"Madama Butterfly"

Japanese geisha loves American naval officer; dies with honor

Opera Scene
By John Patrick Ford

Opera lovers worldwide return time and again to sob over the fate of the delicate and charming Japanese bride of a callous American who has abandoned her and their child. "Madama Butterfly," the last production of the San Diego Opera 2009 season, opening May 9, delivers all the drama and color of the tragic love affair in a creative production portraying the diversity of two cultures.

The opera begins with the wedding of the naval officer to a young girl who enters into an "arranged" marriage to a foreigner with passionate devotion. The second act finds Butterfly waiting for her lover's return three years later. The American consul tries to warn her of his infidelity and marriage to an American wife. Butterfly insists he will return and shows him her child while singing some of the most dynamic Puccini arias in the opera repertory. When the truth sets in, there is no recourse except a death with honor in true samurai tradition.

Those lucky viewers who saw the gripping Metropolitan Opera high-definition broadcast in March at a local movie house will be pleased to see the same Butterfly live on the stage of the Civic Theatre. Patricia Racette is returning for her fourth SDO appearance in the role she has claimed as her own with rave reviews. Tenor Carlo Ventre takes on the heartless lover Lt. Pinkerton while Malcolm MacKenzie brings a sympathetic touch as the American consul Sharpless.

This tear-jerker drama went through several versions See Opera Scene on 4-A.

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before it was set to glorious music by Puccini for its opera premiere in 1904. The French novel author, Julien Viala a.k.a Pierre Loti, penned a book in 1887 called Madame Chrysanthème. He named the naval officer Loti after himself and "rents" a Japanese bride for whom he cares little. Rather than killing herself when her "husband" abandons her, the girl is found counting the money he paid her and looking for the next liaison.

The book ending was not as dramatic as impresario David Belasco envisioned for his play based on the novel. His version opened on Broadway in 1900 with a loving Cho-Cho-San and the new title "Madama Butterfly." Even Pinkerton was recast as a remorseful father who cradled the dying geisha for a tearful finale. Puccini saw the play at the opening night in London and went backstage to negotiate rights with Belasco for an opera. The rest is history.

Interesting trivia about the evolution of the opera story for the Butterfly aficionados includes the transition of Pinkerton from a coarse, rude and patronizing navy guy into a romantic lover. Early productions of the opera removed the Japanese slurs and made him a more likeable and conventional tenor. His American wife Kate, another xenophobe in the original version, confounds Butterfly over taking away the child rather than demurely waiting in the garden as we see her today.

Conductor Edoardo Müller leads the ensemble, and Garnett Bruce returns for his third time as director of this production. His slant emphasizes Butterfly's conversion to Christianity by resetting the marriage ceremony with western clothing into the American consulate. This was an original concept in the Belasco play. The early version of the opera was changed by Puccini to the little love nest on the hill overlooking Nagasaki harbor in Act II.

Puccini strived to give his opera a blend of Japanese-American culture by incorporating at least seven native folk tunes with refrains from "The Star Spangled Banner." The opera is sung in Italian with English text above the stage.

Performances at the Civic Theatre are: 7 p.m. May 9, May 12 and May 20; 8 p.m. May 15; and 2 p.m. May 17. For ticket information, call 619-533-7000 or visit sdopera.com.

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

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