



Review: San Francisco Opera's sumptuous 'Madama Butterfly'

By Richard Scheinin

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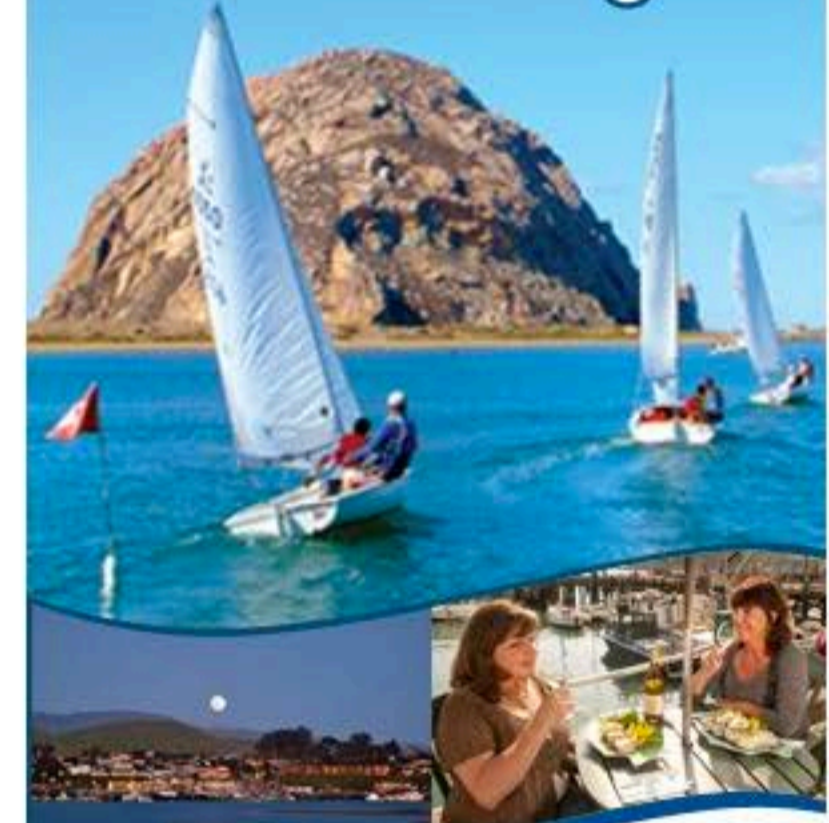
Patricia Racette, as Madama Butterfly, right, and Brian Mulligan, as Sharpless, perform during a dress rehearsal of Madama Butterfly at the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco, Calif., on Thursday, June 12, 2014. The San Francisco Opera's production of Giacomo Puccini's opera runs from June 15 ...

SAN FRANCISCO -- The "Madama Butterfly" that's just opened at San Francisco Opera is a visual riot. It's as if Puccini's classic has gone through the looking glass, landing in a candy-bright wonderland or inside a Peter Max painting.

The action is set in a minimalist landscape of vibrant color: vast fields of color, digitally projected onto an enormous cyclorama backdrop and descending screens. The singers even wear the colors, as the design is of a piece, extending to their costumes. One might question the stylization -- a maverick blend of traditional Japanese and Western elements -- if it didn't turn out to make such excellent sense.

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Patricia Racette, as Madama Butterfly, center, along with Miles Sperske as "Sorrow," right, and Elizabeth DeShong, as Suzuki, left, perform during a dress rehearsal of Madama Butterfly at the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco, Calif., on Thursday, June 12, 2014. The San Francisco Opera's production of Giacomo Puccini's opera runs from June 15 to July 9. The opera was performed for the first time in 1904 in Milan. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group) (JANE TYSKA)

references are illuminated by the intensity of the singing as well as by the colors that surround the singers, those bursting yellows, purples and midnight blues. You might remember Kaneko's gorgeous 2012 production at War Memorial of "The Magic Flute"; unfortunately, it fell flat, because the singing didn't match the visuals. No such problem here.

