

A YOUNG, FIRST TIME VIEWERS REVIEW OF PITTSBURGH OPERA'S TURANDOT

Love conquers all, even the hearts of an ice cold, head-hunting Princess and a XX-year-old Opera virgin.

I hadn't the slightest idea what one should expect to find when I arrived at the Benedum Sunday, April 3 for the closing of Giacomo Puccini's Turandot. Fascinated by the story I read before attending, I could only hope that The Pittsburgh Opera would make the story come alive and make my first Opera experience memorable. They did not disappoint. I wasn't prepared for this spectacular performance that evoked amazement difficult to contain and an emotional stirring I couldn't quite control.

In a day and age when we are bombarded with news of pop culture-princess dating disasters, Hollywood heartbreaks and made for media marriages that end in chaos and divorce court, this high drama with a simple message of love's power comes through loud and clear. We spend a few hours away from the reality show lifestyles of the rich and famous of our own time, as we step into the past and into the loveless life of a Princess determined to "head off" all suitors. The bitter cold of an antagonistic woman meets the fire of a long lost prince and a love ensues but not before much bloodshed.

We are instantly immersed in Puccini's China as manifested by Stage Director and Choreographer Renaud Doucet and Set and Costume Designer Andre Barbe. The two have been a dynamic duo since 2000 and their brilliance is evident from the very start of the show. The curtain rises to reveal a magnificent set that is both spectacular and symbolic, awash in crimson colored lights with the signs and wonders of recent and frequent executions as décor. As the people begin to scurry in from what appears to be everywhere, we are introduced to a kingdom that has seen enough death to make them want both mercy and more blood.

Before the opportunity to recover from the absolute awe of what is seen, vocal strength and agility completely elevate this fable to astonishing. Liu, played by NaGuanda Nobles who is an alumni resident of the Pittsburgh Opera, is first to captivate with her impassioned soprano voice. It is she who causes the tears flow before all is said and done. Yet this Opera is not just tears as laughter is evoked by the Emperor's ministers Craig Vernon, James Flora, and Joseph Gaines as Ping, Pang, and Pong. Timing is everything for these three characters and they are, for the most part, as physically and vocally coordinated as their costumes.

Turandot, played by Susan Neves, is seen before she is heard, though from some perspectives like my own, her first appearance is obstructed by parts of the set. Yet her presence is still as powerful as the much anticipated voice that eventually comes forth. The color of Neves soprano is distinctly different than that of Liu's (NaGuando Nobles), highlighting the difference in heart of these two characters. Similarly, Timur's (Hao Jiang Tian) bass is as warm as it is deep while Calaf's (Antonio Negore's) tenor is rich with

desire. These varied vocal colors combine to create song that vividly paints the story on our hearts.

According to the conductor, one of Turandot's riddles should have asked, "Which tenor will be performing tonight?" Sunday's performance made Nagore the third to play the role of Calaf since the production began. Sickness and prior obligation were to blame for the replacements. Yet Nagore performs as though he's been here from the start. It was impressive that the chemistry of the actors did not at all appear to be affected by the changes in this principle character.

The orchestra conducted by Antony Walker was so amazingly in sync with characters they could not possibly see from the pit beneath the stage. Every crescendo and decrescendo was impeccably timed. There were only a few times where I could hear the orchestra over the vocals. I discovered that in Opera, the music is like the pages of a book holding and unfolding the story and in this case it was done so exceptionally as to have an enchanting effect.

The costumes are the most elaborate I've ever seen, especially those of the royal family and members of the royal court. These costumes are the perfect illusions of grandeur. The addition and removal of key garments throughout the Opera are so telling. For example Turandot's pride has been stripped and this is visually represented by the removal of her crown and top layer of clothing and suddenly the icy daughter of heaven is a fearful mortal. Similarly, Ping, Pang, and Pong changing from day to night clothes and back again in our sight implies that their existence has been days and nights of much the same for quite some time with no real hope of change.

Change came for me on a Sunday afternoon at the Benedum as the Opera became an experience I won't soon forget. I had previously wondered if a fable set in China, sung in Italian with super titles to read, conceived by a maestro who never stepped foot in China and died before completing his masterpiece would be at all distracting. But I became so quickly and so deeply engulfed in the performance that at times I forgot to read the super titles, forgot the words were in an unknown tongue, forgot the setting was in a foreign place, and forgot this work had been left unfinished. I personally believe that the Maestro would have been pleased, especially since the gongs he commissioned so long ago were used in this performance as they were in the very first performance.

My first trip to the Opera was the closing of Turandot's first trip to Pittsburgh, marked by assistants to the royal ministers as characters and a female Executioner. My first Opera experience was Nagore's premiere with the Pittsburgh Opera. If only the first time for everything could be as phenomenal as these firsts.

Love is timeless and universal. Its power is conveyed through this wonderful Opera in a beautifully fantastic way.