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Acting characterizations spark debate on LA Opera's 'Tosca.'

**GIACOMO PUCCINI
TOSCA
LOS ANGELES OPERA
MAY 17, 2008**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

I first heard soprano Adrienne Pieczonka sing the Countess in Los Angeles Opera's production of "The Marriage of Figaro" two years ago. I wrote of her performance then: "As the Countess, Adrienne Pieczonka's voice was magnificent, perfectly placed, supported and full, yet at times she seemed more like Floria Tosca than Countess Almaviva."

Well, on May 17, Pieczonka had the opportunity to play Floria Tosca: the actress-lover of painter-revolutionary Mario Cavaradossi, whose aid to political prisoner Cesare Angelotti led to his execution and to Tosca's suicide. With a corrupt and immoral police chief thrown in for good measure, the opera brought a new dramaticism to Puccini's works when it premiered in 1900 – a dramaticism which bordered on the melodramatic while still maintaining the "verismo" style. Bent on reality, the composer visited the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome to hear authentic church bells and to become better versed on religious detail. He used Wagnerian motifs to add to the suspense and melodrama of the work. Scarpia's evil motif, depicted as early as the opening chords, is an example.

Adrienne Pieczonka was a vibrant, full-voiced Tosca who reached the height of tonal excellence throughout the performance and during her much anticipated aria, "Vissi d'arte." But what was lacking for me was her characterization -- the feeling of despair she should have communicated while repelling the advances of the lascivious Scarpia, and during her "Vissi d'arte." Simply viewing her from behind as she grabbed a knife and held it behind her before stabbing Scarpia was melodramatic and did not reveal much about the state of her mind, body and soul. The directorial device was effective so that we

in the audience could anticipate her upcoming action, but it was Tosca's despair that we needed to feel as well.

Likewise, when Tosca and Cavaradossi should have displayed their passion for each other, Floria Tosca remained somewhat reserved as Cavaradossi did everything in his power to light her fire. Granted, we weren't watching love couples like Villazón and Netrebko or Alagna and Gheorghiu. This was "Tosca" after all -- not "Roméo et Juliette," "Manon" or "La Traviata," but the hot-blooded chemistry should have ideally been there. After all, Tosca's Cavaradossi was emoting up a storm.

Pieczonka is a great singer who has every vocal element of delivery in place, but now it is time for her to discover the inner part of her creativity.

As for veteran tenor Neil Shicoff: "BECOMING" a character is his trademark. If you have ever seen his Eléazar in Halévy's "La Juive," you will understand what I am talking about. A video of the tour de force performance can be seen on his Website. Shicoff knows how to sing with anguish. He knows how to cry on his top and how to draw his audience into his character's world. And his Cavaradossi did all of that, and more.

Young tenors in conservatories and young artist programs continually try to emulate the great tenors of the past by incorporating the ring and cry into their top tones. The Björling tear is legendary. Where would "Vesti la giubba" be without it? Shicoff is one of the few tenors I have heard in recent memory who has the ability to show that passion.

He failed to complete the dress rehearsal due to illness, and before the curtain rose on opening night, an announcer disclosed that he had been indisposed but would be singing after all. I think that all of us were a little uncertain at the onset, including Mr. Shicoff. But after a short time, definitely by the time he sang "Recondita armonia," he entered his character's body, and he allowed his ringing tones to hurl themselves into the hall. His "E lucevan le stelle" was outstanding.

Juan Pons's Scarpia was off the mark. He is an elegant, refined singer who turned Scarpia into a dignified man.

Pardonez-moi, but Scarpia isn't a dignified man. He is a louse. Pons was so dignified that he could have been the elder Giorgio Germont making advances at Violetta, if that were possible. The voice was all there with a burnished timbre and the naturally expected maturity, but I do not want to like Scarpia. He is evil.

Robert Pomakov (Angelotti) and Dale Travis (Sacristan) were well-cast, and it is always nice to hear talented singers from the Domingo-Thornton Young Artist Program, like Karen Vuong and Daniel Armstrong.

The orchestra was conducted admirably by Sir Richard Armstrong.

But what bothered me the most about this slightly weathered production was the picture-

frame look which cut the proscenium arch. When I saw the production a few years ago, I was sitting on the side and couldn't see Tosca when she jumped. I was devastated. At least this time I was able to see her plunge to her death in all her glory.

Conductor, Sir Richard Armstrong
Director, Ian Judge
Set Designer, John Gunter
Lighting Designer, Mary Louise Geiger



Photo from LA Opera site. R. Millard.