



■ José van Dam creates the title role of Bartholomée's 'Oedipe sur la route'

van Dam was outstanding, as he has been in so many productions here during the past 20 years. The role of Oedipus kept him on stage for all of two and a half hours; the part is occasionally a little low for him but the beauty of his timbre and his astonishing ability to get across the text seem unaffected by the years. Alongside him, and all of them well up to scratch, were the Antigone of Valentina Valente, also on stage almost throughout, the Trios of Jean-François Monvoison and, in smaller roles, Hanna Schaer as the sentimentously wise Diotima, dressed in startling red, and Ruby Philogene as the muse Calliope, who at one point strips off to take part in what Diotima describes as an 'événement' between herself and Oedipus, 'une naissance'. A shame that the 'event' of the new opera itself failed to reward all the care and attention lavished on it by the Monnaie. JOEIN MCCANN

## Canada

### Toronto

The CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY ended the 2002-3 season on a high note with two successes—a revival of *Madama Butterfly* and the first company performance of *L'italiana in Algeri*. *Butterfly* sold so well that two extra performances were added, a rarity in these troubled times. The Rossini opera was not so fortunate, as the run coincided with a nasty spring ice storm that affected sales.

Two Stratford veterans, the director Brian Macdonald and designer Susan Benson, had created a minimalist *Butterfly* dominated by soft lines and muted

With his vast experience Bartholomée certainly knows how to write for orchestra and singers but, however inspired he may have been by Bachau's book, he has not composed an opera that is likely to win a place in the repertoire; getting to grips with one's identity is never going to work in the opera house unless accompanied by action and music a good deal more varied and stirring than we were offered on this occasion (March 22) by both librettist and composer.

The producer, Philippe Sireuil, who was also responsible for the atmospheric lighting, did what he could for the new work in a single set consisting of a parched mudflat surrounded at the back and on top by an abstractly striated 'canopy' changing colour from yellow through orange to deep red as Oedipus moves towards the end of his road. Cast and orchestra, under Daniele Callegari, sounded as if they had mastered the intricacies of a complex score. Now in his 63rd year, the extraordinary José

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colours and enhanced by atmospheric lighting. The pared-down production—not a cherry blossom in sight—might have been a bit austere, but allowed one to focus on the power and the sweep of the Puccini score.

Ultimately, *Madama Butterfly* stands or falls by the heroine, and COC had the great good fortune of a remarkable Butterfly in Xiu Wei Sun, who scored a triumph in her Canadian debut. Sun sang with clear, youthful tone, and her naturalistic acting, free of the excessive coyness that passes for western conceptions of a Japanese geisha, touched the heart. As Pinkerton, Jorge Antonio Pita's warm, pleasing timbre was hampered by a lack of *squillo* and a tight top voice. James Westman reprised his sympathetic Sharpless, a portrayal that has matured with time, and Allyson McHardy was a youthful, rich-voiced Suzuki. Opting for brisk tempos throughout, the debuting conductor Elio Boncompagni led the COC forces with a knowing and unsentimental hand—one only wished for a less driven love duet, allowing more of the inherent sensuality of the score to shine through.

If a palette of pastels and subtle lighting worked its magic on *Butterfly*, in *L'italiana* we got an eye-popping mix of vibrant primary colours recalling the hot Mediterranean sun. The clever unit set from Santa Fe Opera, designed by Robert Innes Hopkins, was a giant pop-up comic book on which all the action took place. Steel plates weighing 6,000lb, hidden from view of the audience, opened and closed the 2,000lb cover with a powerful motor—quite an engineering feat. Isabella arrived not via a shipwreck but a plane crash; the gimmicky idea of having a supernumerary wandering up and down the aisles at strategic moments carrying a pole with a model plane complete with lights and moving propellers put the audience in a good mood.

The direction of Edward Hastings was heavy on slapstick, which the strong ensemble cast pulled off without a hitch. Looking every inch the young Lauren Bacall in an Armani suit, Carmen Oprisanu was a glamorous Isabella, showing comic flair and using her well-produced, even mezzo to advantage. Partnering her was Michael Colvin, rapidly becoming a noted Rossinian. Despite not being ideally matched with the model-like Oprisanu—there was not much chemistry between them—Colvin proved an impressive Lindoro, singing with outstanding agility and clarion, elegant tone. Gustáv Beláček, last season's Pimen, returned as a macho, swaggering Mustafà. The rest of the cast was up to the task, with a well-sung Taddeo (Patrick Carlizzi) and a soubrettish Elvira (Shannon Mercer). The British conductor Julian Reynolds, making his debut here, led the COC forces in a vigorous, fast-paced performance. The ensemble singing that ended Act I was terrific, despite Reynolds's breakneck tempo. JOSEPH K. S.