Sunday, the love duet between Racette and Jagde at the end of Act 1 was a feast of vocal color. Just before Racette sang (in Italian) that "heaven is laughing in an ecstasy of love," a Van Gogh moon, thick with dusky yellows, rose on one of the screens. The chorus blended into the effervescent textures of the orchestra, which performed with splendid precision under the baton of Nicola Luisotti. Especially in the first act, with its swirling and continuous musical motion, the production design proved exhilarating.

Of course, this is a tragedy, so "Butterfly" must do more than exhilarate if it is to succeed. This one does on many levels.



Patricia Racette, as Madama Butterfly, right, tosses flower petals as she performs with Miles Sperske as "Sorrow," center, and Elizabeth DeShong, as Suzuki, left, during a dress rehearsal of Madama Butterfly at the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco, Calif., on Thursday, June 12, 2014. The San Francisco Opera's production of Giacomo Puccini's opera runs from June 15 to July 9. The opera was performed for the first time in 1904 in Milan. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group) (JANE TYSKA)

the case of Racette, her face -- each quiver and sigh -- registers her transformation from smitten teenage innocent to abandoned single mother. As she waits, interminably, for Pinkerton's return from the United States -- and as the truth of her situation sinks in -- Racette's portrayal of this stubbornly self-deluding young woman deepens. She seems to have stepped out of a Greek tragedy.

New to San Francisco, designer Jun Kaneko's production (which debuted in 2006 at Opera Omaha) activates the senses. Its colors are complemented by the opulence of the voices in this powerful "Butterfly," which opened Sunday at the War Memorial Opera House. The cast is memorably led by soprano Patricia Racette as the teenage Cio-Cio-San, nicknamed "Butterfly." She is the ex-geisha in Nagasaki whose "wings" will be crushed by her treacherous lover, U.S. Navy Lieutenant B.F. Pinkerton, a role sung by the charismatic tenor Brian Jagde.

Director Leslie Swackhamer is Kaneko's creative collaborator here; their imagination permeates the production.

The libretto is filled with references to perfumes, fragrances and blooming flowers -- and these

Swackhamer's direction is filled with small surface touches: During that duet, Racette and Jagde lock hands, then extend their arms sideways in a manner that mimics the graceful motion of butterfly wings. Here's a less lovely example: After the lovers' wedding, Jagde (truly a suave and ugly American) gives the Japanese priest a slap on the back, as if they were frat brothers.

More significantly, by isolating the characters in those enormous landscapes of pure color, the production simultaneously intensifies the setting and strips away potential distractions. Memories of past "Butterfly" productions are erased, that's for sure. We're newly focused on action and transformation. The story takes on the power of mythology.

This is abetted by the cast's exceptional acting. In

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Her luxurious singing (excepting a couple of instances of too wide vibrato) was a model of nuance and stamina. Jagde's velvet lyricism didn't let up, nor did his strapping vocal authority.

Marvelous in the role of Butterfly's loyal servant Suzuki, mezzo-soprano Elizabeth DeShong sang with depths of resonance and smoky color. Brian Mulligan's etched baritone, as Sharpless, the compassionate U.S. Consul, was consistently fine. Bass Morris Robinson was superb as the Bonze, hot-branding his curse upon the marriage of Butterfly and her American idol.

In the second half of the last act, Kaneko's visuals grow less vivid, more abstract, straining to convey Butterfly's sorrows -- and to outlast Puccini's overly long orchestral interlude. Perhaps Kaneko is merely trying to convey the truth here: that we are witnessing the winter of Butterfly's dreams. The ending is delivered to shattering effect, though: A bleeding Japanese sun grows behind our slumped heroine, a suicide, draped in white, both victim and Madonna as the curtain falls.

Contact Richard Scheinin at 408-920-5069, read his stories and reviews at www.mercurynews.com/richard-scheinin and follow him on Twitter at www.twitter.com/richardscheinin.

'Madama Butterfly'

Presented by San Francisco Opera

Music by Giacomo Puccini; libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica

Through: July 9

Where: War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco

Tickets: \$24-\$379; 415-864-3330, www.sfopera.com

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