

TURANDOT

Notes from the set designer and director

Genesis

How many works have had such a long genesis, from their initial conception, until their final form, under which they find themselves into posterity?

The year was 633 AD and Turandokht - daughter of King Khosrow Parviz, and sister of Azarmidokht and Purandokht - the most beautiful of the three Persian princesses at that time during the Sasian dynasty, had turned into a veritable paradigm of nobility and political stature within her lineage. The name Turandokht means, quite literally, "daughter of Turan", "dohkt" being a contraction of "dokhtar", or daughter, in Persian. The origin of the Turan people goes back to 1700 BC, and it was comprised mostly of Iranians of the Avestan era. The importance of this people in eastern spirituality is enormous, their biggest legacy being the sacred book of Zoroastrianism, the Avesta, written in Zend.

Finding inspiration in the historical figure of the legendary princess, one of the greatest poets of Persian epic literature of the 13th century, Nezamí Ganyaví, recants, in his book *The Seven Princesses*, written circa 1200 AD, the perils of a princess who had sworn to give herself to whomsoever would correctly answer a series of enigmas. Around five hundred years after that, circa 1700 AD, the story of princess Turandokht was picked up and developed by French orientalist François de la Croix, appearing within a collection of stories based on eastern folklore. Only De la Croix, perhaps because of commercial reasons, as Chinese exoticism was in fashion at the time, found his inspiration in the work of the Persian Ganyaví, yes, but set the action in China instead, where the "daughter of Tur", became princess "Turandot". It was on the story by De la Croix, and not the original Persian tale, that Carlo Gozzi based his fable "Turandot" in 1762. This version by the famous Venetian dramaturgist was so successful, that even Friedrich Schiller himself became enamoured by it and, in 1801, it was put to the stage in Weimar, this time, turned into a tragedy...

Eventually, after four different pens spilled their creativity using the original work of a Persian poet whom few remember, librettists Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simon, the fourth and fifth pen respectively to be placed upon the princess, created the version we now know today, and which made almost all other versions be forgotten by the hearts of the general public: the libretto for the homonymous (and posthumous) work composed by Giacomo Puccini. The genius from Lucca began to score *Turandot* in 1921, but on 10 October 1924, with a piece that he was yet to finish, he was diagnosed with throat cancer - a bad joke played by fate onto someone who made, makes, and will make the world sing forever. He sadly died a few weeks after his diagnosis in a surgery in Brussels.

Following the Maestro's wishes, the draft for the end of the piece (around 36 pages) is handed over to composer Riccardo Zandonai, so that he can finish it,

but Tonio Puccini, son of Giacomo, objects, and commissions Franco Alfano so that he may finish the work of his late father. Many are critical of Alfano, some even mock him - with that typical sarcasm of those who always think themselves to be better than others until it's their turn to prove it - making fun of the effort he put into finishing *Turandot*. It's true that we will never know what Zandonai might have done, even less so Puccini, but what we do know is what poor Alfano did, who, likely with tears in his eyes after the death of his friend and mentor, had to face the gargantuan historical task of completing his work. Franco Alfano wasn't a genius the way Puccini was however, and even if he had been, he was never the original author. And that's that. While we're at it, let's remember that Luciano Berio too tried his luck at writing a new ending... So, only Puccini - how obvious - would have been able to finish his own work in a way we would all have liked. He was never able to do it, so let's leave all that useless polemic behind, and dedicate ourselves to squeezing the most we can out of this unfinished, and unfinish-able, composition, a precursor of what would have surely been a revolution in Giacomo Puccini's style of writing. We will never know how far his hungry musical curiosity would have taken him but, in *Turandot*, one can intuit a lot of the Puccini that would have come next: a restless composer who, wherever his evolution would have taken him, would have never given up on melody.

Anyway, today, fourteen centuries after the true "daughter of Turan" lived, more than eight hundred years after the original poem that immortalised her came to light, and in spite of there having been many different hands shaping it, the story of *Turandot* continues to fascinate us.

Motivation

In this version for the ORW, the theatre's artistic director asked me to end the show - the way Toscanini did the day of its premiere - with Liù's death. That made me very keen, as that request gave me the chance to put my personal "adieu" to Giacomo Puccini to the stage, a man who has gifted me with so many emotions and successes - and will surely continue to gift me more - throughout my international career. I remember as if it were yesterday when, as part of my debut in *Tosca* - in Torre del Lago Puccini, 1995 - I went on a private visit of the Casa Puccini and broke down into tears the instant I touched his coffin.

This ending "a-la-Tosca", without the sexual and musical turbulence of the final duo, opens up the possibility of returning to the piece's fairytale-like origins, to the poetic spirit of Nezamí Ganyaví, to Carlo Gozzi's tragicomedy, or put differently, it allows for the return to the fantastical, the fable, and its subsequent moral which resides within Liù's realisation "Who has put so much strength in your heart?" asks *Turandot* - "Love!" answers the slave.

