

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

TOSCA

BY GIACOMO PUCCINI | APRIL 18, 22, 24, 26, 2015

THE LYRIC OPERA'S OPULENT PRODUCTION OF PUCCINI'S TOSCA
IS A TRAGEDY CLOAKED IN BEAUTY.

April 21, 2015

By Frank Siraguso

When the opening curtain rose on Kansas City Lyric Opera's Tosca, I was mesmerized by the back of R. Keith Brumley's magnificent set of a Roman church. The light poured through the high windows, casting shadows on the church floor. I could almost feel the rough texture on the wall of cut stone. I kept reminding myself that it's a flat.

If you, like me (shamefully), are Italian-challenged, you can read the English translation of the lines on a small screen on the back of the seat in front of you. The small screen is easy to read and provides succinct translation that is crucial to following the story. I've been to operas where large screens hover high above the stage and think this is a better system. You have to read quickly so as not to miss any of the action and singing.

On its face, Tosca seems like another story about doomed love. The backstory, however, is a cultural conflict between believers – Italian Catholics – and nonbelievers – Italians who have become followers of Voltaire. (And there's the issue of Napoleon invading Italy.)

Cavaradossi (James Valenti) mentions this almost in passing when he tells his old friend, the escaped papal prisoner Angelotti (Ben Wagner), that he didn't give his whereabouts away to his lover, Tosca (Melody Moore) because "she's a believer who will tell all to her confessor." Puccini doesn't further explore this theme but it does add a hint of Romeo and Juliet to the mix.

Opera is a more physical art form than plays, I think, because although the words may be simple the music and melody carry the meaning. Compare popular songs to poetry. Steve Allen used to read lyrics on TV to show how vapid and meaningless pop music is – "She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah" – but he missed the importance of melody. And he of all people should have known better.

In Tosca, the singing is gorgeous and emotional. When Tosca and Cavaradossi sing together, you know how much in love they are. When Baron Scarpia (Gordon Hawkins) sings his seductive song of treachery to Tosca, you can feel the poison.

Scarpia is twice as evil thanks to Hawkins' gleeful portrayal. He is so effective that, during his curtain call, the audience boomed, albeit with a good-natured smile on its collective face. As Cavaradossi, Valenti portrays the artist as a kind, humble, working-class hero caught up in political drama. Although Tosca is a coquettish diva, Moore brings out Tosca's pure heart. And Scott Michael deserves credit for his Spoletta, a cruel weasel. Conductor Ward Holmquist leads the orchestra and the cast with a sure hand that ensures a coherent production. You just can't do that with canned music.

Tosca may not have you humming a melody on your way out the way you might after seeing, say, *The Barber of Seville* or the lively *Carmen*. But you will remember Tosca's love and resistance to the power of evil, and the tragic way that evil corrupts even love.