

Tosca

Clonter Opera, Swettenham Heath, Cheshire, July 20

This was Clonter's first *Tosca* after 50 years in operation, a courageous choice for this intimate venue. But it worked. The update to an Italy under Giorgia Meloni and her Fratelli d'Italia was a significant element in Steve Elias's intriguing production. He had been involved in last year's *The Butterfly House*, in which extracts from *Tosca* had been included, as had a couple of the principals this time. It made sense for Clonter to underline the enduring relevance of a century-old work set two centuries ago, especially when its very livelihood depends on a single main work each year. It does not have the safety net enjoyed by a full-time company and must draw in clientele anew each year. So we had Scarpia billed as Head of National Security, Angelotti as a respected investigative journalist and Cavaradossi as a supporter of the Resistance. Obviating the need for grand settings, in Stewart J. Charlesworth's designs we had the basilica of Sant'Andrea della Valle clothed in scaffolding and white sheets, under restoration, hinting at a religion at least temporarily displaced. Scarpia's apartment was chillingly brutalist, minimally furnished in black and white, while the Castel Sant'Angelo was a coldly sterile detention centre. There was nothing cosy in this *Tosca*, more a sense of Mediterranean noir.

The energetic Portuguese soprano Isabel Garcia Araújo brought an intensity to *Tosca* that had its natural climax in a determined 'Vissi d'arte'. An explosion of smoke cloaked her demise. (Her alternate was Emilie Cavallo.) Araújo enjoyed a good blend musically and dramatically with the Cavaradossi of Konstantinos Akritides, whose basic sound was pleasing although 'E lucevan le stelle' lacked a final sheen. It was little surprise that he had to withdraw from a performance later in the run. Robin Hughes was an excellent Scarpia, though not the traditional out-and-out villain. His amiable veneer masked an oily blackness that reflected the society's underbelly. Fionn Ó hAlmhain, who spoke on video before Act 3 promising media exposure of the regime's misdemeanours, was the persuasive Angelotti, while Sebastian Stride coolly

moderated his genial Sacristan to become a severe Sciarrone. Luke Horner was the efficient Spoletta. Video linkage by Steve Brookfield allowed direct views of the torture chamber (alongside vivid cries). Philip Sunderland coaxed immense power and thunderous percussion from his dozen-strong Clonter Sinfonia, conducting from an electric organ. Small was definitely beautiful here and sometimes devastating. MARTIN DREYER

Isabel Garcia Araújo as Tosca and Robin Hughes as Scarpia at Clonter Opera