I love working with children, the best actors a director can dream of, so taking on the staging of the show as a fable was the perfect excuse to have them on as much as possible. A sort of timeless group of children who, together with their teacher, put to use what they've learnt during class, building a castle out of Lego, dressing the teacher in the Mandarin's clothes, etc - things that will become

concrete during later scenes, where the imagination of man becomes reality. In that sense, it is important to emphasise the characters of Mandarin-Teacher, who is briefly suggested as being a narrator-type figure, a figure so important in the majority of fairytales, and those of Ping, Pong and Pang, inspired by the *Commedia dell'arte*. Taking advantage of the *carte blanche* given to me by Gozzi, and of the children's imaginary game, the three "masks" are actors, hired by the Teacher, specifically so they perform Pantalone, Arlecchino and the Dottore for the children. The three of them, once fully inhabiting the fantastical world of the story later on, exchange their *Commedia dell'Arte* costumes for Chinese garbs, appropriate to their ranks, in order to take part in the enigma ceremony. Now, according to the Real Academia Española's dictionary, a fable is a "Brief fictitious story, in prose or verse, with didactical intentions, which are frequently manifested as part of a final moral". That would be why the genre is often associated with children's pedagogy, although many fables are of such psychological violence that it is difficult to explain their connection to the age of innocence.

While we're on the subject of the supposed educational aspects of fairytales, if there is one tale whose modernity is overwhelming, that would have to be *Turandot*: ¹The princess fears physical love - with everything it represents - and that is why she shakes in front of the impetuous charge of masculine sensuality. She uses the event of a rape, suffered by one of her ancestors - 1000 years ago - as an excuse to hate all men, which brings her to experiencing the presence of ²her suitors as if they were potential "rapists", in the sense given by Hilmann to the word "Someone who, forcefully, penetrates the defensive pseudo-security of the feminine, disarming her". Puccini and his librettists, modern and sensible men, having understood the concept perfectly, transmitted into the piece the laceration that is suffered by a woman when she is forced to live through that act of "surrendering to man", as a loss of her independence. That is why the princess who did not hesitate to kill her male suitors in order to face her demons, needs, ironically, to sacrifice a different feminine presence, Liù, in order for her to accept that side of her which she so desperately refutes. On the other end, Calaf - who doesn't fall in love with her but instead becomes "enchanted" with her - is ready to use all of his sensual and sexual magnetism in order to obtain what he really wants: a kingdom that may give him back his princely status. In this sense, "*Nessun Dorma*" is less of a love song, and more of a war-cry, with the sense of a pride wounded by a kind of defeat, a pride that sees the arrival of dawn as a triumph in its plans for redemption: "Vincerò!"

The way I see it, *Turandot*, with its plot rich in freudian nuances - it isn't a coincidence that this perennial story finds its true strength in the 1920s, a time when modern psychoanalysis asserts itself as a tool of knowledge - was the "last drop in the cup" of a Puccini who'd always been aware of the feminine. Perhaps that was the reason he couldn't finish the piece? Beyond his terrible illness, maybe what was undermining his confidence was the fear of the "settling of

¹ Concepts developed in the book *Giù la Maschera*, dissertazioni di José Curs, by psychologist Serenella Gragani. Ed.

scores” between his masculine Self and his feminine Self, which is represented in Turandot’s third act? We’ll never know.

We’ll also never know how much truth there is in those theories that connect the inhabitants of Turandot’s fantastical Beijing, with certain, very real, individuals from Torre del Lago, where the composer and his loved ones used to live: in 1909, Doria Manfredi, a housemaid in Puccini’s home, takes her own life in Torre del Lago. Popular imagination associates that tragic event with the persecution of Elvira Puccini, wife of Puccini, who had supposedly accused the young maid of adultery. The story goes that Giacomo was never able to heal from the pain caused by the injustice of that useless death, an event which marked the beginning of an increasing disillusion towards life for him, which is clearly palpable in his letters. Basing their views on these events, many see the character of Liù as a tribute to Manfredi’s sacrifice.

Parallels aside, no matter how much ink is spilled (even after the recent investigations which motivated the film *Puccini e la fanciulla* by Paolo Benvenuti) we will never know the truth for sure. And it’s best it be that way, so that the terrible habit of stirring other people’s misery back up for analysis - genius or not, they are still human beings - may remain buried within a nebulous and indemonstrable state.

Personally, I prefer seeing, in the final song by the old Timur - a heartbreaking farewell to Liù - the very composer who is saying goodbye to all of his creations (perhaps even us), taking part of Calaf’s father’s voice. “In order to rest next to you in a night which has no tomorrow”, says the old man. And my romantic imagination leads me to believe that the voice of a bass, broken by the pain suffered by loss is, probably, the closest thing which may have been able to come out of the mouth of an agonising Puccini - hoarse because of the cancer to his larynx - if he had been able to articulate a sound during the last hours of his incredible life. That is why, at the end of the show, Giacomo takes Timur’s place on stage and, after saying goodbye to his creations, lays down to die in peace, while all of the characters of his different works emotionally walk up to him to pay their respects.

