



MADAMA BUTTERFLY

SOURCE MATERIAL

THE EVOLUTION OF *MADAME BUTTERFLY*

The story of *Madama Butterfly*, Puccini's beloved opera of the young Japanese geisha doomed to an unhappy end, still fascinates the public today. However, much like the life cycle of the butterfly, the story of *Madama Butterfly* underwent considerable transformation over time before the opera emerging in its present form.

The beginnings of the opera can be traced back to a tabloid-like story of a young woman with a broken heart in Japan. At the turn of the 19th century, with the opening of Japan in 1854 by Commodore Matthew Perry, the public's fascination with all things Japanese – *japonisme* - was evident in popular culture. American writer John Luther Long's short story, *Madame Butterfly*, was first published in the January 1898 issue of *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*. The author was purported inspired by a true story relayed to him by his sister, the wife of a missionary living in Nagasaki. However, French author Pierre Loti's popular semi-autobiographical novel, *Madame Chrysanthème*, first published in 1887, also has a very similar storyline of a Japanese geisha who marries a naval officer named Pierre. Loti's novel even inspired an 1893 opera version by Charles Messager. Long's later version of the story has the notable addition of the suicide attempt by Cho-Cho-San after her abandonment by the selfish Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton. At the climax of Long's 18-page version, Suzuki thwarts the heroine's suicide attempt. At the key moment, Suzuki makes Trouble, the child of Butterfly and Pinkerton cry, and Cho-Cho-San realizes that she must care for her child. Madame Butterfly, her faithful friend and the child disappear before Pinkerton and his American wife can claim the child.

American playwright, director and theatre producer, David Belasco (July 25, 1853 – May 14, 1931), took Long's short story as the basis for his theatrical version of the story. His one-act play, *Madame Butterfly*, premiered at the Herald Square Theater in New York on March 5, 1900 to great success.

Belasco was born in San Francisco, California, his parents moving from London, England during the Gold Rush. He began working in San Francisco theatre, holding a variety of routine jobs such as call boy, script copier, eventually advancing to the position of stage manager. His early work in San Francisco allowed him to learning the business inside out. Belasco moved to New York City in 1882 where he worked as stage manager for the Madison Square Theater while writing plays. By 1895, he was so successful that he set himself up as an independent producer. Between 1884 and 1930, Belasco wrote, directed, or produced more than 100 Broadway plays, becoming one of the most powerful personalities on the New York City theater scene. Most famously, two of his plays, *Madame Butterfly* and *The Girl of the Golden West* for the stage, were adapted as operas by Giacomo Puccini.

Impresario Belasco knew how to inject drama into his theatrical productions, and a highlight of his version was the famous staging of Butterfly's evening vigil, as she waits patiently for Pinkerton's return. Actress Blanch Bates stood completely still on stage for 14 minutes as a dramatic lighting effect showed the passage of time from dusk to dawn. Another Belasco addition to the story's evolution was key. Madame Butterfly should succeed in killing herself in the final scene. Belasco's play was a success, but a reading of the text of the original play reveals dialogue that is extremely dated.

When the Belasco play opened in London at the Duke of York's Theatre shortly after the 1900 Broadway premiere, Giacomo Puccini was in the audience. The composer, who was in London for the premiere of *Tosca* at Covent Garden, was encouraged to see this new play. Though Puccini hardly understood a word of English, he was immediately convinced of the play's potential to become a great opera.

November 20, 1900

To Giulio Ricordi

... The more I think of *Butterfly* the more irresistibly am I attracted. Oh, if only had it here, that I might set to work on it! I think instead of one act I could make two quite long ones: the first in North America and the second in Japan. Illica could certainly find in the novel everything that is wanted.

The rights were obtained to the play by Ricordi in 1901, and Puccini selected Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giocosa to create the opera's libretto. Puccini even consulted Madame Oyama, the wife of the Japanese Ambassador, to inject a measure of authenticity into his music with the inclusion of traditional Japanese melodies, such as *Sakura Sakura*. The premiere of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* on February 17, 1904 at La Scala in Milan is infamous for the audience's largely negative response to the opera. The evening was, in the words of Puccini himself "a disgrace." Soprano Rosina Storchio, the singer who was chosen to play the part of Cio-Cio-San, swore that she would never sing *Butterfly* again in Italy.

February 22, 1904

To Rosina Storchio

... And so, my *Butterfly*, the love-sick maiden, would leave me. You seem in your departure to be taking away the best, the most poetical part of my work. I think that *Butterfly* without Rosina Storchio becomes a thing without soul. What a shame! After so many anxious fears, after pouring out such riches of your keen and delicate intelligence, to receive the reward of brutality. What a disgrace it was! But I am sure that this horrible impression will soon be wiped out of our minds, and so, with warm affection and confidence in the future, I wish you good luck.

Audiences were largely unmoved by the political overtones in Puccini's opera which critiqued American imperialism, preferring to focus on the doomed romance of Cio-Cio-San and Pinkerton. Puccini, determined that his opera would succeed, set to work once again to rework the opera. Pinkerton's character was romanticized to engender more audience sympathy, and a revised version of the opera premiered at the Teatro Grande in Brescia, Italy on May 28, 1904. This time, the opera's reception was positive, and the audience's embrace of *Madama Butterfly* was complete.

June 11, 1904 (to Puccini's sister Dide)

Dear Dide,

It went exactly as I had wished: a real and unqualified triumph; the success is greater every evening.

With the opera's success at Brescia, Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* finally revealed itself as one of opera's most enduring stories. Ranked number one on Opera America's list of the 20 most-performed operas, *Madama Butterfly* has gone on to inspire the creation of new works of art in practically every artistic medium available. The tragedy of Cio-Cio-San has been referenced in theatre (*M. Butterfly*, *Miss Saigon*), dance (including ballets by choreographers Frederick Ashton and David Nixon), visual art, popular song (*Poor Butterfly*, a hit on the 1954 Billboard Best Seller chart), and even fashion design. In addition, Puccini's music for *Madama Butterfly* can be found in countless films and commercials. Audiences all around the world continue to be moved by the sad story of the brief, but beautiful life of a young Japanese geisha who loses everything for love.