

## **Madam Butterfly**

London Coliseum, 25 June 2009

Reviewed by **Malcolm Rock**

Anthony Minghella's English National Opera production of *Madam Butterfly* wears its heart on its sleeve.

It was with the careful hands of a doting father that the late director took Puccini's opera and shaped a series of straightforward stage tableaux that he populated with heartfelt performances. Minghella's loving treatment is devotedly restaged at the London Coliseum this month by his widow Carolyn Choa.

For Minghella, Nagasaki is a stage of slats that rake into what could be the beginnings of an ocean wave. At the summit of this timber tsunami a boldly lit horizon functions as entrance and exit for those who pass through the brief life of Cio-Cio-San: the geisha whose faith in the fidelity of an American lieutenant ends in hara-kiri.

Judith Howarth sings a wilful Butterfly whose ill fortune is more the result of incredulity than misplaced confidence. Each of her impassioned arias is an attempt to muddy the facts and Cio-Cio-San is established early on as the kind of woman who would choose the expediency of death over an unsuitable truth.

Bryan Hymel finds sympathy in Lieutenant Pinkerton despite the vilification of the character in the minds of modern audiences. His journey from imperial misogynist to guilt ridden parent is solid enough to justify his personal tragedy at discovering the bloodstained body of Butterfly in the final scene.

Butterfly's maid Suzuki (Christine Rice) and the wet diplomat Sharpless (Brian Mulligan) are gifted go-betweens for Pinkerton and his forsaken rashamen. Rice and Mulligan govern the moral core of the opera with vocal performances that sometimes surpass those of the connubial couple.

Minghella considers the nature of maternal love by casting a Bunraku puppet as Sorrow the son of Butterfly. In doing so the director stresses the symbolism rather than sentiment of the child and leaves the task of bringing the idea to life to puppeteers Martin Barrow, Stuart Angell and Eugenijus Sergejevas who team up to operate head, torso and feet in unison. Theirs is a remarkable contribution that gives the fixed features of Sorrow unlimited expression while creating a character that is both a driver of narrative and an elegant element of design.

At the close of act one a curtain of blossoms descends as dancers encircle the newlyweds with golden lanterns. It is with minimal fuss that Minghella achieves one of the most beautiful love scenes on the opera stage today. Simple, sensual symbolism made him one of the world's leading filmmakers and with *Butterfly* – his only opera – he proves that everything that should be said can be said with the tiniest splash of red on a white silk kimono.

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