## Estonia

### Tallinn

Like its English namesake, the ESTONIAN NATIONAL OPERA has been perturbed by some elbow jabs to its artistic management in recent years, and its graceful theatre on the edge of Tallinn's Old Town is about to undergo extensive renovation, timed to conclude with the company's centenary in 2006. But there the resemblance ends. London, the sixth-largest metropolis in the world, is seemingly unable to afford a full-time chorus of more than 50 at the Coliseum. Meanwhile, the Baltic ENO, servicing a city of 400,000 in a country of just 1.4 million, routinely

presents its 55-strong *operikoor* and full-size orchestra in the THEATRE HALL, seating just 695. Almost all forms of music theatre are embraced: in the final week of March, for instance, the new Estonian musical *Truth and Justice of Vargamäe* played check-by-jowl with the operetta-revue *Sparkling Wine and Paprika!*, a children's musical called *Bumpy*, and a mid-season performance of *La traviata* (March 28). Just about every demographic chunk of the audience is covered, save the one that prefers a dose of pub rock in the city's burgeoning bar scene, and even some of those under-25s looked to have made a gratifyingly stylish showing for this particular night of Verdi.

Making her house debut, the Latvian soprano Kristīne Gailīte proved an overly diffident Violetta. First-night nerves? These might have accounted for her initial slight breathlessness and tight vibrato in her upper-mid register, but her 'Sempre libera' was conquered cleanly, if without the blitheness needed to contrast her demeanour with that of the ensuing act. In direct contrast to her character's galloping consumption, Gailīte's appearance bloomed as the night wore on; by the end of Act 3 she looked radiant. The company's chief producer, Neeme Kuningas, reviving his original 1997 production, transformed her death scene into a 'going into the light' experience, culminating in an unexpectedly optimistic final tableau.

Playing against a love interest who didn't seem in the least interested, Mati Kõrts's Alfredo also lacked dramatic punch, his face registering the same earnest concern whatever the emotional circumstances. I kept thinking of Desi Arnaz as Ricky Ricardo in the old *I Love Lucy* shows. Actually, the Cuban would have looked a lot angrier in Alfredo's denunciation of Violetta in the second-act climax, made perfunctory here by Kõrts's passive delivery. As Germont *père*, Raino Elp displayed far more vocal and physical vitality. Father seemed younger than son; had there been an Act 4, Germont Senior and Violetta may well have made a future together. Egregious hamming over the champagne flutes has cheapened many a Brindisi, but not here: the chorus were the most convincing element of the night, giving animation and a pleasing sense of detail to their bucolic scenes.

The Finnish designer Anna Kontek's set was simple, consisting mainly of a series of tall, reflective pillars placed in a semicircle around the back of the stage—a sort of Stonehenge with mirrors. Apart from making the chorus seem twice as numerous, it also described mid-19th-century opulence so persuasively that the audience, surprised at being able to see itself, applauded when the curtain rose for Act 1. Disconcertingly, the mirrors were still there for the country setting at the beginning of Act 2, suggesting that Violetta and Germont *père* were having their pivotal encounter while sequestered in a very large bathroom—albeit one with a tree. In fact, the only time the shiny sentinels moved was during 'Sempre libera', courtesy of a revolve which spun them downstage, providing the evening's major *coup de théâtre* while permitting some in the front-row stalls to check their make-up before the first interval. The local conductor Arvo Volmer, assuming the baton in the middle of this run of performances, drew a sound from the pit as neat as one would expect with no rehearsal.

