

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

TOSCA

BY GIACOMO PUCCINI | APRIL 18, 22, 24, 26, 2015

TOSCA INHABITS MURIEL KAUFFMAN THEATER FOR LYRIC OPERA

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By Alan Porter



The Lyric Opera of Kansas City's current production of "Tosca" is handsomely mounted, professionally designed, lavishly costumed, orchestrally excellent, and vocally outstanding. Puccini's "Tosca" ably directed by Garnett Bruce lives in a world of Grand Opera as it existed in 1900 when the piece was first performed. It is sung entirely in Italian.

The Muriel Kauffman Theater is a marvelous venue to see and hear such a traditional piece of theater because each and every seat is offered the chance to see an English translation or the original Italian text on a small screen pretty much invisible to the person seated next to you. For those of us barbarians who are not multilingual, the flowing text just below your view of the stage is a huge help to appreciation.

The three lead characters, Soprano Melody Moore as Tosca herself, James Valenti as her lover Mario, and Bass Baritone Gordon Hawkins as the dastardly Scarpia all have outstanding instruments and amazing control over them. Grand Opera is unlike other kinds of musical theater in that it utilizes no amplification.

Everyone on stage must be heard clearly to the back row of the third balcony. In this production of "Tosca," everyone is heard and appreciated. At times, singers perform either facing the wings or from offstage. As anyone who has ever tried to successfully perform this trick knows, it is most difficult. The physical control that these people display using the power of their diaphragms to resonate through the facial mask while maintaining a mellow tone with very difficult music is most impressive.

"Tosca" is a musicalized version of a French play written in the 1880s with one legged French tragedian Sarah Bernhardt in mind. Bernhardt was the Meryl Streep of her day. It is a melodrama set at the time of Napoleon's invasion of Italy in the area now known as Vatican City. Mario is an artist completing a commission for the church. Political prisoner Cesare Angelotti escapes from confinement and pleads with his old friend Mario to help him flee. Mario feeds Angelotti and agrees to hide him at his country house.

Mario is also the lover to the acclaimed Italian Soprano Floria Tosca. They cancel a planned rendezvous for later that day following a short evening performance. Hot on the trail of Angelotti is the evil Baron Scarpia. Somehow he comes to the conclusion that Mario has hidden Angelotti and is protecting the man. It turns out that Scarpia is duplicitous in addition to being evil. Scarpia's lust overfloweth for the ripe, beautiful, and virtuous Tosca. He has plans to torture Mario until he gives up Angelotti's hiding place, will hang him, and take Tosca as his own. Scarpia does not expect Tosca to come willingly, but he thinks her resistance will make his conquest even sweeter.

Tosca reluctantly agrees to Scarpia's lewd advances in exchange for freedom for Mario and a safe conduct pass for both she and Mario out of the country. In order to gain Tosca's favor, Scarpia instructs his henchmen to stand down on hanging Mario. Instead he will appear to be killed by a faux firing squad. Scarpia agrees to Tosca's terms and provides needed documents and assurances. Just as she is about to be conquered, Tosca reveals a convenient knife which she buries in Scarpia's chest. It appears that the lovers will get away, but one or more members of the firing squad doesn't get the message that Mario's execution is just for show. He is killed just prior to Scarpia's body being discovered. Tosca has nothing more to live for. As the play ends, she ascends the tallest parapet of the castle before leaping to her own death. Like I said, Tosca it is a melodrama.

Grand Opera is an acquired taste performed in a particular style of presentation. It is a style in which I do not pretend to be expert, but am anxious to acquire the requisite knowledge necessary to fully appreciate the form. The quality of the voices, the flawless orchestra conducted by Ward Holmquist, and the quality of the production make Tosca a theatrical exercise worth experiencing.