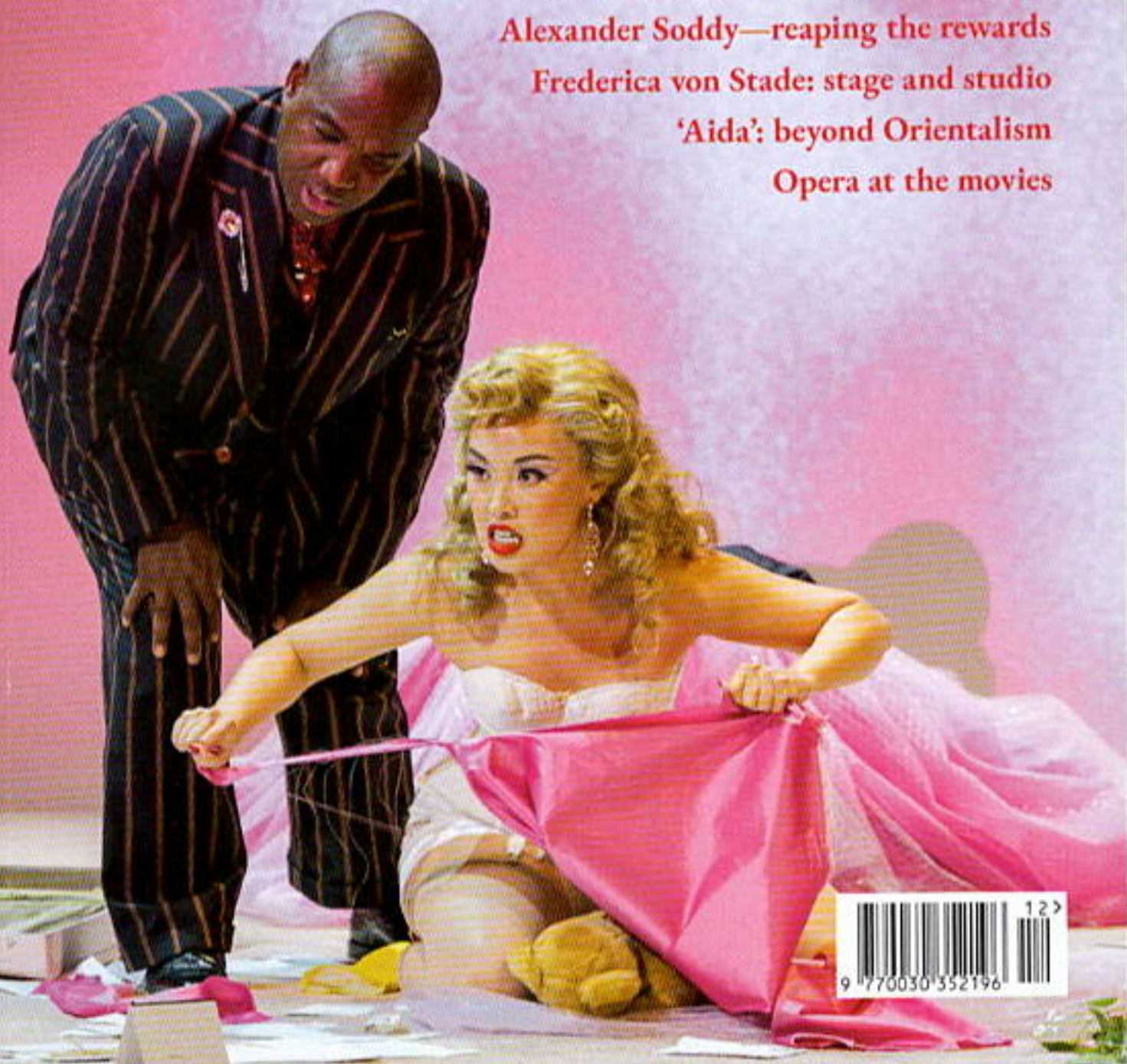


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New York

The Italian-American composer Nicolas Flagello (1928-94) deserves to be better remembered. The brother of the prolific bass-baritone Ezio Flagello, he produced a large number of works including seven operas. But because he expressed himself in a tonal, late-Romantic idiom, he was at odds with the musical currents of the post-World War II era—and his output did not find the widespread success it deserved. New York's small, enterprising TEATRO GRATTACIELO, which has often specialized in reviving neglected 20th-century works, took a big step towards boosting Flagello's reputation on September 15 at LA MAMA SHARES with its staging of the premiere of his final opera, *Beyond the Horizon*. Based on Eugene O'Neill's Pulitzer Prize-winning early play, the

opera was written in 1983, after which Flagello's composing career was curtailed due to a degenerative neurological condition. He collaborated on the libretto with Walter Simmons, and Anthony Sbordoni prepared the chamber-size orchestration (29 musicians) of his score.

Flagello's opera turns out to be an American gem, filled with beauty and tension expressed in an idiom that sounds not at all far from Puccini, Cilea and Giordano, or from film composers such as Franz Waxman and Bernard Herrmann. Christian Capocaccia conducted it with a loving, intensely involved approach that brought out every ounce of drama in the score. O'Neill's plot is, not surprisingly, a tragedy, centred on a romantic triangle that destroys a farming family. Two brothers have differing dreams: Robert is determined to leave his rural confines and see the world; Andrew wants to stay and work the farm with their parents. But when Andrew finds out that Ruth, the girl he loves, is in love with Robert, Andrew is the one who goes off to sea. All three have made the wrong choice, and the farm deteriorates along with their lives.

Ian Silverman's compelling horseshoe-style staging placed the orchestra at the rear, fully visible, while the singers occupied a stretch of brown earth extending into the audience. That and a few pieces of furniture were all that was needed to evoke the hardscrabble agrarian setting. Taylor Friel was the designer; the evocative lighting was by Dimitris Koutas, and the period costumes were designed by Grattacielo's artistic director Stefanos Koroneos.

In the central role of Ruth, Sara Kennedy proved herself a young soprano to watch. Until now she has specialized in Mozart roles, but her dramatic intensity, fierce upper register and commanding chest tones point the way toward Puccini, Verdi and verismo. The bass-baritone John Robert Green was poignant as the misguided Andrew. John Bellemer's ardent tenor was apt for the role of Robert, and he showed great commitment to the role, but his diction was too often cloudy. The same diction problems seemed to plague most of the supporting cast including Daniel Klein and Melina Jaharis as the boys' parents, Steven Kirby as their uncle and Carla López-Speziale as Ruth's mother Mrs Atkins.

The opera's three brief acts were played without a break, resulting in a tight 80-minute performance. This is a work that deserves further mountings by other companies, including music conservatories, for which it would be ideal.

ERIC MYERS