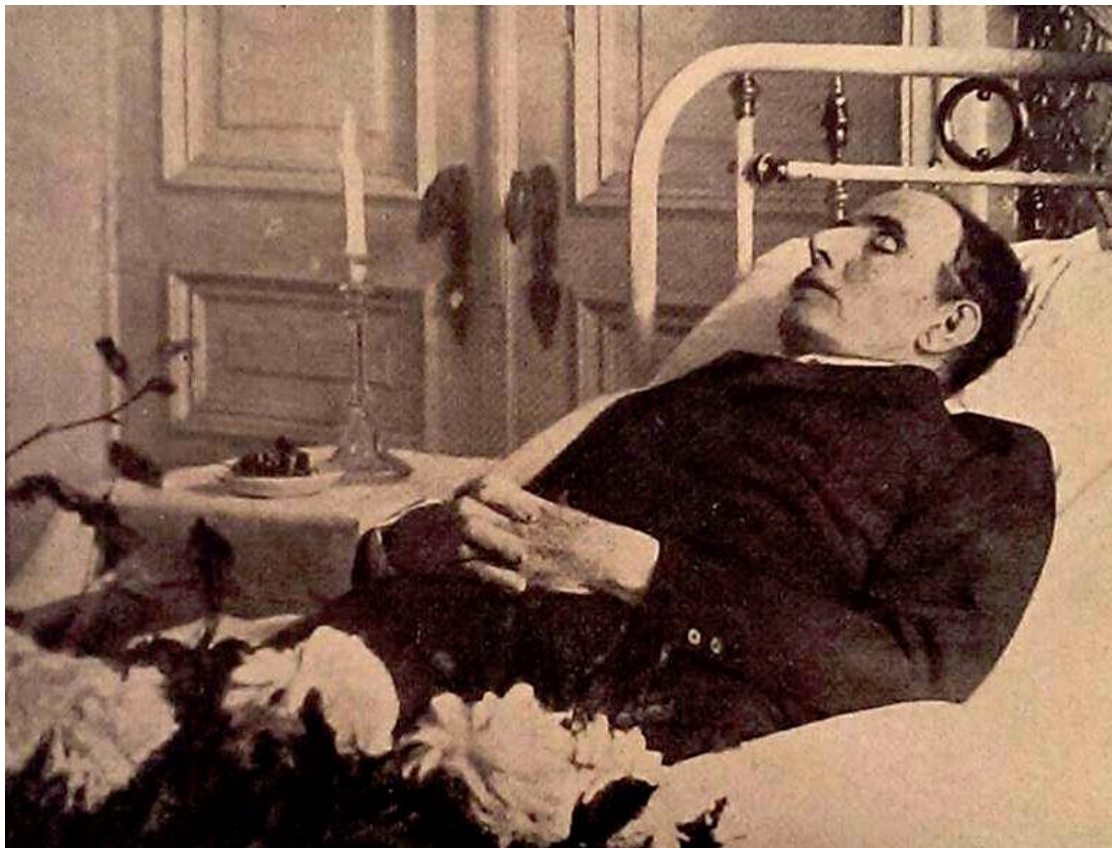
Giacomo Puccini (Lucca, 22-12-1857, Brussels, 29-11-1924)

About the sets

The scene is set by the children’s own sense of invention, which leads them to recreate a freeform version of the Southern Door of the Forbidden City in Beijing using Lego building blocks. That is why we have used design lines which are very clean and minimal, stripping them of the “poetry” of aged materials, of the warmth of lived-in textures, bringing them closer to the plastic coldness of the famous construction toys instead. Another fun set of ideas, as imagined by the children, is the use of coloured lanterns for each different enigma (green=hope, red=blood, and gold=royalty) which are hoisted up in the air as a representation of the enigmas - each one of them, after having being solved, ceases to have “weight” and flies away, or the use of coloured spheres, too - simi-

lar to those found in ball pits - which, representing precious stones, cascade out and down the palace walls.

This concept of simplicity also affects the costumes designed by Fernan Ruíz, who has dressed all of the characters, even the choir, with clothes cut in clean lines, avoiding overloaded designs and, more importantly, minimising any “chinoiserie” to that which is only strictly necessary. The costumes of the Imperial Guard, however, are a nod to the boundless imagination of youth: after having asked a few children how the princess’ soldiers should dress, their almost unanimous answer was: Ninjas! So, even if Ninjas were not Chinese, we shall have Ninjas, since in this game, children also rule...



As I write this, I am told of the death of my friend and great colleague of more than 20 years, Daniela Dessi. I never had Daniela as my Liù, but she has been one of my greatest Desdémonas, Toscas, Magdalenas, Manons, Iris, as well as an invaluable on-stage, concert, and recording partner.

I dedicate this production in her memory.

José Cura
Madrid, 21 August 2016

