

# MADAM BUTTERFLY

*Julie Eagleton at  
the Royal Albert Hall*

Giacomo Puccini often referred to his operatic heroines as 'little women' and stressed that they always ended up being 'losers'. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Madame Butterfly's tragic Cio-Cio-San, the 15 year old geisha girl who becomes the child bride of Lieutenant Pinkerton, a US Navy official, only to be abandoned to lead a lonely life in Nagasaki.

This in-the-round production is visually stunning. 15,000 gallons of water was used to create a lake which surrounded the stage, with walkways all around so that the drama played right out to the audience. The water also symbolised the divide which separated Butterfly from her husband across the ocean, her exclusion from her own culture as well as emphasising her loneliness and isolation.

In Act I, the water was gentle and still, decorated by floating candles, and at the beginning of Act II the water had been cleverly drained to uncover the austere stone Zen garden which paralleled Cio-Cio-San's loss of faith and hope. A simple wooden shell of a house, decorated with red and white lanterns and sheltered by pink and white blossom trees, dominated the stage throughout.

Nancy Yuen turned in a first class performance as Cio-Cio-San. She made her operatic debut to

great critical acclaim in this role and has gone on to repeat it all over the world. She nearly brought the house down at the beginning of Act II with her powerful rendition of *Un Bel de Vedremo*. Tenor John Uhlenhopp was commanding as Pinkerton, particularly in the famous love duet at the end of Act I.

This production has some very special moments but one that stands out is when Butterfly makes her grand entrance, leading a procession of family members and servants down the stairs, through the audience and onto the stage, wearing a dazzling scarlet and gold kimono – quite breathtaking. The long vigil for her husband's ship to dock is poignantly played as her motionless body leans against a wooden

pillar, vacantly staring out to sea, whilst the clever use of lighting depicts the passing of time. It was whilst Puccini was in London to inspect the first Covent Garden performance of *Tosca* that he happened to see the short America play about racial intermarriage which gave him the idea for one of the world's most famous operas. Who would have thought that at its first performance in Milan in 1904 the composer would be jeered and the opera declared a resounding flop?

Cio-Cio-San represents our conscience. She represents the people we have mistreated, let down, deceived and forgotten. That is why this beautiful but tragic opera continues to mesmerise in such a haunting fashion. □

BY GIACOMO PUCCINI  
LIBRETTO BY LUIGI ILLICA  
& GIUSEPPE GIACOSA  
AFTER JOHN L LONG & DAVID BELASCO  
ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY  
AMANDA HOLDEN

<i>Director</i>	David Freeman
<i>Conductor</i>	Peter Robinson
<i>Designer</i>	David Roger
<i>Lighting Designer</i>	Andrew Bridge
<i>Sound Designer</i>	Bobby Aitken
<i>Conductor</i>	Peter Robinson
<i>Madam Butterfly</i>	Nancy Yuen
<i>Pinkerton</i>	John Uhlenhopp
<i>Suzuki</i>	Yvonne Lea
<i>Sharpless</i>	Malcolm Donnelly
<i>The Bonze</i>	Richard Angas
<i>Goro</i>	Aled Hall
<i>Prince Yamadori</i>	Richard Whitehouse
<i>Kate Pinkerton</i>	Alison Kettlewell
<i>Uncle Yakuside</i>	David O'Keefe
<i>The Imperial Commissioner</i>	Richard Mosley-Evans
<i>The Official Registrar</i>	Kevin Sharp
<i>Mother</i>	Miao Lu

<i>Aunt</i>	Akiko Enomoto
<i>Cousin</i>	Hidemi Hatada
<i>Sorrow</i>	Daniel Kraemer

<i>Cast</i>	Margaret Adams, Philipa Daly, Hidemi Hatada, Miao Lu, Rachel Mosley, Jacqueline Parker, Susan Rann, Hilary Taylor, Roseline Tessier-Lemoyne, Jayne Whitaker, Stella Woodman, Melissa Adler, Louise Armit, Ann Atkinson, Amy Black, Emma Jones Colledge, Akiko Enomoto, Susan Jelley, Christina Lee, Diana McNeilis, Emma Pollard, Cari Searle, Zoe Willis, Alastair Armit, Matthew Bridle, John Brackenridge, Stephen Cairn, Robert Gibbs, Nicholas Hills, Gary Huddleston, Colin Judson, Howard Kirk, Kevin Matthews, Alan Aldridge, Greg Ashton, In-Sook Chappell, Toshiyuki Dokiya, Richard Duployen, Stefano Cressieux, Hywel Jones, Dan Long, Anthony Powell, Craig Scarborough, Neil Suarez, Peter Anthony Wheeler, Helen Wigan, Chiaki Yamauchi, Kei Ishii, Momoko Inagaki, Hideki Minamino, Atsuki Sato, Naho Ishigame, Ryosuke Okuno, Akimune Yoshida, Rie Harashima, Ryo Nakagawa
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BBC Concert Orchestra

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As I was ushered to a table centimetres from the circular stage, which was surrounded by green tropical plants, I couldn't help but wonder what lay in store. Hyped as 'the most exotic, erotic and sensual show business spectacle on earth', Cuba's legendary *Club Tropicana* had temporarily moved from Havana and brought its own brand of hedonism to London for four nights. Three entrepreneurs created the original *Club Tropicana* in Havana in 1939, in the grounds of a house surrounded by rainforests. 49 years later, a makeshift rainforest had been assembled at the back of the stage and I prepared myself for some tackiness. As a blaze of fuchsia pink and sky blue hit the stage, the predictable opening was more reminiscent of Vegas than hot-blooded Hispanic. A pulsating 20 strong band and a quartet of singers backed the girls who were covered in sequins and glitter, with huge pink headdresses. But once the opening number was out of the way, the show really started to heat up and just got better and better.

The second number incorporated an excellent

## Club Tropicana

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ballet sequence, followed quickly by a traditional mambo where the girls wore dresses reminiscent of the Charleston era. Then the show was given a much more contemporary feel as the dancers, wearing neon catsuits, danced barefoot. Tables had been set next to the main performing area, creating a club atmosphere, and dotted around this were several podiums which was used to good effect, ensuring lots of audience participation. One of the best numbers was the tribal dance sequence. With a slow, steady beat on the hongo drums, the procession of dancers, clad in purple and orange tribal ware, crouched at the edges of the stage with wooden sticks symbolising spears. As the drum beats quickened

into a frenzy, the piece turned into a war dance as the dancers fought each other with the sticks and used every inch of space, with the action coming uncomfortably close to the edge of the stage at one point. This climaxed with the arrival of two African queens; one swirling red and black skirt and the other in puritanical white, symbolising good and evil spirits. In between the dance sequences, incorporating mamba and salsa, there were entertaining drumming sessions by Los Papines, involving lots of audience participation.

The finale saw the whole troupe run into the audience waving fluorescent batons and, as the lights dimmed and the audience abandoned themselves to the hypnotic rhythms of the mamba and the spectacle of the batons spinning around like multi-coloured comets. Artistic director Santiago Alfonso came out to rapturous applause from a very appreciative audience at the end of the show. This is the first showing of *Club Tropicana* outside Cuba, a country without the luxury of press freedom. How ironic that this performance symbolised freedom of movement, expression and spirit; an export to be proud of. □