

# SAN DIEGO DAILY TRANSCRIPT

November 21, 2008

## San Diego Opera mixes romance with suicide set to grand music



### Opera Scene

By John  
Patrick Ford

Searching for a theme for San Diego Opera's 2009 season provides some unlikely comparisons of opera plots. The usual unrequited love affairs leading to rash suicides, common to most operas, are there in four of the five operas in the repertory, opening with Giacomo Puccini's "Tosca" on Jan. 24 at the Civic Theatre.

Probably the most obvious theme for the SDO season is the similar identity of three leading female characters. Tosca, Gilda (Rigoletto's daughter) and Madama Butterfly are all women betrayed by the men they trusted. Three of the operas feature deranged men in the roles of Don Quixote, Rigoletto and Peter Grimes.

These five opera dramas would make a psychiatry field day if the characters were real-life persons in the modern world.

Suicide does impact the outcome of four of the operas. Three sopranos, Tosca, Gilda and Butterfly, have lost their lovers and choose death over

coping with the shame of their fate without their men. The tenor Grimes is driven by hostile village neighbors to find redemption in death at sea.

In the season opener, the celebrated singer Floria Tosca is pursued by a lecherous police chief who bargains for her favors in exchange for release of Tosca's rebel lover. The deal goes bad when she kills the evil scoundrel to save her honor not knowing the chief arranged a "mock" execution of her man that turned out real. In flight from the firing squad, Tosca in despair takes a leap from atop Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome.

A bit of comic relief is provided in the second opera of the season, "Don Quixote" by Jules Massenet. The familiar tale of an eccentric knight searching for the Impossible Dream, takes him through a series of misadventures. Singing the choice character role is basso Ferruccio Furlanetto, a leading star of the international opera stage, who has appeared with SDO in major roles over the last 13 seasons.

Conductor Edoardo Müller and director Lotfi Mansouri return to SDO and team up to shape the third opera, a fast-paced Giuseppe Verdi classic,



Photo: Pablo Mason

The San Diego Opera presents "Don Quixote," in February.

"Rigoletto." Woven into a background of treachery, abduction and personal sacrifice are some of the best known arias in opera leading to a dramatic climax with the

famous quartet.

The hunchback jester for the Duke of Mantua tries to protect his daughter Gilda

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## Opera Scene

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from his lecherous boss. She is abducted by courtiers as a payback to Rigoletto's jests and falls for the Duke's sweet talk. Gilda learns of her lover's infidelity but still protects him from her father's revenge.

Gilda is the disguised victim of a paid assassin. Suicide is her redemption.

The sea plays a significant role in both "Peter Grimes" and "Madama Butterfly," the last two operas of the 2009 season. The four sea interludes of Benjamin Britten's score for "Peter Grimes" depict a brooding quality with the feel of the English seacoast fog covering the tragedy to come:

"Dawn" sets the mood of surface tranquility soon over-

taken with mystery and foreboding. "Sunday Morning" lifts the spirits of despair as the villagers answer the call of church bells. "Moonlight" rolls with the sea, setting the stage for Grimes' ultimate fate.

"Storm" brings out the full force of nature's conflict linked to Grimes' inner tensions of hostility and frustration that drive him to be swallowed up by the sea.

Modern-day therapy could have helped this demented and lonely fisherman who had only a kindly schoolmarm as a friend. Anthony Dean Griffey brings his dynamic interpretation fresh from last season's Metropolitan Opera production.

The sea also provides a

background for the bitter-sweet romance in Puccini's "Madama Butterfly."

After Lt. Pinkerton, an American naval officer stationed in Nagasaki, leaves his Japanese bride and returns to sea, Butterfly's obsession is focused on the view of the harbor from her hilltop cottage.

The dramatic climax of the second act is sighting her lover's ship returning years later. Tickets for all performances at the Civic Theatre are now available at 619-533-7000 or online at [sdopera.com](http://sdopera.com).

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*Ford is a past president of San Diego Opera and supports the opera archive at San Diego State University.*

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These five opera dramas would make a psychiatry field day if the characters were real-life persons in the modern world.

Suicide does impact the outcome of four of the operas. Three sopranos, Tosca, Gilda and Butterfly, have lost their lovers and choose death over coping with the shame of their fate without their men. The tenor Grimes is driven by hostile village neighbors to find redemption in death at sea.

In the season opener, the celebrated singer Floria Tosca is pursued by a lecherous police chief who bargains for her favors in exchange for release of Tosca's rebel lover. The deal goes bad when she kills the evil scoundrel to save her honor not knowing the chief arranged a "mock" execution of her man that turned out real. In flight from the firing squad, Tosca in despair takes a leap from atop Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome.

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Conductor Edoardo Müller and director Lotfi Mansouri return to SDO and team up to shape the third opera, a fast-paced Giuseppe Verdi classic, "Rigoletto." Woven into a background of treachery, abduction and personal sacrifice are some of the best known arias in opera leading to a dramatic climax with the famous quartet.

The hunchback jester for the Duke of Mantua tries to protect his daughter Gilda from his lecherous boss. She is abducted by courtiers as a payback to Rigoletto's jests and falls for the Duke's sweet talk. Gilda learns of her lover's infidelity but still protects him from her father's revenge. Gilda is the disguised victim of a paid assassin. Suicide is her redemption.

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Modern-day therapy could have helped this demented and lonely fisherman who had only a kindly schoolmarm as a friend. Anthony Dean Griffey brings his dynamic interpretation fresh from last season's Metropolitan Opera production.

The sea also provides a background for the bittersweet romance in Puccini's "Madama Butterfly." After Lt. Pinkerton, an American naval officer stationed in Nagasaki, leaves his Japanese bride and returns to sea, Butterfly's obsession is focused on the view of the harbor from her hilltop cottage.

The dramatic climax of the second act is sighting her lover's ship returning years later. Her expectation of reunion is soon to be dashed with the appearance of a new American wife. Hari-kari is the only solution for the abandoned child bride so her little boy can be taken away by his father.

Despite the pathos of the opera stories, the music by Puccini in the opening and closing productions of "Tosca" and "Madama Butterfly" is supplemented by the ever-popular Verdi score for "Rigoletto," so full of hummable tunes.

A final similarity of the 2009 season is that the title of each opera is the name of the main character, providing instant identity of the plot and leading role.

Tickets for all performances at the Civic Theatre are now available at 619-533-7000 or online at [sdopera.com](http://sdopera.com).

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