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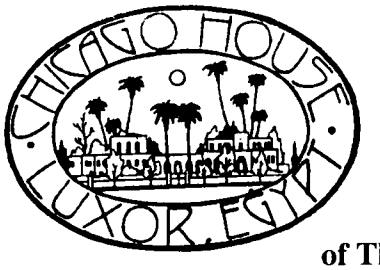

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AIDA, OPET, AND THE GREAT FLOOD OF '94

By Ray Johnson, Senior Artist

[The opening of the 1994-95 season has been so unique and so filled with bizarre incident that this entire issue is given over to Ray Johnson's lively description of it.—Ed.]

The Chicago House season officially begins each year on October 1st, and although the time is usually a busy one as staff members settle back into the normal work routine, there was nothing normal about the first two months of this 1994-95 season. First, on our arrival we were surprised to find that advanced preparations were underway to dismantle the easternmost row of columns of Amenhotep III's solar court in Luxor Temple, which is a part of the Epigraphic Survey's ongoing publication program. Later, a series of freak, catastrophic rainstorms—the worst in living memory—pounded Luxor and areas to the north. Then in November the city of Luxor hosted two spectacles of a different sort, a dazzling reenactment of the ancient Egyptian Festival of Opet at Karnak, and, around Thanksgiving time, a lavish production of Verdi's grand opera *Aida* at the site of Hatshepsut's mortuary temple at Deir El-Bahri that coincided with our annual Friends of Chicago House weekend. Between the work, the weather, and the arts, it's been a thoroughly mad autumn!

We arrived in Luxor to find the city already in the throes of preparations for the spectacles ahead. Our colleagues of the Franco-Egyptian Center at Karnak had to cope with the construction (practically in their backyard) of a temporary pontoon bridge across the Nile for the transport of busloads of happy opera-goers to the Deir el-Bahri performance of Aida. The access ramp to the bridge was unfortunately so close to the French compound on the Nile that part of our friend Luc Gabolde's bungalow and garden had to be demolished to make way for it. Luxor itself was given a "new" look for the thousands of tourists expected to flock to the event: sidewalks were torn up and completely retiled; a covered walkway was constructed down the 'Suq al-Saghir' street right next to the old Savoy Hotel; pharaonic "monuments " (fountains and papyrus-column kiosks) were constructed at every street intersection, as were Luxor's first-ever street signs(the latter compliments of the Coca- Cola company); and, strangest-looking of all, the buildings along the major tourist routes (from the train station and airport) were painted the same light bricky-red color. The whole town was literally painted red!

As if that weren't bizarre enough, we had another surprise at Luxor Temple when we made our beginning-of-the-season inspection; we found scaffolding being erected over all of the columns of the east side of Amenhotep III's solar court, and big chalk numbers scrawled on all of the column blocks. In addition, the entire eastern fragment storage area (thirty rows of thousands of block fragments) had been moved and restacked over the summer around the Epigraphic Survey blockyard, creating space for the great crane that is supposed to arrive at the end of the year. Peter Dorman and I met with the Egyptian contractors of the Orascom Company who are responsible for the dismantling and stabilization project, and they couldn't have been nicer or more obliging when we asked if it might be possible to photograph the east wall of the court before they built any more scaffolding. That task was accomplished over the next couple of days by Jerry Kobylecky, assisted by Ellie Smith and me, as steel struts and planks were literally being erected behind us.

One of those days, October 8, dawned clear, fresh, and with scattered, bright clouds: an ideal day for field photography. Jerry, Ellie, and I went down to Luxor Temple around 8:30 AM, just as the clouds started to thicken. The wind was strong from the east, and although it seemed to be somewhat threatening-looking on the west bank we figured if there was rain, the strong east wind would keep it from us. We set up our shot at the wall just as, to our total surprise, the wind abruptly reversed its direction and all those heavy black clouds started screaming toward us. In seconds the storm hit, with great claps of thunder, lightning, and an absolutely torrential rain. It was so surreal to witness the big drops of water quickly discolor the walls, then stain it in long tendril-like streaks. We had just enough time to cover the camera and lights before the water came down in a flood; imagine the roar of the falling water, the thunder, the screams of the workmen scrambling down from their metal scaffolding and running for cover. At first the wind was so strong we managed to keep somewhat dry by standing against the lee of individual papyrus-bundle columns, but soon the storm passed right overhead and the rain came down vertically. We were drenched, and it was suddenly freezing in the wind. The worst of it must have lasted no more than twenty minutes, then it let up enough to allow us to pack things up, but only after we took our shot (professionals all the way!). Our driver, Abd

(continued on p. 2)

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Aida, Opet, Great Flood *(continued from p. 1)*

el Hay, had come back for us when it began to pour, and we gratefully ran to the Land Rover. I was stopped dead in my tracks, however, by the spectacle that greeted us in the first court of Ramesses II: all of the colossal statuary glowed eerily in the half light, and were streaked like marble, the rain-streaks exposing the true color of the stone against the dull dust coating. Some of them looked like they were weeping. The sight of the rain-drenched temple was absolutely spectacular in every sense of the word, disorientingly wrong, strange and surreal.

