

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

The Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire said that “it is dangerous to be right when the government is wrong.” When designer Robert Innes Hopkins and I began a few years ago to discuss Puccini’s masterpiece, we were struck again and again by the pervasive corruption endemic to *Tosca*’s Rome. It is the kind of odious corruption like mold-producing water damage that rots from within until structures collapse. How does a moral, ethical person navigate a world where institutions tasked with protecting the common good have been usurped to serve the nefarious desires of unchecked tyrants? Do you compromise in small ways daily for survival until your own personal integrity is shredded into nonexistence? When do you stand up and fight back?

The task of creating a new production of a beloved opera and extremely significant title for San Francisco Opera is one we have joyfully and seriously taken on. Puccini’s masterpiece, ideal for novice and aficionado alike, grabs the audience by the throat with Scarpia’s chords at the downbeat and does not shake free until eternity is brought down upon our main players. Act I, Puccini tells us, takes place at Sant’Andrea della Valle. With Robert, we found the breathtaking Duomo di San Giorgio in Ragusa, Sicily as our inspiration: the Duomo’s primary colors are as visually vivid as Puccini’s music. In Act II, Scarpia’s office within the Palazzo Farnese is a kind of elegant rat’s nest, full of bribes and tributes from a cowering populace he extorts as he “protects” them. And Act III—the roof atop Castel Sant’Angelo, where long-suffering Roman citizens meet their state-ordered end—is a place that God has turned his back on, lest one witnesses the crimes men visit upon each other. Having been inspired by the portraits of Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, one of only fifteen women admitted to the French Royal Academy in her lifetime, we worked to create the clothing of *Tosca*’s Rome—a time when the city did not rival Paris for fashion, had been under siege for years, and was desperately missing the patronage of the Pope.

Each of these spaces are as charged as Puccini’s music and as complex as the characters who inhabit this world. Flora Tosca, swept from her simple sheepherding childhood because of her extraordinary gift of singing, manages to keep her faith and peasant wisdom even as the corruption of Scarpia’s Rome washes over her. Mario Cavaradossi, whose politics begin as a fashion statement for annoying conservative priests, when tested, inspires incredible bravery and resistance. His love and passion for Tosca, which are the true meanings of his existence, fall also victim to the tyranny of the police chief’s treachery. And Baron Scarpia is a self-made man with no time or tolerance for artsy idealists who don’t understand that someone must preserve law and order—and whose sadistic sexual proclivities and lust for power demolish the lives and dignity of everyone he touches.

With Napoleon and his unstoppable forces bearing down on a Rome without the protection of the Pope, our main three characters become ensnared in the horrible net of treachery, intrigues, lies, moral turpitude, and fraudulence that extinguishes them all. Grand opera means grand tragedies. But in a world where corrupt dealings decay civic institutions, torture is fair and legal, and the Church colludes with tyrants for self-preservation, a woman fights back against her fate and the damning crush of this society. *Tosca* is a piece for today like almost never before. ☀



Top: The 1791 oil painting Hyacinthe Gabrielle Roland, Marchioness Wellesley by Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (1755–1842).

FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO, MILDRED ANNA WILLIAMS COLLECTION, BEQUEST FUND OF HENRY S. WILLIAMS IN MEMORY OF H.K.S. WILLIAMS, 1991.29.

Bottom: Tenor Brian Jagde, director Shawna Lucey, and soprano Carmen Giannattasio in rehearsal.