



# Extraordinary 'Butterfly'

by Philip Campbell

The San Francisco Opera's new production of *Madama Butterfly* opened recently as the third and final offering of the summer season – ironically enough, on Father's Day. The matinee performance of Puccini's classic story of a mother's sacrifice marked the third time in eight years that SFO and Bay Area favorite Patricia Racette has appeared as Cio-Cio-San on the War Memorial stage. It also celebrated the unassuming diva's remarkable 24-year association with the company.

The mutual admiration society is the result of a career based on commitment, versatility and almost unbelievable stamina. Known for her utter immersion in character, she also possesses a voice that is well-suited to Puccini's unforgettable heroines. Another endearing quality that may or may not affect the American soprano's vocal performance is her unhidden sexuality and the happy openness of her marriage to mezzo-soprano Beth Clayton. I think such truthfulness almost certainly contributes to her authenticity onstage.

The gleaming ease of Racette's young vocal register has inevitably become less rich, but the increasing vibrato some complain of is not all that troubling as yet, especially when her still-powerful instrument is backed by such extraordinary acting skills.

SFO has framed Racette's latest portrayal of *Butterfly* with a production first seen at Opera Omaha featuring designs by Japanese sculptor and painter Jun Kaneko. His highly kinetic and often whimsical settings and costumes were first seen here in the acclaimed Mozart *Magic Flute* a few seasons back, and there has been more than a little buzz generated by his latest excursion into the world of opera. For Puccini's tragedy, Kaneko has toned down the eccentricity and added vast swathes of color as backdrop to a simpler (though still eye-catching) visual design. The concept works well with director Leslie Swackhamer's unfussy approach to the story-telling. Her company debut displays insight and restraint that allow the singers subtle expressivity without losing any dramatic credibility.

Luckily, SFO Music Director Nicola Luisotti is on the podium to set the seal on a presentation that carries the audience inexorably to the shattering final curtain. The maestro has this music in his blood, and his occasional tendency to dawdle with other scores is perceived here as more a loving caress, especially in the beautiful Act II orchestral interlude.

The rest of the cast is virtually ideal. As the insensitive (that's putting it mildly) Lieutenant B.F. Pinkerton, Brian Jagde never goes far beyond his initial impression as a loutish cad, but his bearish physicality and handsome face make him at least a little bit more understandable. Jagde's ringing voice pairs well in the magnificent love duet ending Act I, and he is eminently believable when he turns coward late in Act II.

Tenor Julius Ahn (SFO debut) is by turns slimy and amusing as the disgraceful marriage-broker Goro, and Morris Robinson, taking a break from his role as Joe in the summer season's *Show Boat*, makes another big impression as the Bonze. His chilling condemnation of Cio-Cio-San's denial of her religion for Pinkerton's faith is downright scary.



Brian Mulligan (Sharpless) and Brian Jagde (Pinkerton) in *Madama Butterfly*. Photo: Cory Weaver/San Francisco Opera

The important supporting roles are realized beautifully by baritone Brian Mulligan as a kindhearted and intelligent Sharpless, and mezzo-soprano Elizabeth DeShong, portraying Butterfly's maid Suzuki as more concerned friend than mature and skeptical servant.

Jacqueline Piccolino (SFO debut and current Adler Fellow) is Pinkerton's American wife Kate, and she handles her assignment with quiet confidence. Baritone Efrain Solis (SFO debut and current Adler Fellow) also makes his mark as Prince Yamadori, a rich suitor offered to Butterfly by Goro as an alternative to her unthinkingly heartless American husband.

I find it hard to believe this was my first experience of Patricia Racette's Butterfly onstage. I have seen her astonishing performance on DVD in the legendary Met production directed by the late Anthony Minghella, but nothing could have prepared me for the impact of seeing her live in a part she has so thoroughly come to own. Watching her from the very beginning, when she appears as a shy and impossibly naive 15-year-old, through her touching journey to a horrific end, there is never much need to suspend disbelief. Racette *is* Madame Pinkerton (as she so piteously maintains), and when she finally realizes the enormity of her fate, I defy anyone with a heart to remain unmoved. There was some audible sobbing in the War Memorial, and I confess to choking back a few tears myself.

We were witness to the performance of a lifetime. The spontaneous and prolonged standing ovation that followed expressed not only genuine appreciation, but also provided a very welcome opportunity for a sort of group hug.

*Madama Butterfly* continues through Wed., July 9.

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