

TOSCA

Music by Giacomo Puccini

Virginia Opera

Harrison Opera House

Jan.30 - Feb. 8, 2009

For tickets: (757) 623-1223; (757)877-2550; www.tickets.com

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

Victorien Sardou was a prolific writer of the "well made play" in France in the late 1800's. In his latter years he wrote melodramas for the great Sarah Bernhardt. One of them was "La Tosca" which Puccini witnessed and immediately saw operatic possibilities. Alas, so did Verdi and Franchetti. After the usual show business shenanigans, Puccini ultimately obtained the operatic rights.

The story contains the typical elements of Sardou's works for the stage. There are tears, tensions and terror. There is a doomed trio of lovers. Tosca is a celebrated, acclaimed opera singer who is passionate about her art, religion, and life and is not afraid to open her heart to love. She is jealous beyond reason. She is in love with and loved by Mario Cavaradossi, a handsome artist. And, there is Baron Scarpia, the Chief of Police who lusts with carnal rage for Floria Tosca. The outcome is betrayal and murder.

Cavaradossi is at work on a portrait of Mary Magdalene in a chapel. His model has been the sister of his friend Cesare Angelotti sung by Christopher Temporelli. He is an escaped political prisoner who is seeking sanctuary. Hearing Tosca approaching, Cavaradossi hides his friend. She is jealous of the portrait because it lacks her hair and eye coloring.

The first impression of award winning soprano, May Elizabeth Williams as Tosca, is not what one anticipates. She is wearing an unattractive, lifeless very plain white dress. She is in essence a sweet, reserved lady, not the accomplished diva of the 1800's opera stage we are expecting. Her voice is beautifully controlled, with rich full bodied sounds along with light as air tones that float over the audience like flower petals. Yet she seems vocally restrained and at times her voice is veiled. She has more presence and assurance in Acts II and III.

As the artist Mario Cavaradossi, the charismatic Michael Hayes is warm and likable with a lush tenor that makes you want to do nothing more than just sit back and listen as he draws you into the story. Stephen Kechulius is the personification of evil and terror as Scarpia. With a baritone richly laden with the color of blood, he is as frightening as a great ghost story. He's very intense but never goes over the top.

In fact, Scarpia provides much needed dramatic tension to the production that stage director Marc Astafan doesn't always inject in his rather mundane mounting of the opera. He certainly gives an intelligent, neat rendition of this roiling tragedy, but the peaks of dramatic power, the sadistic moments of rape, torture, murder and suicides do not seem fully realized.

It is fair to note that he was apparently forced to use existing very traditional, grand scenery by the fine Michael Yeargan that curtailed any new concepts or visions of the piece. I think also one must question the casting of Mary Elizabeth Williams, at this point in her professional growth and development. Certainly the vocal apparatus is there but the emotional facilities to create the complex operatic diva who is Floria Tosca is yet to reach maturation. She lacks abandon and much of what she does is by the book. She lacks character definition. Let it be said that the potential for operatic fire is there. Furthermore, I do feel the wardrobe, wig and makeup people could have given her more help.

Maestro Peter Mark seems to relish the ominous tones of the score and makes clear the lyrical, more beautiful passages as well.

The Yeagan sets have mood and atmosphere which I found lacking in Chris Kitrell's lighting.

"Tosca" has been an audience favorite since its premiere in 1900, in the month of January by the way. There is certainly much to admire in this production as well.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.