

red—was a bit of a stretch, especially as Young Company's *raison d'être* was always to showcase the ensemble rather than soloists. There was no sense of character development or narrative clarity, but when individuals were allowed to shine, as in the emcee role (aka 'Mysterious Woman') in three of the stories, *Red* took on a coherence and communicative force that served to highlight how amorphous the rest of the storytelling was and how weak the dramaturgy. The male characters were ciphers, the text's flashes of poetic inspiration all too rare.

As for the music, some unadorned lyricism would have been welcome. Instead we heard snatches of everything from American musical theatre, cabaret and Weill, to skiffle, disco, rap and postmodern choral intoning, handled with deft versatility by 15 teenage singers (most of them in multiple roles) and five professional instrumentalists. Characterization of the female lead, portrayed by the same singer in each story, was disappointingly passive, making it hard to establish who she was or what she represented: you could hardly blame the statuesque Maria Wotherspoon for wafting through the performance in a haze of Pre-Raphaelite postures, however faithfully she sang her lines. Whenever the less typecast figure of 'Mysterious Woman' took centre stage, *Red* mysteriously came to life, largely thanks to the suave stage presence and pleasing vocal projection of El Rose. Ilona Sofia Năstase created a distinctive personality out of each of her various roles, while James Kennedy headed up the male also-rans.

MacIver and Davidson had clearly tailored their work to the specific resources and talents at their disposal, and for that they deserve credit. The production, directed by Flora Emily Thomson, designed by Finlay McLay, lit by Laura Hawkins and conducted by Chris Gray, was one of Young Company's best, radiating ingenuity, accomplishment and creative spirit. Despite their efforts, I can't see *Red* being performed elsewhere. That's no tragedy—but the death of Scottish Opera Young Company definitely is.

ANDREW CLARK

The Butterfly House

Clonter Opera, Swettenham Heath, Cheshire, July 21

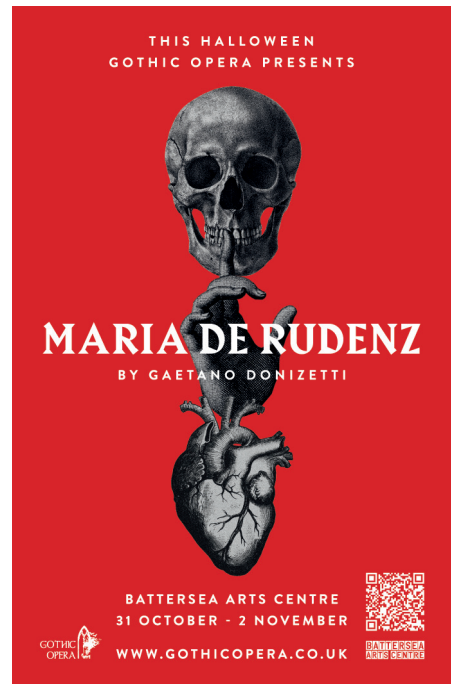
Clonter Opera celebrated its 50th anniversary by commemorating the centenary of Puccini's death. The origins of *The Butterfly House* lay in educational outreach that Clonter undertook in 2004 alongside its production of *Madama Butterfly*, which in turn had been inspired by visits to the composer's birthplace in Lucca and his home in Torre del Lago the previous year. The initial script, a mere 35 minutes, was commissioned from the baritone Geoffrey Dolton. He was sensibly brought back to mastermind this much enlarged version, with additional material from Alex Rugman and Amanda Harman, now described as an original two-act play with music. In essence it told the life of Puccini through 16 extracts from half of his dozen operas, the majority taken from *La Bohème* and *Tosca*. Critical to the success of the show was the linking narrative, which was intermittently delivered by Dolton in a black-and-white film produced by Steve Brookfield and shown via a back-screen: his clarity and charisma were exemplary. Dolton himself appeared on stage only towards the end as the older Puccini. The rest of the drama was left to the four singers, who between them also covered nine spoken roles of key personalities in Puccini's life.

The textured, predominantly green setting devised by Jessica Staton, who also designed the period costumes covering half a century of changes in fashion, was inspired

by the Torre del Lago house with its many windows. Its versatility allowed for quick changes of scene. Lighting by Steven Benson added further atmosphere. Dolton's production depended crucially on the ability of the singers to switch between their spoken parts and adopt the persona behind their various arias. It fell to the French soprano Emilie Cavallo to cover the roles of both Albina, Puccini's influential mother, and Elvira, his long-term lover and eventually wife, a source of creative tension fuelled by his extramarital liaisons. She was a better Mimi than Musetta, delivered a strong 'Vissi d'arte' and was especially effective in 'Un bel dì'. The Greek tenor Konstantinos Akritides played the younger Puccini and later the composer's son Antonio. He was most convincing in 'E lucevan le stelle' though he had not quite mastered the final bars of 'Nessun dorma'. But he certainly has potential.

Olivia Carrell's light soprano excelled in 'Mi chiamano Mimi' and charmed in 'O mio babbino caro'. She was also authoritative as Puccini's patron Sybil Seligman, the Anglo-American socialite. John Ieuan Jones's baritone was relatively underemployed but he made his mark as Scarpia, combining well with Cavallo. His primary role was as Puccini's staunchly supportive publisher Ricordi. All four singers projected their acting roles admirably. The evening opened with the start of *La Bohème* and finished with the humming chorus from *Madama Butterfly*, but could have benefited from more ensembles. It was strongly underpinned by Philip Sunderland, who conducted his own arrangements from a grand piano alongside Andrea Vogler's wide-ranging percussion. The evening was undeniably entertaining even if the logic of the constant switching between music and speech was not always easy to follow.

MARTIN DREYER



Madama Butterfly

Dorset Opera at the Coade Theatre, Bryanston, July 22

Over its 50 years of existence, an anniversary celebrated this year with its first newly commissioned work (Paul Carr's *Under the Greenwood Tree*, see pp. 1395-7), Dorset Opera Festival has expanded its programme to take in three performances of one opera and four of another, plus a gala concert—all within six days.

While the company has frequently offered unusual repertoire—Puccini has been represented by *Edgar* and both the Alfano and Berio completions of *Turandot*—as well as more standard titles, for some reason it had never staged *Madama Butterfly* until now.