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Lopez as Tosca, Gwaltney as Cavaradossi

Tosca Converts An Opera Agnostic

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Tosca has opened at Opera North and it's a stunner. Sandra Lopez (Tosca), Jeffrey Gwaltney (Cavaradossi) and Aleksey Bogdanov (Scarpia) are veterans of the Young Artists Program who, in the midst of successful careers, have returned to Opera North to tackle sex, violence, and death in this work by Puccini. Upper Valley patrons will be glad they have come home.

Tosca is a well-known opera and therefore a synopsis of the story should not be too much of a spoiler, but if you are not familiar with it and like surprises, skip the next two paragraphs. Angelotti escapes from prison and hides in the church of Sant' Andrea. The painter Mario Cavaradossi, at his easel in the church, encounters Angelotti and hides him from Scarpia, the chief of the secret police. Cavaradossi is eventually captured; he is imprisoned and tortured to get him to confess to Angelotti's whereabouts. Meanwhile, Scarpia lusts after Floria Tosca, a famed singer and Cavaradossi's lover. He promises to release the painter if Tosca has (what will surely be repellent) sex with him. To save her lover, Tosca agrees but negotiates. She wants Scarpia to sign papers that will guarantee the couple's safe passage from the country. He turns his back to draft the documents. She eyes the knife on the table. Scarpia's character does not extend beyond the end of Act II.

Act III begins with Cavaradossi about to be brought before a firing squad, pining for his love, Tosca. She arrives and tells him she has everything in hand. As per her agreement with Scarpia, the execution is a sham and the soldiers will be firing blanks. She advises Cavaradossi to fall--and realistically!--and to wait until the soldiers have departed, after which their future together can begin. They fire. Scarpia has lied. Cavaradossi is dead. The police move in to arrest Tosca for Scarpia's murder. She jumps over the parapet to her death, "very Thelma and Louise."

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It is said that the set begins to tell the story before a line of dialogue is uttered or sung. Paul Tate dePoo III's set speaks volumes. The church in Act I, Scarpia's palatial rooms in Act II, and the parapet in Act III are magnificently detailed and draw the audience in. The set is rivaled by designer Jack Maisenbach's costumes--rich and lush and not simply worn by but an integral part of each character. The orchestra at Opera North is once again top-notch, conducted by Filippo Ciabatti. And Puccini's arias soar in the voices of all three principal actors.

If you have been reading my series about Opera North and OSHER's class "Behind the Curtain," you may remember that opera has not been my favorite art form. I have seldom found the stories believable. Tosca was an exception. What stood out for me was not the beautiful operatic singing, which I had expected, but the acting. From the beginning of their verbal dueling and cooing in the church, Lopez and Gwaltney left no doubt that their characters Tosca and Cavaradossi were ardent lovers. She flirted beautifully. He was visibly beguiled, and impatient at her refusal to leave so that he could get to the business of saving Angelotti. (That the verbal lovemaking is taking place in a church is tickling, except to the fussy and disapproving sacristan, played well and comically by Eric Lindsey, hoping that the Madonna "is forgiving." His character could have been one of the nuns at my high school dances.) Cavaradossi's pining for Tosca in Act III is heartfelt and wrenching. Lopez is at her acting best in the scene in which she sees the knife. In short order, her face, tone, and body language convey it all: recognition, possibility, fear, indecision, and finally courage.



*Bogdanov as Scarpia, Lopez as Tosca. Scarpia offers a vile bargain along with a Spanish wine that is "quite good."*

It is Bogdanov's Scarpia, however, that will never fade from memory and could haunt my dreams. From the moment he thunders onto the stage to a chorus of jackboots making their way through the audience, he is poisonous. He bullies the sacristan and starts playing mind games with Tosca. His personal brand of evil blossoms in Act II, commanding Cavaradossi's torture and taunting Tosca with his threats of rape. He is utterly hateful, but never cartoonish. As my companion noted, even his groping of Tosca is realistic, and it makes the skin crawl.

If you are nervous about opera, Tosca may be the one to see. It's got drama as well as music. Opera North's productions have supertitles in English. Tickets are available for Tosca's

remaining performances on August 7 (5 p.m.), 9 and 12 (7:30 p.m.) through the [Opera North website](http://operanorth.org) (<http://operanorth.org>) and box office. Go. To quote director Evans Haile, two of the most exciting words in the English language are "live theater."



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So ends my review of Tosca and my saga of peeking "behind the curtain" with OSHER, except to mention class member and Opera North veteran (since 1982) James Hughes of West Fairlee VT, husband of local actor Gillian Tyler, in a cameo as the judge in Tosca's Act II. One final related, but culinary, note. At some point in the opera, a character appears onstage to inform Scarpia that Napoleon has been victorious at the battle of Marengo. My companion informed me that it is the same Marengo of the famed chicken recipe. Chicken Marengo is the name that was apparently given to the dish that Napoleon's chef prepared for him after this military victory. Napoleon was said to have liked it so much that he required the chef to make it--without variation--after every subsequent battle. There is a great deal of lore about the veracity of this tale, and even about the recipe itself, particularly about the inclusion of tomatoes as they were not even available in Italy at the time. Eggs and crayfish? Then yes, now, not so much. Here is a link to what may be the [original recipe](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicken_Marengo) ([https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicken\\_Marengo](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicken_Marengo)). Although, arguments still rage . . .

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