

Tosca Lives for Art

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Scarpia (Jassi Zahharov) and Tosca (Heli Veskus)

(Photo: Harri Rospu / Rahvusooper Estonia)

Giacomo Puccini's "Tosca" at the Estonian National Opera, June 4, 2011.

Opera is considered, rightly, among the highest of the high arts. It is worth considering, however, the overt melodrama that comprises the storylines of many operas. The story of "Tosca", for example, with its caricatured villains, desperate love interests and duplicities wouldn't be out of place in a Venezuelan serial on Telemundo. But we don't really attend the opera for the "stories", do we. It is for the singing, and the musicianship, the staging, the lighting, the costumes and the beautiful spaces in which the works are performed. The Estonian National Opera's production of "Tosca" on Saturday night scored a bull's-eye on all counts.

Performances of "Tosca" in Estonia have been going on for a while. The first dates to 1925 with Raimund Kull directing and the beautiful and exotic Olga Torokoff-Tiedeberg in the eponymous title role. The Estonian National Opera's premiere dates to 2005. The work's origins go back to a French language play, "La Tosca", by Victorien Sardou, from 1887. Giacomo Puccini saw the play and was impressed with its potential for the opera. After a series of artistic and business differences the libretto was finally completed by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, premiering in Rome in 1900. It is one of the most performed operas in the world, very popular with the opera public, and has never left the standard repertoire since its inception.

"Tosca" is set in Rome in 1800 at the time of the Napoleonic Wars. The historical setting provides the framework for the opera's action, with its references to liberty and justice in the face of persecution by the evil and conniving police official Scarpia. Puccini's Tosca is really a very simple story of love, the abuses of power and of efforts to be honorable under difficult circumstances.

A striking aspect of the Estonian National Opera's Tosca was the stage settings, particularly in the first two acts. Act I set in the Church of Sant' Andrea della Valle in Rome where Tosca's lover, the painter Mario Cavaradossi is creating his "Mary Magdalene" was wonderfully conceived by Lithuanian designer Sergejus Bocullo. Act II in Scarpia's lair had a neat touch. As Tosca does in Scarpia with a knife, he stretches out to die on his dinner table as lighting underneath the glass tabletop turns it to blood red. The lighting was superb all night and created ambiance appropriately thanks to designer Neeme Jõe.

And the singing and theatrics were not to be outdone. Heli Veskus's Floria Tosca was a bundle of worried

energy and pure pitched vocals. Veskus's aria, the pleading "Vissi D'arte" ("I lived for art"), reached a level of pathos which was transformative. Urmas Põldma as Cavaradossi was equally arresting. Awaiting his execution, remembering his love for Tosca inspires the beautiful "E lucevan le stelle" ("And the stars shone") which Põldma handled with emotional and artistic sincerity. The role of Scarpia was cast for Jassi Zahharov and he capered around splendidly as the churlish lout with a thing for Tosca. Zahharov also is a fine singer.

The Estonian National Opera Orchestra, conducted by Jüri Alperen, set the aural mood with skill equal to the physical atmosphere in staging and lighting. Those elements combined with the building itself which is compact and cozy, make for a very pleasant evening. The suspension of disbelief which opera requires, perhaps like no other art form, engenders a magical quality when done well. The Estonian National Opera has this synergy working. Like in some Quentin Tarantino movie, in "Tosca" everybody dies. But it is a cathartic tragedy redeemed by art.