Back at the house there was general chaos, but most things held up pretty well. Then the rains began again, and continued all afternoon. Luxor was totally flooded and the Corniche looked like a canal. Runoff water from the Valley of the Kings on the west bank flooded much of the area of el-Tarif, where some of our workmen have their homes. Over the next few days Luxor experienced several other light showers, but the worst seemed to be over.

But the worst was actually yet to come. The subsequent rains of November 2nd were so catastrophic they made the world news. They lasted only about an hour or two here, but were heavy and affected Egypt from Luxor all the way to Cairo; streets were flooded, a section of the Khan el-Khalili collapsed, and the entire area between the two cities experienced terrible destruction from run-off water hurtling through villages that were unhappily in the way and already weakened by the earlier rains. In the town of Durunka, south of Assiut, a terrible accident at a military fuel depot was sparked at the height of the storm by a gasoline-train that exploded when floodwaters derailed it. The town surrounding the depot was inundated with rivers of flame carried by the floodwaters, thousands of gallons of blazing fuel that trapped and incinerated people in their houses.

We had tragedy here, too, although luckily not on that scale. The village of el-Tarif was devastated by the run-off waters, hundreds of mud-brick buildings collapsed, and three of our workmen (our three laddermen, old Ali, young Ali, and Abu el-Qasem) lost their homes. Peter and I drove over to old Ali's place the next day (on the cultivation edge in front of Deir el-Bahri), and I am really hard-pressed to describe the scene. Large numbers of mudbrick homes between there and el-Tarif to the north were absolutely flattened; only the baked-brick or concrete houses survived. Ali's house was an unrecognizable mound: splintered wooden beams sticking out of it at crazy angles are the only evidence that it was ever a house at all. Just to the east and north the fields were as filled with water as they must have been during the inundation, with flooded houses sticking out of the water here and there. There was an awful beauty to the devastation; the shining water, the mounds of collapsed buildings, the islands of surviving houses. Ali's family and others had hauled as many of their belongings as possible up along the desert edge; he wept as he showed us

(continued on p. 3)

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Aida, Opet, Great Flood *(continued from p. 2)*

what used to be his home. Luckily no one there was hurt. We tried to go to el-Tarif to check on young Ali, but when we tried to turn onto the road to el-Tarif below Howard Carter's house (the eastern extension of the Valley of the kings road) we found that the road was washed away just past the cemetery. Apparently three taxis had been caught by the raging waters at the western end of the road near the Valley of the Kings resthouse and were destroyed, smashed against the rock walls of the canyon (the occupants were able to get out and climb to safety). In the Valley of the Kings itself several tombs were flooded, and further down the road the mortuary temple of Sety I was filled with mud. The wall of the cemetery to the north appeared intact, but as we turned around I got a bone-chilling glimpse through several breaches in the wall of a sea of shiny, wet mud where the graveyard had been with one or two gravestones poking up through the mess; it was a terrible sight. We got back to the east bank to find young Ali waiting for us by the Land Rover. His family was OK, and the Gurna area in general experienced very little loss of life. Chicago House is giving financial assitance to Abu el -Qasem and the two Alis, and we all took up a collection to contribute to it.

Despite the local devastation, preparations for Aida continued apace. November 5 marked the first day of the "Luxor Day Second Annual Tutankhamun Conference" at the Convention Center next door, where during the next three days friends and colleagues gave papers. Both Mohammed Saghir and Peter gave talks on the Opet reliefs of Luxor Temple, using slides from our new publication. The surprise of the opening day was our being bused to Karnak that evening for the most elaborate reenactment of the Opet Procession that I have ever seen, or could ever imagine. It was simply unbelievable. A gigantic stage and bleachers had been erected in front of the entryway to Karnak, and I swear that two thousand people must have taken part; there were at least a thousand dancers alone!