'Mid-season' is the real life of an opera house, of course. Away from the *frisson* of new productions and opening nights, the pulse of a company is often best taken once some of the adrenalin has come back to everyday levels. Kuningas's *Traviata* may have had conveyor-belt stolidity, but it was deliberately—and confidently—pitched for the more conservative section of his audience. With a *Freischütz* opening in April, plus revivals of *Macbeth* and Orff's *Die Kluge* soon to bump in with

*Bumpy*, Kuningas knows he has plenty of alternatives to offer those of his audience who are ready to move beyond the mainstream, all with the gloriously illogical (by English funding standards) audience/performer ratio of 4:1. Is it that the Estonians can't count? Or that opera does? CHRISTOPHER LAWRENCE

## France

### Paris

*Guillaume Tell* has to be one of greatest operas written to a French text, on a level with *Iphigénie en Tauride* and *Don Carlos*, all three, of course, composed by foreigners: the glory days of post-Rameau French opera were still to come. Until this year, *Tell* had not been performed by the Opéra since 1932. Words fail me. One day there is a study to be written on French attitudes to their music in the post-World War II era. The new production that opened at the OPERA BASTILLE on March 14 made amends: at least *Tell* was back on stage, in Paris, where it belongs.

Or rather, most of it. When the Opéra management told the retired Rossini that they were going to revive his last opera, he is said to have replied, 'What, all of it?' (it had been subjected to cuts soon after the premiere in 1829). Yes, it is long, but so is *Parsifal*, so is *Tamerlano*. It has to be long, rather like *Gazza ladra*, because the world, the natural world, the state of grace or whatever you want to call it, has to be established before we see how it is threatened and—in *Tell*—redeemed. The

long (80 minutes), much-criticized first act seems to me a perfectly balanced and most deftly constructed dramatic entity. In this new production we lost around 45 minutes of music all told, much of it, admittedly, repeats, though such snips do untold damage to the musico-dramatic architecture of which Rossini was such a master. But the cutting of the whole triple-chorus 'gathering of the clans' at the end of the second act, one of the great moments of 19th-century opera, seemed to me an act of sheer vandalism. I will stop moaning about cuts in Rossini (and Handel) when it becomes routine to shorten the boring bits in *Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung*. (In the 1960s Karajan made a snip, but inevitably the wrong one, in *Götterdämmerung*, and got into terrible hot water.)

All of which having been said, the matinee on March 23 afforded four hours of pure pleasure: even when shortened, *Tell* remains a sublime masterpiece. Peter Davison's near-permanent, highly adaptable setting was Swiss-

■ Thomas Hampson as Guillaume Tell in Paris



Eesti

## Tallinn

Sarnaselt inglise nimekaimule on ka Eesti Rahvusooperit viimasel paaril aastal kostitatud paari küünarnukihoobiga teatri kunstilise juhtimise pihta. Samuti toimuvad mainitud asutuse Tallinna Vanalinna servas paiknevas elegantsees hoones ulatuslikud renoveerimistööd, mis on kavas lõpetada teatri sajandal tegutsemisaastal 2006. Ent siin ka kogu sarnasus lõpeb. London, maailma suuruselt kuues metropol, tundub olevat võimetu lubama enesele üle 50 liikme ja täiskohaga tegutsevat ooperikoori, samas kui Baltikumis asetsev Eesti Rahvusooper, mis teenindab 400,000 elanikuga linna riigis, kus elanike arv on kõigest 1,4 miljonit, esitleb kõigest 695 istekohaga ooperiteatri saalis regulaarselt oma 55 pealist tugevat ooperikoori ja täissuuruses orkestrit. Esindatud on pea kõik muusikateatri žanrid: näiteks märtsikuu viimasel nädalal etendati kõrvuti uue kodumaise muusikaliga *Vargamäe tõde ja õigus* veel operetirevüüd *Vahuvein ja paprika*, lastemuusikali *Nukitsamees*, samuti anti hooaja keskel *La Traviata* etendus (28. märtsil). Mõeldud on peaaegu kõikidele publiku demograafilistele segmentidele, välja arvatud ehk need, kes eelistavad kuulata kõrtsimuusikat, mida pakutakse linnapilti arvukalt lisanduvates pubides. Publiku hulgas võis kohata isegi alla kahekümneviieseid, kes rõõmustasid silma oma elegantse kohaloluga eelmainitud Verdi etendusel.

