

Director's notes

Why Tosca?

There are not too many ways to tackle the Manoel's stage limitations, limitations that are not a defect of the house, but the result of using its stage for things that are not among those for which it was conceived. So when I was asked to produce a "big" title on a stage, and in a pit, that are primarily a Baroque space, the first thing I did was to check the scores of several different titles among the cherished ones by audiences, to find out the minimum number of players possible to tackle some of them. With this in mind, the next step was to choose an opera that, regardless of its orchestration, was structured in a way that the "stage traffic" could be handled without accidents... It is not the same to produce a huge choir-based opera like *Turandot*, *Don Carlo*, *Traviata*, *Bohème* —to mention some of the darling ones—, than going for an opera like *Tosca* that, still being acoustically ample due to its large orchestration, is basically a chamber like kind of "straight-theatre" piece. Not for nothing. Its operatic libretto comes from Sardou's play of the same name, which so impressed Puccini. Not counting with the physical space to choreograph a huge procession —neither counting with a larger choir than the very refined, yet small KorMalta—, if we could find a way to stage the famous *Te Deum* with less of the "Hollywood pomp" that the big Roman basilicas seem to require, and more of a chapel-like kind of atmosphere, the rest of the action could perfectly fit the only 50m2 we can use on stage. Yes, just 50m2 because, in order to go around the pit limitations of the Manoel —conceived to host no more than the 30 musicians early operas require—, we have placed Puccini's more than 60 players on stage, behind a curtain decorated as a Maltese wall.

Apart from allowing us to produce a large opera, the immediate consequence of the above is that the singers will be performing at such a close distance to the audience that any gesture, even the move of an eyebrow, will be perceived by those sitting near them as if they would be part of the actual action, for example sitting in one of the church's benches in the first act, while the drama unfolds.

Valletta and Birgu as Tosca's "*luogo dell'anima*"

Those who have been following my career as a producer, would have witnessed that it is part of my "style" to try to find connections between the actual location of the plot and the country where the production will take place, the "*luogo dell'anima*", intended as the place where the plot's soul animates.

I strongly believe that innovations are welcome as long as they are done with care and not as a way to attract attention. Of course, some quotes in the play's librettos can "jail" certain productions in a given location, but if the concept is done with intelligence, for example replacing one iconographic church in Rome, for another one equally emblematic but in Malta —such as the Co-Cathedral—, then the emotional identification of the audience with the pictures shown on stage pays back.

Examples of what I mean are many, but I will only quote my own productions to avoid stepping on others toes. My 2010 *Samson et Dalila*, for example, happened within an oil extraction camp —one among many symbols of human greed—, where Samson brought

down the towers with the lesson implied. My 2015 *Bohème* in Sweden, was fully recreated in Stockholm locations where, at the time of the “French bohemians” movement, there was also a “Scandinavian bohemian” one, led by guys like Strindberg, Munch, etc. Hence, making Edvard Munch be Marcello and August Strindberg be Rodolfo, was a very logic and smooth adaptation. Recreating the Stockholm Christmas Market for the second act was amazingly effective and a reason of pride for the Swedish public. So much so that today, after 8 years and more than 200 revivals, the production is one of the most successful house favourites. These kinds of adaptations is what I believe modern opera should be about, including quality acting on stage. Aida riding a motorbike, Abigail dressed like a “queen bee”, or the Duke of Mantua arriving from the planet of apes, are not the answer to what the operatic show business needs in order to insert itself in modern times...

I hope that recreating Tosca’s first act at the Saint John Oratorium and the second and third acts at the Inquisitor’s Palace in Birgu, will be a matter of national pride for Malta, that same pride that represents for us to be part of this potentially historical step for Malta’s operatic life.

Costume designer’s notes

There are limits in theatre that are intrinsic to the place, and are also part of its charm. Such limitations stimulate imagination and creativity.

I wanted the costumes to speak for themselves, without the need of further explanations. For a character, a costume is their everyday outfit, hence they have to feel it as a second skin, such as we feel ours when we wear them.

Tosca, a woman who has become famous for her talent as a singer, enjoys, by force of her humble origins, to be the centre of attention. This sweet vanity of hers is expressed by the dresses she chooses to wear in public. In the first act, a simple day dress receives a colourful touch making her hardly go unnoticed. In the second act, her almost “over the top” concert dress tells us about her compulsive desire to be the centre of attention. This trait of insecurity, inherent to the character, is probably what makes her so disarmingly attractive to her lover, and certainly the weakness upon which Scarpia bases his attacks.

For this Tosca production I wanted to review the empire style but under a modern light. While remaining connected to the mentioned style, all costumes are differentiated by the addition of certain details that makes them original. For example, the oversized buttons that distinguish those connected to Scarpia. The use of colours was equally important in approaching the costumes’ design for this Tosca. While “blood tonalities” flow among the fabrics of Scarpia and his gang, Cavaradossi and Angelotti, morally connected by the bonds of their revolutionary fight, are dressed in earthy tones.