

Review: 'M. Butterfly' Metamorphoses Again, as an Opera

David Henry Hwang has returned to his Tony-winning play with a libretto for Huang Ruo's new work. But can its story change with the times?

By David Allen

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SANTA FE, N.M. — “M. Butterfly” has been a Broadway hit, a watershed in Asian American representation, a film, and recently a revised version of the original play.

Now, with the premiere on Saturday here at Santa Fe Opera of an adaptation by the composer Huang Ruo, with a libretto by David Henry Hwang, the play's author, the butterfly has returned to its operatic chrysalis.

It was inevitable, really. Hwang's Tony Award-winning script, from 1988, came to him when he saw that he could use the Orientalist stereotypes of Puccini's “Madama Butterfly” as a mirror to explore how, for two decades, the French diplomat Bernard Boursicot (renamed Rene Gallimard in the play) carried on an affair with the Chinese opera singer and spy Shi Pei Pu (renamed Song Liling), only to discover, amid a lurid espionage case, that “she” had been a “he” all along.

Hwang's smash exposé of empire and race, gender and domination, could always be read as a reflection on the Puccini and the biases it still perpetuates as well as a gloss on the real-life tale. Find the right composer who could blend its elements with metatheatrical flair while maintaining the elusive quality that so marks the play, and the opportunity was obvious.

Huang, a Chinese-born professor at the Mannes School of Music, whose works have often integrated Eastern and Western influences into a distinctive personal style, was almost certainly the best bet to be that composer.

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But the opportunity is missed.

“M. Butterfly” had plenty of potential to fly at Santa Fe. Delayed for two years on account of the pandemic, James Robinson’s production is simple but telling, making clean use of sensible projections, by Greg Emetaz, and moving easily between the personal and the geopolitical, as Gallimard’s fate entwines with that of the imperial pretensions of the French and Americans in Vietnam, and Song’s shifts with that of the Chinese Communist Party. Carolyn Kuan conducts with empathy, if not the rhythmic precision that the thudding score needs.



James Robinson’s production is simple but telling, making clean use of sensible projections, our critic writes. Curtis Brown

The cast is an exemplary one, too. Mark Stone makes for a suitably worn, confused Gallimard, and he sings his thorny vocal lines with impressive shape. The more minor parts are neatly delivered, especially Hongni Wu’s amused Comrade Chin and Kevin

Burdette's connivingly bureaucratic ambassador to China.

All must bow to Kangmin Justin Kim, whose drag performances as Kimchilia Bartoli must have helped him portray Song with the extraordinary conviction he displays here. More than credible singing Cio-Cio-San's "Un bel dì" and other soprano excerpts from the Puccini, this astonishing countertenor's alluring, ringing tone, and the sensitivity as an actor that he shows in toying with Gallimard's delusions and exploring Song's own sexuality, announced an artist to watch closely.

The problem with "M. Butterfly" is a deeper one, and it's the same difficulty that Hwang grappled with when he rewrote the script for its return to Broadway in 2017: As times change, can "M. Butterfly" change with them and still be true to itself?

That's not to say that Hwang's earlier themes are irrelevant now; far from it. Violence against women of Asian descent remains outrageously persistent, and there is still considerable value in confronting the Butterfly stereotypes that sustain it, especially in an opera world that remains stubbornly — no, offensively — reluctant to reckon with its many racisms, including in "Madama Butterfly" and "Turandot."

But the play itself helped to expose related intricacies of sexism, racism and imperialism that have since become familiar, and the story has worn. Gender norms, for one thing, have shifted dramatically enough that the old question of whether Gallimard knew that Song was a man is barely titillating at all. By now we should also know that Gallimard's desires are problematic; if we don't, "M. Butterfly" still achieves its goal of showing us that we should. Either way, it's hard to engage much with the bumbling, repressed central character, and the opera barely asks us to.



Stone, left, and Kim in the opera, which has a distance from the original material, with a knowingly analytical air. Curtis Brown

So what is left? “M. Butterfly,” the play, always had ambiguity and illusion at its core, and this operatic version tries to break down binaries still further, especially through Song’s character. Fluidity washes; power blurs as East meets West; metaphor piles onto metaphor. There is a distance from the original material here, and the opera takes on a kind of knowingly analytical air.

It’s more of a disquisition than a drama, and nowhere is that more apparent than in a big third-act aria for Song, “Awoke as a Butterfly.” She sings it as the Party tries to send her to France to spy on a lover she thinks has long forgotten her, and as the stage turns to black, you hope that her motivations are at last about to become more than dimly apparent. Is she just a Party stooge? Is she in love? What does she want from him?

“I pretend to know, pretend to know the truth,” she sings. “I know the truth and so I pretend.”

Alas, no luck.

Huang Ruo’s music offers few such subtleties, though unlike in his earlier opera for Santa Fe, “Dr. Sun Yat-sen,” it declines to weave Chinese instruments into the orchestra. The intrigue here lies in how he deals with the musical legacy of “Madama Butterfly,” and,

wisely, he has been careful with it.

There's no sense of pastiche, no resort to parody; direct quotation is limited to the few moments when Song is performing as Cio-Cio-San. When there are references, they are oblique or distorted, and they tend to follow Hwang's story in inverting the original material, asking us who the Butterfly in the story really is. There's a humming chorus, for instance, or at least a chorus that hums, but it intends to evoke Gallimard's memories, not those of his lover.

But much of the score otherwise tires as its pounding chords and thumping cross-rhythms alternate and overlap with more static, suspended passages. If there is plenty of tension, there is little variety, and this arid music rarely gives us insights that the words do not. It needed to; for without them, this Butterfly is lost.

M. Butterfly

Through Aug. 24 at Santa Fe Opera, New Mexico; santafeopera.org.

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