

TO KILL A BUTTERFLY

The opera *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini was first performed in Milan, Italy in 1904. Performed literally thousands of times and considered one of the greatest, most popular operas ever written, it's a love story of sublime beauty, sustained by the heartbreaking loyalty of the beautiful and innocent Japanese heroine, Cio-Cio-San (soprano). Her American lover, Lt. Pinkerton (tenor), in an act of seduction, marries her in a ceremony that he does not take seriously and then abandons her. Despite warnings, the naïve Cio-Cio-San renounces her family and religion in order to give herself totally to the perfidious Pinkerton. Forsaken when he returns to America, three years pass with no word, but the saintly Cio-Cio-San remains unshakably and sublimely faithful, living with her

devoted friend, Suzuki, and her adored child waiting patiently for Pinkerton's return. Finally, the American counsel informs her that Pinkerton is returning at last but with his American wife. She refuses to believe his betrayal and in incredulous anticipation stages an all-night vigil. When Pinkerton arrives with his wife, Cio-Cio-San tearfully accepts reality and relinquishes her child. Then in a scene of astonishing poignancy and lyrical musical beauty she commits suicide.

Opera is arguably the greatest of all art forms. It's truly a synthesis of everything: music, literature, drama, dance and architecture.

When Ann Chotard founded The Arkansas Opera Theater in 1973 she started with nothing more than with pieces of the set of the *Butterfly* in the back of her car. On its wings she soared upward as Artistic Director of the

Wildwood Center for Performing Arts, which opened in 1991.

In a 1993 Wildwood production of *Butterfly*, a scarlet ribbon streamed ever so slowly from Cio-Cio San's breast as her life's blood oozed out over the stage. It was one of the most moving moments of theatre this writer has ever seen.

After Ann retired in 2007 local opera sagged a bit, but the hunger remained. Soon Opera in the Rock (OITR) appeared and began to breathe life back into musical drama for our community.

OITR staged two performances of *Butterfly* at Little Rock's Arkansas Repertory Theater in 2019. A marvelously gifted lyrical soprano, Francesco Mondanaro of New York, sang the lead and the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra directed by Geoffrey Robson provided the music to packed sold-out houses.

Mondanaro spent nine months preparing for the role, absorbing herself

in what she terms the “creative primordial soup.” She read about geisha, studied Asian exhibits in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Japanese Society house at the United Nations.

Her performance was hailed as a “triumph” by the *Arkansas Times*, engendered by “the sense of excitement in an audience starved for stellar opera in Central Arkansas.”

OITR planned Giuseppe Verdi’s masterpiece *La Traviata* as its 2020 spring show. But that was the Year of the Covid-19 Plague and so it was canceled. In its place Mondanaro’s *Butterfly* was to stream over U-Tube on June 12 and 14 as a fundraiser and a replacement for *La Traviata*.

One would think that the American opera world would embrace the emergence of OITR’s staging of such a poignant work featuring a singer with the marvelous gifts of Ms. Mondanaro. But no,

it was not to be. The *Butterfly* was soon assaulted in a concerted, ugly social media attack led by one Simone Cottrell of Fayetteville, the daughter of a Cambodian refugee. She set out to kill the *Butterfly* and she succeeded. Ms. Cottrell demanded that the opera be canceled as “Yellow Face” since a white actress was playing an Asian part, and moreover she shouted out that the opera itself is “racist.” Soon more of Ms. Cottrell’s social media minions circled in attacking so viciously that OITR chairman, Joshua Price, himself an Asian American, called them “crazy.” Others quickly joined the frenzy as did one Debbie Chinn; Executive Director of *Opera Parallele* of San Francisco, who loped in via LinkedIn and Facebook and snarled out similar vituperation, adding that OITR should have its “air hose” cut off. But it did not stop with that, their blood was up and quickly posts were snapped out at the *Butterfly* sponsors like Opera America, the

Arkansas Arts Council, and Blue Cross Blue Shield.

Finally coming in for the kill was one Kevin Duong, an official from a Minnesota theater called Theater Mu. He howled out: "We are watching. If you continue to ignore and erase our concerns and experience...we WILL come for your throats!" This got 19 "I like" posts.

All this killed the *Butterfly*.

