



## Madama Butterfly brings magic and tears to Opera SJ

By [Cynthia Corral](#)

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Cast 1: Soprano Cecilia Violetta López as Cio-Cio-san (Madame Butterfly). Photo by Pat Kirk.

Last weekend I was lucky enough to see **Opera San Jose's** tremendously entertaining production of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, starring one of opera's most dastardly villains: Lt. BF Pinkerton.

When you have two strong, educated, feminist women in the audience of *Madama Butterfly* for the first time, you can expect a lot of crossed arms, raised eyebrows, and smirks. But though the story of an American lieutenant – who believes wives can be as changeable and temporary as the screens in his Japanese home – is barely tolerable, the opera as a whole is gorgeous, tragic, emotional and an auditory blessing.

The story: Lieutenant BF Pinkerton signs a 999 year lease on a house in Japan that (Bonus!) comes with a free geisha wife! Even better, the lease is also sort of month to month, and Japanese divorce laws are subject to the whim of a husband, so it's a win-win deal for Pinkerton.

Not so lucky is sweet young Madama Butterfly, who has fallen in love with her husband and believes this is a till death do them part situation. Unfortunately, Pinkerton has other ideas, and already plans to get a "real" wife when he ships back to America. Sweet 15 year old Butterfly, to Pinkerton, is merely a "toy" for sex while he's in Japan, and there is a lot of talk of "breaking her wings" and pinning her for display purposes. Nice.

Even better, Butterfly gives birth to Pinkerton's son after he leaves for America, and during the entire three years he is gone she believes he will return to meet his son and they will be a permanent family. On the contrary, Pinkerton plans to return to Japan with his new American wife, and take the child from Butterfly to raise as their own.

Without giving away the ending, you can assume it follows the typical line of opera tragedies.



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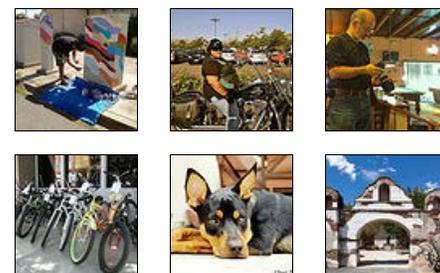
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However, I have learned that the last few seconds of Opera SJ's show, which brings a swift karma payment to Pinkerton, was added for this production. I don't know how opera purists feel about this change, but for me it made the whole story much more palatable.

I have always known I am very lucky to be able to see all these opera productions for the last several years. This show, however, I felt truly privileged. The music and singing is beautiful perfection as always, but in Act II Madame Butterfly sings "Un Bel Di" (One Beautiful Day), and it was a magical experience. I have never felt that before at the opera, but **Cecilia Violetta López** made me feel I was present for something important. By the end of Act III López is singing with tears in her eyes, and they were still present during the standing ovation at the end. **Cecilia Violetta López**, having previously charmed me as Leila in *The Pearl Fishers*, has earned her place in this company, and should be considered a huge benefit to Opera SJ.

Cast 1: Tenor James Callon as BF Pinkerton and soprano Cecilia Violetta López as Cio-Cio-san. Photo by Pat Kirk.



Cast 1: Soprano Cecilia Violetta López as Cio-Cio-san (Madame Butterfly). Photo by Pat Kirk.

Resident tenor **James Callon** is a perfectly awful BF Pinkerton (in the best way possible) with an amazing voice as usual. **Lisa Chavez** and **Zachary Altman** (Suzuki and Sharpless) are spectacular as the only two characters who speak any sense. And special mention goes to an actor who really deserves mention: **Sammy Tittle** as Butterfly's son. Sammy is quite young and the part requires him to be on stage for much of the show. He was a quiet scene stealer because he was so absolutely perfect.

There are many visual treats in this production. The main feature of the set is a changeable lighted screen at the back of the stage. This provided an impressive opening when the

curtain went up. The screen was lit with giant red and white stripes, and the figures of Lt. Pinkerton and friends standing at attention in uniform set the scene and mood immediately. Later in Act I Madame Butterfly and her friends and sisters appear in their full geisha costumes and make-up, and gorgeous multicolored parasols. But while there were some individual scenes that stood out, I was underwhelmed by the stage setting as a whole. I have seen some drop-dead stage designs at Opera SJ before, and I was really looking forward to being immersed in a gorgeous Japanese setting. On the contrary, I was not. However, this is a minor disappointment in what quickly became one of my best experiences at the opera.

I am open about not knowing anything technical about opera, but I know entertainment and a great show when I see one. Not only is this show now one of my favorite operas I've seen so far (and by now I've seen quite a few), but some scenes moved me in ways I've never felt before. It's a show that is suitable for both opera experts and opera newbies. It's a show you should not miss.

**Madama Butterfly**  
**Opera San Jose**  
**Through March 2nd**  
**California Theatre**



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