

BROOKLYN, NY

The best of Ira Siff's delirious burlesques for his La Gran Scena travesty-troupe have been those in which audiences were moved not only by comedy but by the indestructible beauty of the music. Believe it or not, a couple of numbers -- the *Hänsel und Gretel* prayer performed by two centenarians, the flower duet from *Madama Butterfly* -- provoke tears from more susceptible listeners. Considerable interest therefore attended the announcement of Opera Company of Brooklyn's new production of *Butterfly*, directed by Siff (a contributor to OPERA NEWS). Seen at the only public performance (Dec. 15), the production offered abundant evidence of Siff's familiarity with and affection for this opera. Siff pushed the action forward to 1948-51, during the U.S. occupation of Japan, when, according to Siff's research, tens of thousands of American servicemen married Japanese women. (Despite unusual makeup for the Bonze that could have been meant to represent radiation poisoning, Siff glossed over the impact of the atom-bombing of Nagasaki, an event that surely would have altered Cio-Cio-San's lifestyle if not ended her life.) Before the orchestra played a note, Pinkerton (German Vilar, in his U.S. debut) and Sorrow, now a teenager (mimed by Zachary Bernhard) examined memorabilia from Pinkerton's stay in Japan: presumably the opera that followed was a reflection of Pinkerton's attempt to explain the past to his son. The updating was evident mainly in Meghan E. Healey's costume designs, where it worked splendidly. Goro (John Zuckerman) was thoroughly Westernized, in a natty suit, saddle shoes and sunglasses that somehow made him more odious. After her marriage, Butterfly (Michelle Mattalina) traded in her kimono for a Peter Pan collar and a pink cardigan, playing up her innocence by making her look like a high-school student. There were a few directorial glitches -- excessive business from the ensemble (on a creaky stage platform) undercut the hypnotic power of Butterfly's entrance; an insubordinate U.S. seaman attended the wedding; Pinkerton's final entrance suggested he already knew Butterfly was dying. But Siff and his cast knew the text thoroughly (one regretted the absence of projected titles) and conveyed the drama compellingly.

The music was another matter. This is a young company, with young singers, performing in the auditorium of New York Technical University, a venue not designed for opera. The orchestra was on the same level as the audience, with the result that singers had to project their voices up and over the orchestra just to be heard. Leading a full orchestra, Jay D. Meetze conducted a passionate but quite loud reading of the score, complicating the singers' predicament. The principal victims, naturally, were Mattalina and Vilar, in roles that daunt many a singer in the best of houses. They made themselves heard, no mean feat, but at the expense of vocal beauty, color and nuance, and additional performances of these roles in this space would have posed significant risks.

Mattalina's characterization lacked delicacy in Butterfly's opening scenes: her gestures and her stride were too big. But in Acts II and III, when Butterfly is more Westernized, she settled into a touching portrayal, and she wrung every bit of pathos from her scenes with the young Sorrow (George Simonds). Clearly fatigued during Act II, she took "Un bel di" at a fast clip.

Tall and handsome, Vilar looked young enough to be Mattalina's son, and the next time he's in a production set in 1948-51, he really ought to get a haircut. But his callow appearance played well for the impetuous Pinkerton. His lower and middle registers are rich, full and well-supported. He sometimes aimed his high notes at his sternum, squeezing his throat shut; at orchestral climaxes, he had to push, but his singing was strong enough that one looks forward to hearing him in a better acoustical environment.

Elizabeth Saunders's Suzuki displayed a broader emotional range than do many: she was by turns angry, amused and -- of course -- consoling. Her attack on Goro in Act II looked like a scene from a karate self-defense video. Of the cast, she had least trouble projecting her voice over the orchestra. Galen Scott Bower didn't always try to project, but he offered a credibly weary, sympathetic Sharpless. Zuckerman's Goro was extremely well acted, unctuous and opportunistic, and deftly sung in a small but focused tenor.

Across a wide, narrow stage, Troy Hourie's set pieces eloquently set the scene, a few simple panels indicating the interior or exterior of Butterfly's house, a bit of fabric suggesting a bower of cherry blossoms and a canvas banner with an "Occupied Japan" imprint reminding the audience of the time and place.

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