Performers were frightened, sponsors fled, and so the *Butterfly* fell dead. Its demise cost OITR about \$37,000, no small sum for a struggling regional opera.

Internet terroristic threatening is a criminal offense, and it's also actionable at law. But OITR in an act of unnecessary but polite propitiation issued a statement that said among other things:

Opera in The Rock is firmly committed to diversity and inclusion in casting of all our productions. *Madama Butterfly* was originally presented in May 2019 in celebration of Asian

Pacific Heritage Month to showcase the struggle and contribution of Asian Americans in our society.

We would love to have cast Japanese American singers, but unfortunately none auditioned for the production. Francesca Mondanaro who sang the leading roles is of Jewish and Italian heritage. Additionally, more than one-third of the cast was African-American, which is also non-traditional casting for this production, as our company feels that every role should be open to artists of all races, ethnicities, and gender expression.

It's a powerful story of love and betrayal that includes themes still relevant today such as colonialism, traditional roles of women, interracial relationships, racism, and immigration. Our costumer was of Japanese heritage, so she had personal insight into how the clothing and accessories should be worn and even provided guidance on how the cast should walk and carry themselves in accordance with Japanese culture. We also hired a professional makeup and hair artist from New York to ensure that the styling was culturally appropriate and respectful to highlight our multi-racial cast while using their natural hair. The Chairman of the Board of Opera in the Rock is himself Asian-American and was

intimately involved with this production at every step in the creative process to ensure it not only celebrated Asian culture but represented diversity of the arts community.

The attackers were not appeased. They gloated back that the statement was “flaccid” and “anemic.”

Never mind that OITR Board Chairman Mr. Price is president of the American-Asian society of Arkansas, or that he solicited approval of its members for staging the *Butterfly*; but none of this was enough.

What, one might ask, does “Yellow Face” exactly mean? That non-Asians can never perform an Asian role? Well, countless first-rank stars have. Recently, for example, Patricia Racette, who is white, made a career singing the role of Cio-Cio San at the Metropolitan Opera. Then there is Latonia Moore, who is black, who sang Cio-Cio San in San Diego in 2016 and is scheduled to sing the part

again in February of 2022 at the Dallas Opera, or Lianna Haroutounian, white, who sang it at the Met in 2016 to name only a very few. Asian soprano Hei-Kyung Hong also sang the part at the Met, but she also performed countless traditionally white roles such as Mimi in *Tosca* at the Met in 2016.

Are we now to believe that is there something wrong with an Asian playing a white role like Ms. Hong playing Mimi? Can a white actor not play Othello or black one, Hamlet, or an Asian, Juliet? Is it to be “color blind” casting or “color-conscious” casting? Or are we to have a double standard? What would you rather have a great performer who can perform the part but doesn’t quite look it or one who is not quite as good but who does?

Or does “Yellow Face” mean, as Ms. Cottrell averts, that one cannot do the *Butterfly* at all? Did she, Duong and Chinn stage a vicious social media war against

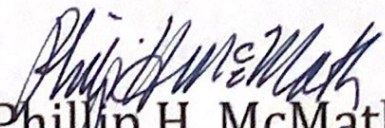
the Met for staging *Butterfly* in October and November of 2019 or in streaming it free in April of 2020? The question answers itself.

Indeed, if we adhere to the Cottrell strictures, Asian performers will be the ones penalized the most. Why risk staging *Butterfly*, *Turandot*, *The Mikado*, *Little Miss Saigon* or *Tea House of the August Moon*? Who knows what social media wolves will be offended or why? What about other plays touching on race like *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, *Showboat* or *Driving Miss Daisy*? Maybe somebody somewhere will decide they are all “racist.” The examples are endless. If these shows are avoided in favor of relatively innocuous, traditional ones they will inevitably be attacked as “white” and “Eurocentric.”

How then can the performing arts safely touch upon any difficult or challenging thematic material with any measure of safety? There is always

someone out there who might be “offended.” Can artistic and intellectual paralysis, and the loss of relevance, power and meaning be avoided? If so, how?

This obsessive, hysterical preoccupation with race and ethnicity, primed as it is now into very personal, rude, even violent animosity, is itself a form of racism. Supercharged with the unique power of social media this development has created a “cancel culture” that is in danger of canceling culture itself.


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