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## OPERA REVIEW

# 'M. Butterfly' caps a solid Santa Fe Opera season

By Mark Tiarks For The New Mexican  
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Song Liling (played by Kangmin Justin Kim) and René Gallimard (played by Mark Stone) in the Santa Fe Opera production of *M. Butterfly*.

Curtis Brown/For the Santa Fe Opera

### If You Go

**What:** *M. Butterfly*

**When:** 8 p.m.  
Wednesday and Aug. 12,  
18, 24.

**Where:** Santa Fe Opera,  
301 Opera Drive.

**Tickets:** \$44 to \$376,

The immediate question raised by turning David Henry Hwang's superb play *M. Butterfly* into an opera is whether it can gain enough by the transformation to offset what's lost. Based on the opening night performance at the Santa Fe Opera on Saturday, the answer is a definite yes.

It's the company's best world premiere in many years, far outstripping *The Lord of Cries* (2021), *The Thirteenth*

with \$15 for standing room; 505-986-5900, [santafeopera.org](http://santafeopera.org).

**Something else:** The opera season closes with *Carmen* at 8 p.m. Aug. 27, and a free event, Opera in the Park, at 6 p.m. Aug. 28.

*Child* (2019), *Oscar* (2013), and *Life is a Dream* (2010). The closest contender, *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* (2017), had some storyline oversights that keep it out of the same league.

*M. Butterfly* centers on the real-life relationship between a French diplomat and a Chinese Opera singer who were jailed in France in 1986 for spying on China's behalf. At their trial, it was revealed that the singer, who specialized in female roles, was a man, even though the diplomat had believed for more than 20 years that he was a woman. They had fallen in love when the opera singer performed "Un bel di," the title character's poignant aria from *Madame Butterfly*, at a French embassy party.

In his play, which was a Tony Award winner and Pulitzer Prize finalist, Hwang paralleled the relationship with that of fictional lovers Butterfly and the American sailor B. F. Pinkerton, in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. But with an added twist: The diplomat starts out thinking of himself as Pinkerton, the dominant Western male, but eventually realizes he has been the Madame Butterfly in their tragic relationship. Opera and play end with "Butterfly's" ritual suicide.

A major factor in its success is the decision by Hwang and composer Huang Ruo to refashion the play as a true opera libretto, with arias, duets and choruses, rather than simply cutting text and setting the rest as sung dialogue.

In another smart decision, they also added some relevant material directly from Puccini's opera, including from the love duet between Butterfly and Pinkerton that ends Act One, and from Chinese Opera, with a scene from *The Butterfly Lovers*, which also deals with gender confusion

and which the real-life singer often performed.

The score often references Puccini's music, sometimes almost imperceptibly, and sometimes with ironic humor, such as the mangled version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" that punctuates the French diplomats' discussion of American interests in southeast Asia. (In the Puccini, it leads into an aria for Pinkerton that begins with, "Everywhere in the world the roving Yankee takes his pleasure and his profit.")

Some aspects of the opera version even offer enhancements to the play, not just equivalent substitutions. In the play, the role of Song Liling, the opera performer, is played by a male actor speaking in a relatively high vocal register. In the opera, it's an Asian countertenor, which provides a wider and more intense emotional and vocal range for the character.

The most immediately noticeable aspects of Huang Ruo's impressive score are its dramatic momentum, driven by repeated rhythmic passages in the orchestra, often in triple meters, and its excellent English-language word setting.

His harmonic palette is primarily tonal, with spiky dissonances reserved for specific moments. And when the People's Liberation Army co-opts the Chinese Opera troupe and starts performing Maoist propaganda, the vocal and orchestral writing becomes appropriately banal.

There are no specifically Asian instruments in the orchestra, but the evocation of Chinese Opera is effectively managed with some extended playing techniques and frequent glissandi — sliding between pitches, which is also applied to vocal lines at times.

The cast and the physical production were first-rate. As Song Liling, Kangmin Justin Kim was exceptional, singing with fervor and appealing tone throughout his wide-ranging role and providing compelling acting in his Chinese Opera excerpts, as well as his private scenes with the diplomat.

Kim was effectively partnered with baritone Mark Stone as Gallimard, who undergoes a dizzying trajectory from diplomatic underling to vice consul to being shipped back to France as a failure, while his dream world of loving and being loved by “the perfect woman” comes crashing down during the espionage trial.

The confrontation scene between Kim and Stone after the trial, in which the former’s anatomical truth is revealed, was masterfully shaped, as was Stone’s haunting physical transition to Butterfly, complete with kimono, wig and white makeup, leading into the suicide.

Conductor Carolyn Kuan offered an incisive reading of the score, with its many quick transitions, needing only to tone down the orchestra in a few spots where it overrode Kim’s vocal line.

James Robinson has a well-deserved reputation as a stage director, and his excellent work here was greatly aided by Allen Moyer’s set design, which was a model of visual ingenuity and theatrical efficiency, moving seamlessly during the many scene changes.

Greg Emetaz’s very specific projections —giant headlines from the *New York Times*, a nighttime aerial photograph of Paris, many smiling Chairman Maos, and more — established times and places quickly and vividly.

In the supporting roles, Hongni Wu was excellent as

Comrade Chin, the no-nonsense People's Liberation Army functionary who recruits Song Liling for espionage service, while Kevin Burdette blended bureaucratic unction with a sense of stir-craziness in his portrayal of Manuel Toulon, France's ambassador to China. Joshua Dennis was fine as Marc, Gallimard's school chum, who makes one appearance in a role that could probably be omitted.

*M. Butterfly* is a gratifying and rewarding conclusion to what has been a very good Santa Fe Opera season. It seems the kind of piece that may well have a life after its premiere here, so this could be your opportunity to say, "I saw it first" in the future.

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Mark Tiarks