Läti sopran Kristine Gailite, kellele antud etendus oli esimene mainitud teatrimajas, osutus ülimalt ebakindlaks Violettaks. Kas esietendusele omane närvipinget? See võis tõesti põhjustada lauljanna esialgset hingeldamist ja pinges *vibratot* keskregistri ülaosas, ent tema 'Sempre libera' tuli välja puhtalt, kui mitte arvestada liigvähest lõbusust, loomaks vajalikku kontrasti kangelanna käitumisega järgmises stseenis. Vastupidiselt kangelanna süvenevale tiisikusele muutus Gailite esinemine etenduse edenedes järjest paremaks; kolmanda vaatuse lõpus ta lausa säras. Trupi pealavastaja Neeme Kuningas, kes taaselustas oma 1997. aastal loodud originaallavastuse, muutis kangelanna surmastseeni 'valgusesse mineku' kogemuseks, mis kulmineerus ootamatult optimistliku lõpupildiga.

Tema lavapartner, kes süžee põhjal pidanuks üles näitama armastusest ajendatud huvi, ei näinud olevat vähimalgi määral asjast huvitatud. Mati Kõrtsi Alfredol puudus ka dramaatiline ilmekus, tema näos peegeldus siiras mure sõltumata emotsionaalsetest

asjaoludest. Mulle meenus üha uuesti Desi Arnaz Ricky Ricardona vanas *I Love Lucy* shows. Olen kindel, et kuubalane oleks paistnud välja hulga vihasem teise vaatuse kulminatsioonis, kus Alfredo Voiletta hukka mõistab. Nähtud etendusel jäi stseen pealiskaudseks tänu Kõrtsi passiivsele esinemisele. Ranno Elp Germont *père*'na näitas üles märksa tugevamat vokaalset ja füüsilist elujõudu. *Père* tundus olevat pojast noorem; neljanda vaatuse olemasolul oleks Germont Seeniori ja Violettat võinud ees oodata isegi ühine tulevik. Ülepakutud näitlemine šampanjaklaasi käes hoides on labastanud nii mõndagi etendust, kuid mitte seda: koor oli õhtu veenvaim komponent, tuues elavust ja meeldivaid detailinüansse lavastuse bukoolilistesse stseenidesse.

Soome kunstniku Anna Konteki lavakujundus oli lihtne, koosnedes peamiselt kõrgetest peegelduvatest sammastest, mis asusid poolringis ümber tagalava, meenutades peeglitega Stonehenge'i. Lisaks sellele, et kujundus muutis koori näiliselt kaks korda arvukamaks kui tegelikult, andis kõnealune lavakujundus ka 19. sajandi keskpaiga külluslikku elu edasi nõnda veenvalt, et publik, üllatunud iseenda peegeldusest, aplodeeris, kui eesriie esimese vaatuse alguses avanes. Segadusse ajavalt seisid peeglid endiselt paigas ka teise vaatuse alguse maakohta kujutavas stseenis, andes mõista, et Violetta ja Germont *père* vahel leidis tohutu suure, kasvava puuga vannitoa eraldatuses aset pöördelise tähtsusega kohtumine. Tegelikult oligi ainus kord, kui säravad vahipostid liikusid, 'Sempre libra' ajal, seda tänu pöördmehhanismile, mis keeras peegelsambad lava esikülje suunas, luues seeläbi õhtu suurima *coup de theatre*'i ja lastes nii mõnelgi esiridadest tõusnol enne esimesele vaheajale minekut oma makeup'i kontrollida. Kohalik dirigent Arvo Volmer, kes võttis taktikepi üle hooaja kestel, võlus orkestrist välja just nii puhta heli, millist ilma harjutamata võib oodata.

Hooaja keskpaik tähendab ooperimajale tõelist elu. Ajal, mil uuslavastuste ja esietenduste närvikõdi on jäänud seljataha, saab trupi pulssi mõõta kõige paremini seejärel, kui ka igapäevatasandile on taas jõudnud väike annus adrenaliini. Kuninga Traviata võis küll olla pikatoimeline nagu ülekanderihm, ometi oli see häälestatud paika taotluslikult ja samas veendunult publiku konservatiivsemat osa silmas pidades.

Mõeldes *Freischützi* esietendusele aprillis ja *Macbethi* ja Orffi *Die Kluge* peatsele taasetendamisele kõrvuti *Nukitsamehega* teab Kuningas, et tal on palju pakkuda ka sellele osale publikust, kes on valmis minema peavoolust kaugemale, tehes seda hiilgavalt

ebaloogilise (inglise finantseerimisstandardi järgi) publiku/esineja suhte 4:1 juures. Kas eestlased ei mõista arvutada? Või läheb neile korda hoopis ooper?

*Christopher Lawrence*

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