

'Madama Butterfly' is a poignant American tragedy at Boston Lyric Opera

Helmed by a mostly Asian American creative team, BLO's inventive new production begins in San Francisco's glittering Chinatown circa 1941

By [A.Z. Madonna](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 17, 2023, 1 hour ago



Butterfly (Karen Chia-ling Ho, center) is a nightclub entertainer in BLO's new production of "Madama Butterfly." KEN YOTSUKURA

Enter the Emerson Colonial Theatre for a performance of Boston Lyric Opera's "Madama Butterfly," and the first thing you'll see is two gray-haired women in 1980s garb silently decorating a cake. One wears a distinctive red flower in her hair. This is your first clue that BLO's "Butterfly" is not your typical "Butterfly." If a tragedy is named after a woman, she's not supposed to make it to the final curtain, let alone live to have gray hair.

This "Butterfly" will undoubtedly irk some purists. For other opera lovers, including the mostly Asian American creative team helmed by director Phil Chan ("Final Bow for Yellowface") and dramaturg Nina Yoshida Nelsen (mezzo-soprano who has sung Suzuki in "Butterfly" productions the world over), it represents an invigorating and meaningful reclamation of Puccini's beloved opera. The gorgeous music rose unhampered by creaky stereotypes. No longer dependent on secondhand fantasies of Japan, this "Butterfly" stands strong as a poignant American tragedy.

Because for all its verismo, "Butterfly" has always contained a surfeit of fantasy. However, BLO's "Butterfly" deftly unpacks those fantasies and the roles the characters play in them. Act I takes place in the glittering world of San Francisco's Chinatown circa 1941, where Asian American performers (including Japanese Americans like [Dorothy Toy](#), born Shigeko Takahashi) catered to white audiences by playing on visions of a mysterious, exotic East.

In the process, the emotional arc of Act I is also skillfully redirected. As depicted here and played by the magnetic Karen Chia-ling Ho, Butterfly is no dewy-eyed innocent about to be married to a scoundrel, but a nightclub star who clearly adores her job, which includes participating in a wedding skit with servicemen. The connection between Ho's streetwise coquette Butterfly and Dominick Chenes's brash, naive B.F. Pinkerton only bloomed after "Uncle Bonze" interrupted the skit to reveal Butterfly's Japanese origins, labeling her a traitor. Pinkerton comforted her through the shunning of her coworkers/"family" (the excellent BLO chorus decked out in glitzy regalia by

Sara Ryung Clement), and together they departed into the shining city night, a natural setup for a romantic moment.

The “wedding night” sequence that ends Act I is usually a balancing act. It features some of the most breathtaking singing in the canon, but it also rides on a disturbing dynamic between the impoverished Butterfly, who thinks it’s the beginning of happily ever after, and Pinkerton, a man who has no intention of staying. That dynamic absent here, the love duet shone without compromise. Butterfly sidestepped the stereotype and brought Pinkerton along with her. He was still a cad, but not a caricature.

For this change, the second half’s plotline of innocence betrayed is no less relevant. In fact, Butterfly is betrayed twofold; first by Pinkerton, and second by the so-called land of the free, which [incarcerated more than 100,000 Japanese Americans](#) living on the West Coast after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Act II finds Butterfly living with her baby with Pinkerton and her coworker Suzuki (a tough, sweet Alice Chung), in the same Arizona internment camp where, in real life, Nelsen’s grandparents, Mitsuo and Masako Yoshida, were incarcerated. (The program book includes their photos.)

The production’s emotional trajectory is possibly even more poignant than usual due to these circumstances; rarely does Butterfly’s Act II line “welcome to an American house” resonate with such darkness. When Butterfly and Suzuki rejoice at Pinkerton’s impending arrival, they deck the scene with paper flowers, a powerful and historically accurate detail. At the real desert camps, little bloomed, and paper flowers were a common decoration.



Suzuki (Alice Chung, l.) laments the news Pinkerton (Dominick Chenes) brings with him in BLO's new production of "Madama Butterfly." KEN YOTSUKURA

Besides Ho, Chung, and Chenes, standouts of the cast included baritone Troy Cook as a fatherly Sharpless, tenor Rodell Rosel as flamboyant nightclub emcee Goro, tenor Matthew Arnold as the rich, lovelorn Signor Dori (a substitute for Yamadori), and kindergartner Neko Umphenour in the role of Dolore (Sorrow), Butterfly's child with Pinkerton and a silent but haunting presence in Acts II and III.

BLO music director David Angus capably led the large orchestra from a floor-level pit; the setup at first seemed like a slightly bothersome barrier between stage and seats, but that quickly faded into the background as the voices consistently projected over it. The Colonial is probably the most opera-friendly space that the nomadic BLO visits, and it's fortunate that "Butterfly" landed there.

For as long as I've been attending BLO productions, the company has been willing to

tweak the surtitles in non-English operas, and this opera features several notable alterations. I don't understand enough Italian to know where the surtitles and singing didn't match, but more importantly, the acting matched the surtitles, and the handful of obviously swapped lyrics didn't detract from the experience for me. What a lucky coincidence that "San Francisco" and "Nagasaki" scan syllabically, and both cities are built on hills!

The staging was sterling as well, informed by experiences of creative team members descended from Japanese internment camp survivors as well as historical dramaturgy by Arthur Dong ("Forbidden City, U.S.A."), Karen Inouye, and Ashlyn Aiko Nelson. Thanks to their contributions, BLO's "Butterfly" was able to simultaneously pay respects to the lineage of the opera and Asian American history while creating a staggering emotional experience with an uncommonly shocking final tableau.

Impresarios, take note. This show should have wings.

MADAMA BUTTERFLY

Presented by Boston Lyric Opera. At Emerson Colonial Theatre, Thursday, Sept. 14.

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