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**Los Angeles Opera's 'Madama Butterfly' shines but lacks sentimentality and pathos of more traditional versions.**

**GIACOMO PUCCINI  
MADAMA BUTTERFLY  
LOS ANGELES OPERA  
OCTOBER 10, 2008**

By: Carol Jean Delmar  
OperaOnline.us

If Robert Wilson's production of "Madama Butterfly" – currently being performed for a third time by Los Angeles Opera -- had been the first production of the opera ever produced, would "Madama Butterfly" have been a resounding success? The real premiere was an abject failure, but after subsequent changes, the tide turned.

The answer is yes. The music pulls the heartstrings whether the characters are dressed in traditional 1900's costumes on an elaborate Nagasaki set or in classical-looking Greek toga-like futuristic costumes on a minimalistic set with a blank cycloramic backdrop. We watch the tragic consequences of Cio-Cio-San's somewhat unconventional, illegitimate marriage to B.F. Pinkerton and loathe him for his actions. And we cry for the little geisha girl because she is so loyal, noble and innocent. The opera stands on its own because it is driven by a heart-rending score that shines whether the production is staged or not.

The Wilson vision – with its Noh, Kabuki and Commedia dell'arte influences -- is at times phenomenal; the lighting, awe-inspiring. The characters move in choreographed patterns across an almost bare stage using pantomime and other ancient ritualistic movements to depict their actions. Some move with brisk, short strides. Others seem to float. It is a sight to behold. But the traditional pathos communicated in this opera is lacking. The characters are controlled, reserved and show emotion only through their vocality, which isn't easy. Their Kabuki-esque faces are mask-like, and some of them seem locked behind their makeup and costumes as if imprisoned. The singers are external actors, recreating the external signs of their characters' emotions without becoming

emotionally involved, which is in contrast to internal actors who commit to their emotionality. Wilson directs these singer-actors to appear as if they've studied with François Delsarte (1811-1871), who directed actors to utilize pat gestures, poses, postures and movements to project the basic emotions. When Butterfly figuratively commits harakiri, descending to her death as Pinkerton rushes in, we feel as if we finally understand Wilson, but we do not cry for Cio-Cio-San. We are entranced with the symbolic vision. The dance-like movement patterns, stylization and symbolism capture our attention, and we are captivated with the East meets West confrontation. It is then that we say to ourselves that it would be nice to feel emotion, but sometimes it's interesting to be lost in a creative vision.

This Wilson production premiered in Paris in 1993, making its way to Los Angeles in 2004, 2006, and now 2008. I saw it for the first time in 2006 and have mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, I feel more fulfilled this time because in the cast I saw, both Cio-Cio-San and Suzuki were Asian. For some reason, the movements seem specific to the culture, and the story and movements make sense now. It is so nice to see a Butterfly that really looks the part and to be able to delineate the differences between the American and Asian cultures. But although I think positively about this 2008 revival production, I still want to rant and rave and say to LA Opera General Director Plácido Domingo: "Mr. Domingo, we have seen this production three times within five years. Enough is enough already. I want to connect with the characters. I want to see Cio-Cio-San look into Pinkerton's eyes, and I want them to hold each other when they sing of love. I want to see Cio-Cio-San touch her little boy, and I want to see her kill herself, even though she often does that behind a screen. I want to see emotion on her face, and I want to feel her pain. So next time you produce 'Madama Butterfly,' please give us a new traditional production and bring back some of the sentimentality."

In summary, Robert Wilson's production does indeed work on a creative level as a novelty production, but not as a steady diet. I strongly believe that he has made a mistake by applying the same doctrine to other operas because now this particular "Madama Butterfly" has become less, and the other productions have become more about Mr. Wilson than the operas performed. If Mr. Wilson is in fact the "genius" so many people believe him to be, then he should use that genius to create productions that are unique unto themselves instead of always applying his signature formula to create cookie-cutter duplicates.

#### THE SINGERS:

Liping Zhang as Cio-Cio-San was the audience favorite, although I disagree. Don't get me wrong: I did like her, but she didn't excite me. She was perfectly cast visually, sang with a sweet timbre, and moved with the grace and delicacy the part requires. But her simplistic nondramatic "Un bel dì" left me cold and wanting. Some of the singers had at least a marginal amount of expression on their faces, at least to let me know that they were alive, but Zhang's face was so nondescript that she looked lifeless and tired. Maybe she was. We were told that she had a cold, so it is probable that her voice was more provocative on other nights.

My favorites are usually the basses, bass-baritones, baritones and mezzos. I love chocolate, and baritone Vladimir Chernov's Sharpless was chocolate. His tones were rich and fudgy, focused, supported and technically strong. He is statuesque on a stage, and he wore his long dark gray Wilson costume well, moving with stately grace and dignity just as a good American consul should. He thrived in the confines of this Wilson production and still exuded the integrity of his character.

Ning Liang was my second favorite. The mezzo-soprano sang Suzuki with creamy, full-bodied, succulent sound, and she was cast perfectly to sing the "Flower Duet" with Zhang. Franco Farina as Lt. Pinkerton went through the motions but did not excel in the Wilson environment. A ringing free voice would have endeared us, but Farina's vocality failed to inspire.

Bass Andrea Silvestrelli's deep-toned Bonze was noteworthy. Erica Brookhyser's Kate Pinkerton added visual and vocal elegance. Keith Jameson's Goro had the moves down pat. And Matthew Moore's Prince Yamadori was up to the task. Thomas Kuklenski held our attention as Cio-Cio-San's son – a Cirque du Soleil gymnast in the making.

The "Humming Chorus" and intermezzo sequence were harmonious, for the orchestra was in the very capable hands of Los Angeles Opera's music director, James Conlon. But whenever I glanced at Maestro Conlon, I reflected on his enthusiastic, passionate, expressive directorial style, which I usually find invigorating because of the magic it wields on the orchestra. On this night, however, it somehow seemed out of place and failed to match the austerity onstage. It is at these moments that I question the production.

Direction, Designs, Lighting Design: Robert Wilson  
Conductor: James Conlon  
Associate Director: Jean-Yves Courrègelongue  
Set Design: Stephanie Engeln  
Lighting Design: A. J. Weissbard  
Costume Design: Frida Parmeggiani



Photo: Robert Millard



The second Cio-Cio-San: What a difference a cast change can make.

By Carol Jean Delmar  
OperaOnline.us

When soprano Michèle Crider sang Cio-Cio-San in Los Angeles Opera's final performance of "Madama Butterfly" on Oct. 18, the production took on a new dimension. There were pros and cons to the change, but the modification was striking.

Crider didn't look the part. Liping Zhang did. Crider, a black woman, was more physically robust. Along with that robustness flowed forth a more dramatic soprano that gave "Un bel dì" some much needed heft. Crider's vocal passion shattered the Wilson barriers while still maintaining his dispositions. Less robotic – her moves communicated a gracefulness of motion. She reminded us of the great Leontyne Price.

Probably not what Robert Wilson had ascribed – Crider's voice lacked Zhang's sweet timbre and exhibited a somewhat loose vibrato at times. Her body failed to exude Zhang's delicacy. But she brought contagious dramatic vocality to the production, which the other singers reacted to accordingly, specifically Franco Farina, whose Pinkerton was revived with her adrenaline. James Conlon's passionate orchestral direction made more sense, too. So thank you for your warm delivery, Ms. Crider. I think that we'd somehow forgotten.