REVIEW: TOSCA

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out of 5.

"Tosca was a testament to the company's dedication to making opera both thrilling and accessible"

Oxford Opera's production of *Tosca* at the Oxford Playhouse offered an ambitious and emotionally charged interpretation of Puccini's masterpiece. With a fresh English translation by Christopher Cowell, the company aimed to make the opera accessible to a wider audience while maintaining its dramatic intensity. Directed by Katie Blackwell, the production reimagined *Tosca* within a state controlled by a corrupt military regime, adding contemporary relevance to the timeless themes of love, betrayal, and oppression.

Marlena Devoe delivered a compelling performance as Tosca, balancing vulnerability with fierce determination. Her vocal agility and emotional depth made for a captivating portrayal of the opera's tragic heroine. Sam Furness's Cavaradossi was ardent and expressive, his soaring tenor filled with passion, particularly in his Act III aria. Philip Rhodes, as the sinister Baron Scarpia, commanded the stage with his rich, menacing baritone, making him a truly formidable antagonist. Under the direction of John Warner, the Oxford Opera Orchestra played with power and nuance, capturing the full orchestral magic of Puccini's lush score. However, with no microphones used, some of the quieter singers (The Sacristan/Spoletta/The Jailer) struggled to project over the orchestra, making it difficult to catch every lyric. Thankfully, the subtitles provided helpful clarity.

The staging was minimalistic but highly effective. A crucifix-shaped platform on castors served as the production's central set piece, transforming seamlessly from the grandeur of the church where Angelotti hides to the oppressive atmosphere of Scarpia's quarters. This simple yet striking approach allowed for fluid scene changes without distracting from the opera's gripping drama. The starkness

of the set also emphasized the characters' emotional turmoil, making Tosca's ultimate act of defiance all the more poignant.

While the decision to present *Tosca* in English made the opera more immediately comprehensible, something about the translation felt slightly off at times. The natural musicality of Puccini's Italian libretto was occasionally lost, and there were moments where I found myself longing to hear the original language with English subtitles instead.Visually, the production had a bold aesthetic, though the costumes, while evocative of the setting, sometimes appeared ill-fitted, which slightly detracted from the overall polish. However, Oxford Opera's commitment to high-quality performances with a community-focused ethos shone through. With its mix of world-class professionals and local engagement, this *Tosca* was a testament to the company's dedication to making opera both thrilling and accessible. Despite minor shortcomings, the production successfully conveyed the raw emotion and grandeur of Puccini's timeless work, leaving a lasting impression on its audience.

Review: TOSCA at Oxford Playhouse

Posted by Ros Carne | 29 Mar 2025

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Puccini's drama of tyranny and resistance, first produced in 1900, speaks with compelling relevance to our troubled times in this powerful production by Oxford Opera Company. Director Katie Blackwell has transposed the story from the Rome of the Napoleonic Wars to an imaginary, nameless, vaguely South American country under a brutal contemporary dictatorship. The design of a simple platform under three enormous, illuminated crosses suggests the regime's reliance on an oppressive Christianity, while the overall palette of black and red hints at a lurid combination of blood and fascism.

Only when the forces of liberation emerge towards the end does light fill the stage, bringing hope in the form of a children's chorus dressed in white, splashed with coloured paint and adorned with yellow feathers. These singers from Oxford Youth Chorus are one happy outcome of the company's mission to bring opera and music to local young people through outreach and education. In this context, it makes sense that the company's *Tosca* should be sung in English. And Chris Cowell's translation (2022) is sharp and often witty. But Puccini intended his work to be sung in Italian and not just the meaning, but the quality of the sound must change when moving from a language of long vowels and unstressed endings to one of clipped diphthongs and hard consonants.
Fortunately, the trio of magnificent principals bring so much technical wizardly to the score that it's possible to abandon expectations and simply revel in the beauty of the vocal lines and sumptuous interweaving of voices. Marlena Devoe's dramatic soprano soars effortlessly to the heights, equally at home in moments of greatest passion and those of quiet intimacy. 'Art was my life' doesn't have quite the ring of 'Vissi d' Arte', but we are nonetheless drawn deep into her anguish at this moment of sublime terror.

Tosca has strong contrasting characters and a fast-moving dramatic story, rich in twists, but it can feel a little unrelenting in its darkness. Violence to women is fundamental to the plot and it only works dramatically if we can inhabit the mental world of the villain, Scarpia. Phillip Rhodes remarkable performance enables us to do just that. He is a terrifyingly seductive monster, pouring out his lust in a forceful baritone, a consummate actor, every tiny physical movement indicating his

need to dominate and control. He is well matched by a heart breaking Cavaradossi (Sam Furness) who gives an exquisite rendering of the familiar aria ‘O dolci mani,’ translated as ‘Your hand as gentle’ as he imagines his lover’s assassination of their mutual nemesis. One of the many things Puccini does superbly well is to swing from a character’s outer world to their inner world at moments of great tension.

The playhouse has a large pit, big enough for a reduced professional orchestra. The acoustic is a little hard and unforgiving, but the quality of the playing under John Warner last night was high. The auditorium was packed with an attentive and enthusiastic audience. It seems a shame that this fine local company can only offer the city a two-night run of this excellent show.

★★★★☆ Ros Carne 29 March 2025

REVIEW: TOSCA AT OXFORD PLAYHOUSE IS 'OXFORD OPERA COMPANY AT ITS BEST' – THE SOLOISTS COMMANDING ATTENTION AS THE YOUTH CHOIR INJECT YOUTHFUL OPTIMISM

https://oxinabox.co.uk/review-tosca-at-oxford-playhouse-is-oxford-opera-company-at-its-best-the-soloists-commanding-attention-as-the-youth-choir-inject-youthful-optimism/#

Not long after it's debut performance in 1900, critic **Joseph Kerman** pronounced the opera Tosca, 'that shabby little shocker'. Tosca has therefore come a long way in 125 years, **Oxford Opera Company**'s director **Katie Blackwell** asking 'how do we build on perfection?' in the programme at **Oxford Playhouse**.

However, in terms of its themes of violence, corruption and abuses of power, last night's performance demonstrates with passion and panache, that very little seems to have changed at all.

Tosca youth chorus

Set against a sparse black backdrop, illuminated by three large electrically lit crosses, lovers Tosca (soprano **Marlena Devoe**) and Caveradossi (tenor **Sam Furness**) immediately command attention though their onstage presence and wonderfully clear yet soulful voices.

At one point in Act III, while duetting together, the orchestra drops out altogether leaving their voices poignantly exposed only for the music to gently glide in again – a clever idea, marvellously executed.

Sam Furness in Tosca

Their happiness and love can't last of course, as opera baddie police chief Scarpia struts in to spoil everything with his grotesque and sadistic deeds, **Phillip Rhodes** very convincing as the tall, dark and malevolent Baron.

At the chilling end of Act I, the electric crosses glow red and the innocent children's chorus singing the **Te Deum** fall under his demonic control. Through torture and deceit he continues his march of destruction throughout Act II until the courageous Tosca thwarts his plans.

Phillip Rhodes in Tosca

With vocal performances this strong, superbly supported by a small, tight and efficient orchestra, nothing extra was required of this gripping new English translation by Chris Cowell.

However, the children in the youth choir, commendably selected from local schools and redeployed as a spray-can wielding rebel army at the beginning of Act III, injected youthful optimism and defiance into the proceedings, if slightly slowing the momentum of the story.

Oxford Opera Company at its best.

Edward Bliss