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Tosca, the lasting appeal of pure melodrama

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A scene from Puccini's *Tosca*, produced and staged by Mario Perusso at the Avenida Theatre.

By Pablo Bardin

For the Herald

Buenos Aires Lirica started its season at the Avenida Theatre with Puccini's opera

During my 25 years with the Herald, I've had plenty of opportunities to write about successive revivals of *Tosca*, as the most verista Puccini opera is always being done — the same goes for *La Bohème* and, a bit less, for *Madama Butterfly*. *Tosca* is now 115 years old, but nothing indicates that its attraction is diminishing. As in *Hamlet* — though, of course, quite in another world — all the principals die. It is a gory opera in which torture is crudely shown for the first time and a sad portrait of 1800 Rome, where the pope's — and the queen's — Secret Police acts with impunity — and immunity.

We are in June 1800, the time of the Battle of Marengo, won by Napoleon against Baron Michael Melas, general of the Austrian Army. This forced an armistice that made Napoleon the master of northern Italy. Queen Maria Carolina of Naples and Sicily had taken refuge in Palermo in 1798 due to the threat of French troops, and both the French Revolution-inspired Roman Republic and the Parthenopean (Neapolitan) Republic were installed. But by 1800, a strange thing happened: the Republicans were vanquished, the queen returned to Naples, and the Rome area, previously part of the ample Papal States, for some years depended — for protective reasons — on the Kingdom of Naples. This queen was redoubtable and formidable: famous for her ruthlessness, she gave no quarter to the Roman Republicans, called the *Volterran*.

So Scarpia in the opera is the chief of the Secret Police both of the pope and of the queen. Mario Cavaradossi is a *Volterran*, and Angelotti is, as the libretto says, "the Consul of the spent Roman Republic." All this is more clearly stated in the original drama (1887) by Victorien Sardou that became a vehicle for the great actress Sarah Bernhardt in Paris and eventually in Italy. Sardou was very meticulous about historical backgrounds.

The composer had as librettists the same team as in *La Bohème*, Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, who offered Puccini a drama full of action and suspense. The musician gave full due to the strong dramatic effects, but also kept alive the plangent lyricism in the two tenor arias and *Tosca's* *Vissi d'arte* — although, for the only time in the opera, it impedes the tragic flow of events.

Buenos Aires Lirica started its season at the Avenida Theatre with *Tosca* and gave as its rationale that BAL had never offered it. True, but operagoers who encompass the whole area of influence of our city have probably seen the *Tosca* offered late last year at the Teatro Argentino. I didn't need another one, but others may feel differently. Well, this *Tosca* didn't lack conviction either from the principals or the conductor. And although I have serious strictures about the production, at least it respects time and place — the latter, however, suggested rather vaguely.

I believe that Mónica Ferracani is our best soprano for this forceful role. Now in her 50s, she looks splendid and her singing line is impeccable, as are her dramatic instincts. Enrique Folger has a big intense voice, and always sings and acts with utmost involvement; what his Mario lacks is the refinement for the quieter moments and the restraint to sing *E lucevan le stelle* straight, without added crying — the defect Italians call *piangione*. As for Scarpia, the Cuban-Chilean Homero Pérez Miranda is well-known here in dramatic roles; he is a seasoned performer with stage presence, firm singing and the ability to give innuendo and villainy to his vocal inflexions, but his voice projection is rather veiled, without the expansion needed for the crucial climaxes.

Christian Peregrino's Angelotti was marred by uncertain pitch, though the voice is strong. Enzo Romano's Sacristan was played straight, without the usual *buffo* relief, and with a rather arid voice. Sergio Spina shouted too much as the servile Spoletta, but the character was well acted. Walter Schwarz was a correct Jailer, and Cecilia Arroyo a fresh little Shepherd. Javier Logioia Orbe was a very positive conductor, who has studied the score minutely and provided at all times the right tempi and accents, as well as providing the necessary support for his singers. But there were two matters to mention: he never got from the orchestra the terrifying *fortissimi* that are needed at some points; and it was a miscalculation to sing on stage the Second Act cantata, for it obliterated the important dialogue between Scarpia and Mario. Good choir in the First Act (Juan Casasbellas) plus the *Petits Coeurs* Children Choir (Rosana Bravo).

The positive thing about the production was the costumes of Stella Maris Müller: they were both historically accurate and, in the case of *Tosca's* gowns, quite attractive (white for the First Act, an appropriate red for the blood-tinged Second and Third Acts).

Mario Perusso was producer and stage designer. He moved the singers well, but you scarcely recognized the three places depicted: the Sant'Andrea della Valle church, the Palazzo Farnese and the Castel Sant'Angelo. And mystification abounded: *Tosca's* suicide went for nothing — a mere blackout... Mario's death was opportunely veiled by smoke... The torture was seen, when it shouldn't. And Scarpia's death is precisely told by *Tosca*: "I planted the blade in his heart", but here she wounded him three times in different places.

Where and when

Teatro Avenida (Av. de Mayo 1222). May 8 at 8pm, May 10 at 6pm. Tickets from 120 pesos at the venue or through Plateanet.