

Aida ★★★★★

(2012) 150 min. In Italian w/ English subtitles. DVD: \$24.99, Blu-ray: \$29.99. Opus Arte (dist. by Naxos of America).



The monumental quality of Giuseppe Verdi's 1871 opera—about the doomed love between the titular Ethiopian princess and Egyptian army commander Radames, who faces the forces of Aida's father—is certainly conveyed in this 2012 production from the massive Arena di Verona. Directed in highly traditional fashion by Gianfranco de Bosio, the staging features magnificent sets and costumes designed to replicate the 1913 performance that opened the Arena as an operatic venue, filling the huge space with color and opulence. The musical side doesn't quite match up, but this is nonetheless a solid reading of the score, with Daniel Oren coaxing strong playing from the company orchestra, while numerous choristers and dancers ably fulfill their responsibilities—as do the four horses that bow before the king. Among the singers, Hui He and Andrea Ulbrich stand out as Aida and Amneris, her rival for Radames' affections, while Ambrogio Maestri makes a powerful sound as Aida's father, Amonasro. Only Marco Berti is on a distinctly lower level (in terms of both vocalism and acting) as Radames. Presented in DTS 5.1 and Dolby Digital stereo on DVD, and DTS-HD 5.1 and LPCM stereo on Blu-ray, extras include a cast gallery (as well as a 3D option for those suitably equipped). In a crowded field, this *Aida* may not be the first choice (Franco Zeffirelli's 2001 mounting from Verdi's birthplace in Busseto, Italy, reviewed in VL-11/02, would be better), but it can easily be recommended. (F. Swietek)

All the Labor ★★★★★

(2013) 96 min. DVD: \$19.95. Music Video Distributors (avail. from most distributors).

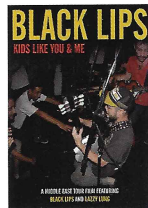


With an assist from Fugazi drummer-turned-filmmaker Brendan Canty, director Doug Hawes-Davis's scrappy documentary here profiles Austin roots band the Gourds (the quintet prefers the term "collective" to "band," as they've maintained the same lineup since 1999). Drummer Keith Langford notes that the members hail from various parts of Texas, except for Shreveport-born accordion player Claude Bernard. All are middle-aged men with wives and children, although the group clearly doubles as their second family. Guitarist Kevin Russell chalks up their longevity to the fact that they're still having fun, but expresses frustration over the way they defy easy categorization, stating that "the Gourds are a difficult, tangled, complex, weird, awkward mess." The group also features two singer-songwriters: Russell and bass player Jimmy Smith, who squabble

like an old married couple, but the traits that have made them difficult to market have also enabled them to develop a following over the course of 10 albums and countless tours. The Gourds also credit a heavily-downloaded cover of Snoop Dogg's "Gin and Juice" for bringing new fans their way, although this means they have to play it at every show in order to keep audience members happy (Langford says he doesn't mind). While most of the players come across as extroverts, multi-instrumentalist Max Johnston, who has worked with Uncle Tupelo and Wilco, seems more camera-shy, letting his musician father, "Dollar" Bill Johnston, speak on his behalf. Hawes-Davis organizes his material by members rather than chronology, which may frustrate anyone expecting a conventional biography, but there's a lot of music here for fans to enjoy, including live numbers and solo selections from Russell and Smith. DVD extras include extensive bonus performances. Recommended. (K. Fennessy)

Black Lips: Kids Like You & Me ★★★★★1/2

(2011) 75 min. DVD: \$16.95. Music Video Distributors (avail. from most distributors).



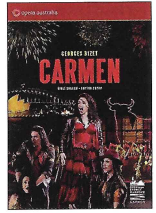
This engaging documentary covers four weeks in the life of a rock band from Georgia called the Black Lips. While the band itself is decent although not extraordinary, there's nothing ordinary about what's covered here: the quartet of Atlanta musicians just happen to be touring the Middle East in 2011, at the early peak of the Arab Spring in Egypt (shortly before Hosni Mubarak was ousted from the presidency) and as events in Syria are beginning to teeter toward disaster. Producer-director Bill Cody follows the Black Lips as they not only play in those countries—as well as Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Cyprus—but also try to understand tumultuous events and serve as goodwill ambassadors despite rising anti-U.S. sentiment. Touring with a Lebanese band called Lazy Lung, the Black Lips make a joyful noise and get people dancing, dealing along the way with media attention and difficult questions about values as best they can. While the concert footage is satisfying, the film's greatest strength is its street-level view of rapidly changing circumstances in Cairo and Alexandria, especially a remarkable scene in Tahrir Square with artists and others enjoying a new sense of freedom. DVD extras include bonus footage of an earlier tour and an MTV appearance. Highly recommended. (T. Keogh)

Carmen ★★★★★1/2

(2013) 141 min. In French w/English subtitles. DVD: \$29.99, Blu-ray: \$39.99. Opera Australia (dist. by Naxos of America).

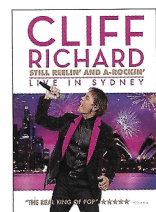
Performed on a large stage at Sydney

Harbour, Gale Edwards' Opera Australia production of Georges Bizet's popular warhorse about the manipulative seductress whose romantic tricks drive soldier Don José to violence is heavier on spectacle than musicality. The performance is punctuated by big moments (cranes lowering military vehicles onto the set, a parade of supernumeraries waving gigantic flags while fireworks explode in the night sky, the illuminated outline of a bull appearing in the background, etc.) that tend to overwhelm the more intimate story elements. Still, Rinat Shaham is superb in the title role, her allure evident both physically and in her rich mezzo voice, while Nicole Car also exhibits strong vocalism as the sweet young peasant girl, Micaëla. The men are less impressive, with Dmytro Popov (Don José) and Andrew Jones (the toreador Escamillo) showing signs of strain, although both have imposing stage presence (all suffer, however, from the ungainly head microphones that look like orthodontic devices). Brian Castles-Onion conducts a sprightly reading of the score (although the sound of the unseen orchestra comes across as a bit tinny), but some of the music is missing (such as the jaunty urchin march in the first scene) and the dialogue is severely cut (the large audience, which applauds lustily throughout, doesn't seem to be bothered). A more conventional *Carmen*—such as the 2002 Glyndebourne mounting starring Anne Sofie von Otter (VL-7/03)—would be a better choice. Presented in DTS 5.1 and Dolby Digital stereo on DVD, and DTS-HD 5.1 and LPCM stereo on Blu-ray, extras include a cast gallery. Optional. (F. Swietek)



Cliff Richard: Still Reelin' and A-Rockin'—Live in Sydney ★★★★★1/2

(2013) 148 min. DVD: \$14.98, Blu-ray: \$19.98. Eagle Rock Entertainment (avail. from most distributors).



For this 2013 concert, drawn from a four-night stint at the Sydney Opera House, Cliff Richard performs in a studded black blazer and glossy pants, looking considerably younger than his 72 years. Richard, who has the stage largely to himself (his band, with the exception of two keyboard players, occupies the second level), shares stories about his career (he was a star by the age of 16) between songs, noting that he's had hits, flops, and still finds it amusing when people recognize him in public. With the sparkles, crowd-pleasing banter, and dancing guitar players, Richards' show is basically a Vegas revue filled with solo singles, sides recorded with the Shadows (his backing band), and covers, such as Brian Hyland's "Sealed with a Kiss." But while Richards'