The show began with folkloric dancing, a dozen groups representing various areas in Egypt and time periods, dancing individually and then all together in an amazingly choreographed tableau of swirling color and movement. At the height of the dancing melée the music abruptly stopped, the dancers slowly turned toward the Karnak pylons, and in an absolutely electrifying moment, long piercing notes of great trumpets from the top of the first pylon cut through the air, drums started a slow, rhythmic beating, and the present gave way to the past as ghostly processions from antiquity gradually emerged from the gloom at the base of the pylon, and the modern dancers slowly backed off the stage into the darkness. Nefertiti appeared on a sedan chair in a procession of nobility, ladies-in-waiting, and children, all carrying elaborate standards and wearing wonderful, ancient Egyptian costumes. There were soldiers and panther-skinned priests with bald heads. And Pharaoh, wearing an Atef crown dripping with cobras, rodein a real horse-drawn chariot accompanied by hundreds of lithe soldiers in little nemes headdresses. The best were the dancers, obviously from a local Cairo ballet troupe: thin, willowy young women in close-fitting long black wigs and sheath dresses and tall, muscular young men in kilts and nemes head cloths. While the music was a little modern for my taste in spots, it was not bad; the dancing was very nice. Pharaoh, who must have been Amenhotep IV (he even looked like him, very tall and thin) was conducted into the temple by an army of priests, while a strange tent-like vehicle two stories high rolled up onto the stage. As it turned the corner we saw that it was a gigantic mobile movie screen (!), and to our amazement what flashed on it was a view of the procession of the king and priests, inside Karnak out of our sight, following the king as he went to the sacred lake to purify himself, and to the bark shrine of Amun to offer incense and water before escorting the god out of the temple. As the screen withdrew, the barks of Amun, Mut and Khonsu, gilded and very elaborate, emerged from the pylon on the shoulders of falcon and jackal-headed priests. As the procession made its way out of the temple toward us, the mobile screen rolled away and the barks were carried to the stage. The whole thing ended with lavish, extraordinary dancing, and a grand procession past the audience: all of the modern dancers; then the barks, one after the other; the royal family in sedan chair and chariot; dignitaries and officials; foreign prisoners (including several real dwarves!); countless soldiers of various types (archers, infantry with hatchets, spears, and/or decorated shields); and standard bearers of all sorts. As they all disappeared off the stage into the night, a voice announced that we should return to Luxor next year for Part Two, the great river procession to Luxor Temple! It was really very charming, with moments that were quite moving. There was a moment of sheer beauty when the queen and high priests (real actors who truly looked the part) in their panther skins, holding incense burners waited for the king on the great quay; it was so evocative it gave me a real shiver.

Finally, on the last night of our Friends of Chicago House weekend (Nov. 26), Aida opened at Deir el-Bahri. Despite my moral objections to the whole thing (because of the inevitable damage to the antiquities of Deir el-Bahri that such an undertaking absolutely ensures), I will admit that I did experience a twinge of regret that I could not take part in the madness (especially at $300 a ticket!), since it is one of my all-time favorite operas, but we were surprised to find out that the opening was being broadcast live on Egyptian television! FOCH tour guests Ali and Kate Khalifa very kindly invited Jerry, Linda and me to their room to watch it in comfort, so we took them up on their invitation and enjoyed a wonderful evening. It was actually better than being there: you could see

(continued on p. 4)

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Aida, Opet, Great Flood *(continued from p. 3)*

people in the audience all bundled up in blankets, desperately trying to keep warm. The singers were superb (the Aida was drop-dead gorgeous with a stunning voice; I wish I could say the same for Radames, who had the voice of an angel and the face and figure of a hobbit), the camera work and sound quality was first-rate, the sets and costumes were imaginative and fun, the seating for four thousand was practically full, the cliffs did not fall, nor did anyone mess up anything badly; in other words, much to everyone's surprise and pleasure, it was a total artistic success!

The night of the second performance (of three) I looked out at the cliffs of Deir el-Bahri from my veranda at Chicago House around 9:00 PM and was startled to see a huge ankh sign projected in dazzling white light against the cliffs over Hatshepsut's temple, clearly visible even from here! I'll admit, it was a sight that made me smile. The entire nation focused all of its resources on this one cultural event, and all of its national pride. The construction about town, not quite finished in many places, continued furiously (it continues today!); the hotels were crammed full of visiting dignitaries, Egyptian and foreign; and the streets were so full of "plainclothes" policemen and soldiers it was difficult maneuvering down the sidewalk! Everywhere one went one was greeted by the townspeople with shouts of "Aida , Aida !" Everyone in town watched the live broadcast on TV opening night, and Luxor's citizens were now expressing an almost ferocious pride in a love story which firmly ranks human love higher than the love of one's country. It was so odd, so wonderfully contradictory, and yet so true to this paradoxical place. I love Egypt, and I share its joy at this success; I just hope they don't do it again for a long time to come!

END

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