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'Butterfly' neither flutters nor falters

OPERA REVIEW

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It might help to think of opera as 19th-century performance art. Otherwise, it can be hard to explain why a group of American actors are wearing Japanese costumes and singing in Italian. The short reason: Harrisburg Opera Association is staging Giacomo Puccini's "Madama Butterfly" tonight and Saturday at the Whitaker Center.

Based on the performances at a full dress rehearsal Tuesday night, the singing tandem of Adam Klein and Tami Swartz in the lead roles makes "Butterfly" worthy of attendance. Their duet at the end of the first act is particularly sumptuous.

Klein's smooth tenor is ideal for the role of Pinkerton, the American naval officer who marries then abandons a young Japanese girl known as Cho-Cho San, or "Butterfly" in English. **Swartz, whose mother is Japanese, brings commitment to her portrayal of a young girl who is betrayed not only by her husband, but also by her own culture. Her tragic end is made all the more poignant by that fact.**

What Butterfly sees as a happy marriage and a new beginning is really just a financial arrangement that can be canceled at any time. Butterfly essentially goes along with the house that Pinkerton leases, and the lieutenant plans all along to leave eventually and find an American wife. **Swartz's voice soars beautifully in the second act, when Butterfly continues to insist to family and friends that Pinkerton will return to her and their son.** When he at last does come back, accompanied by his new wife, an inconsolable Butterfly takes her own life.

Swartz, an experienced opera singer, performs quite creditably in her first turn as Butterfly.

Timothy Lafontaine contributes a solid supporting voice in the role of the hapless American, Sharpless, and Keith Brant (Uncle Yakuside) and Debbie Voight (as Pinkerton's American wife, Kate) also shine. In fact, the company is in fine voice from top to bottom, even if they don't always look their parts.

At the time Puccini wrote "Butterfly," no one gave much thought to ethnic accuracy in roles for theater or opera. Today, such oversights are sometimes controversial. In 1991, for example, a Broadway production of "Miss Saigon" received criticism for casting English actor Jonathan Pryce in an Asian role. Harrisburg Opera's production suffers a little from this proclivity, but a saving grace is that there is no condescension in the performances. A yellow skull cap with a top knot residing on the head of one actor does, however, cross the line into caricature. The truth is that in theater, no one is ever playing him or herself, so such criticisms tend to lose their edge. Pryce received a Tony Award for his "Miss Saigon" performance. Onstage, it's less about who one is than how one acts. And as a representation of that concept, as well as how "Butterfly" might have appeared on stage when it was first presented in Milan in 1904, Harrisburg Opera's production is very much in keeping with both traditions.