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Photo: Robert Millard

In this ‘Butterfly’ Singers Shine In Spite of Vivid but Confining Production.

**GIACOMO PUCCINI
MADAMA BUTTERFLY
LOS ANGELES OPERA
JANUARY 21, 2006**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

Robust vocal and orchestral sound vibrated through the auditorium of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion at the Los Angeles Music Center on Sat., Jan. 21 for Los Angeles Opera’s opening night of Giacomo Puccini’s “Madama Butterfly.” It was soprano Patricia Racette’s evening. Her voice displayed exquisite quality and depth. It was round and warm at times, numbing at others, never shrill or strident, always well-supported, rich and full. She received a standing ovation at the conclusion of her performance.

Racette portrayed Cio-Cio-San/Madama Butterfly, the fragile geisha who renounces her religion and marries American Navy Lt. B.F. Pinkerton after the local marriage broker, Goro, arranges the wedding in early 1900's Nagasaki. With full knowledge that the Japanese marriage is not binding, Pinkerton abandons Cio-Cio-San, returns to the United States and takes an American woman to be his wife, only to learn from the U.S. consul, Sharpless, that Butterfly has given birth to his son. After three years in the U.S., Pinkerton returns to Nagasaki with his new wife, Kate, to claim his young son, whom Butterfly has named Trouble. Overcome with remorse, Pinkerton cannot face Butterfly. But when she learns the truth, she consents to let him take Trouble to the U.S., under the condition that he claim the child himself. Butterfly stabs herself with her father's dagger, and when Pinkerton arrives, he discovers her falling to her death.

The story is a tragic one, and Puccini's music underscores every nuance of the heart-rending tale, which conductor Dan Ettinger explores with rhythmic precision, polish and finesse, especially during the "Humming Chorus" and intermezzo sequences, which warm the senses with melodious harmony. While the orchestral tones were astonishingly beautiful throughout, they were occasionally evocative at the expense of the singers, whose voices were at times buried beneath the orchestra's flourishing crescendos and fortissimos. This was possibly due in part to the acoustical makeup of the house, but definitely not the result of a lack of vocal projection on the part of the singers.

In traditional productions of "Madama Butterfly," the operagoer can almost completely comprehend the story by simply watching the action onstage. Even the language, usually Italian, is not a barrier. The singers perform with deep emotion in voice and demeanor, and the sets and costumes reflect the culture and period of the moment. Plácido Domingo and Mirella Freni acted the roles of Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San so convincingly in the 1974 Ponnelle film of "Butterfly" that after viewing it, I was so depressed I didn't want to see the opera again until months later, the story affected me so. How could that callous Pinkerton do that to that fragile, delicate little geisha? Well, Saturday night's performance went for a completely different effect.

According to Domingo at a press conference the previous week, one of Los Angeles Opera's artistic goals is "to find new ways of presenting favorite operas." With this Robert Wilson production of "Madama Butterfly," he is accomplishing his end.

First performed in Paris in 1993, Los Angeles Opera presented the American premiere of the production in 2004. With virtually no props or set, simply a platformed stage of wood and stone with a blank cycloramic backdrop flashing various hues of light; and with white, gray and black costumes that resemble avant-garde stylized Greek tragedy togas, Wilson's minimalistic approach has been labeled revolutionary. And even though the singers do in fact sing, the production is mime- and pantomime-oriented, with Noh, Kabuki and Commedia dell'arte influences, and with a little bit of martial arts thrown in for good measure.

Some of the characters, like Goro, move with brisk, short strides, while others float as if part of a highly choreographed modern dance. The singers have been directed to wipe

much of their emotion from their faces while still maintaining vocal expression and feeling, which is somehow like patting one's head and rubbing one's stomach at the same time. Upon first glance, one questions whether these singers are robots, or simply new characters in a staged version of the original "Stepford Wives." And as innovative as the staging may be, it is somewhat reminiscent of the Delsarte system, originated by actor-teacher François Delsarte (1811-1871), who directed actors and singers to utilize pat gestures, postures and movements to project their emotions to an audience. Thus, Wilson's end result does not offer the opera-goer the same type of emotional involvement with the characters as a conventional production does. At times, it is almost as if another opera is being synchronized to Puccini's score. The story is somewhat unclear. The singers rarely make eye-contact or touch, even when Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San sing their love duet. They don't look up when they sing of the stars above. And when Butterfly bids Trouble goodbye in an impassioned "O a me, sceso dal trono," she is positioned downstage facing the audience while he is upstage with his back to her. We never actually see her commit hara-kiri (even though she is in full view of the audience and not behind a screen), although we do see a highly stylized and choreographed descent thereafter. But even though the emotional connection between the audience and the characters onstage may be severed, the production should not be missed by anyone interested in having an artistically exciting theatrical experience. The lighting alone is worth the price of admission. If only the sky could be so blue. It was like watching fireworks going off on the fourth of July, like watching a little bit of Martha Graham or Isadora Duncan. In spite of what Robert Wilson espouses, the minimalistic presentation may not enable the audience to focus more on the voices and music, for there is just too much of the unfamiliar occurring on the stage to keep the viewer occupied. But the production does offer a unique and different vision of the opera that fascinates the senses -- not as a steady diet, but as a holiday meal.

The challenges the singers faced while preparing for this production were no doubt phenomenal. With the guidance of Christiane Lévêque, who has been filling in for Wilson who is directing another "Butterfly" in Paris, they had to master the movements as if they were dancers, and attempt to restrain their acting while maintaining the resonance of Puccini's passionate score. As previously noted, Patricia Racette was remarkable. Only her "Un bel dì" lacked a little pizzazz, probably due to the constraints placed upon her by the production. Her vocal quality remained even, never faltering.

Tenor Marcus Haddock concealed much of the Pinkerton character, as required, while singing steadily with a warm almost baritonal timbre that aimed to please. Some of his higher notes truly pulled the heartstrings, as in his "Addio, fiorito asil." Russian baritone Vladimir Chernov lended a supportive Sharpless to the cast, singing with depth and vocal color. And mezzo-soprano Margaret Thompson's deep, often chesty Suzuki shined, especially during the lyrical "Flower Duet."

Peter Blanchet, who first played Goro in the 2002 Netherlands production of "Butterfly," was at ease onstage and managed to display some of the semi-evil characteristics demanded of the role. Renee Sousa's Kate added a statuesque presence. And Wayne Tigges as the Bonze and Andrew Wilkowske as Prince Yamadori rounded out the

extremely accomplished ensemble cast, with young Stephan Cruz as Butterfly's son, Trouble -- a true modern dancer in the making if there ever was one.

Patricia Racette will reprise her role as Cio-Cio-San in a conventional production of "Madama Butterfly" for the San Francisco Opera later this year. Now "that" will be something to see.

Direction, Designs and Lighting Design, Robert Wilson
Conductor, Dan Ettinger
Associate Director, Christiane Lévêque
Set Design, Stephanie Engeln
Costume Design, Frida Parmeggiani
Lighting Design, Heinrich Brunke
Additional Lighting Design, A.J. Weissbard and Trevor Stirlin Burk