

STAGE DESIGN

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Modish producer's opera spreads to Italy □ More of the same at the ENO □ Heartwarming enthusiasm for a new Theatre company □ Shakespeare doesn't always travel well between Stratford and London.

Producer's and designer's opera really does seem to be threatening to take a stranglehold on the form. Even open-air opera festivals in Italy, where up to now one has expected and found nothing more than honest to goodness spectacle allied to high volume performances of the music, seem to be joining the cult. For after a visit this summer to Puccini's own village of Torre del Lago, where his final opera, *Turandot* was being performed in an impromptu open-air auditorium beside the lake, just 200 metres from the villa that was his home, I moved on to Macerata and its Sferisterio.

Whereas Torre's *Turandot* had been blessedly simple in concept – minimal scenery, stunning costumes and masks, highly dramatic puppets, and the natural effect of the full moon rising over the lake during the Riddle Scene – Macerata's three productions were of a very different style. The Sferisterio was built in this pretty renaissance hill-town during the 19th century to house a ball-game, of the pelota type, called Sfera. There is thus a high back-wall, intended for the game, and also an extremely theatrical open-air auditorium, with a stage 100 metres wide, stalls and two semi-circular tiers of opera-house boxes, topped by a standing galleria. No wonder the current directors of the festival, Marcello Abbado and Giancarlo del Monaco, choose to regard the Sferisterio not as an arena, but as "a theatre without a roof", and it is therefore entirely right for them to attempt full scale operatic productions in it which cut no corners. But this does not mean that they have to plunge neck deep into modish producer's opera as happened with two of the three productions this year. Both Verdi's *Macbeth* and Bizet's *Carmen* were given the 'treatment', greatly to their, and their singers', disadvantage.

Macbeth, which was produced by distinguished Italian Shakespearean actor, Giorgio Albertazzi, concentrated on an apparent belief that evil stemmed from sex, and that the Witches were the mainspring of the work. They were thus omni-present as apparently modern floozies in white nighties and henna wigs, forever interfering and distracting. The designer, Attilio Colonello, who was responsible for all three productions, provided an unhelpfully fussy setting, with a stylised and mirror-fronted castle exterior which offered irritating reflections of the conductor, and enclosed a huge, pink, sprung mattress which clearly posed serious problems for *Macbeth* and his Lady. In the second half of the opera neither the Sleep-Walking scene, nor the advance

from Birnam Wood to Dunsinane were effectively achieved, and the staging throughout, as well as irritating by its gimmicks, lacked focus. I did not see the *Carmen* which was set in New York City in the 1950's, with José as a traffic cop and Escamillo a prize-fighter, but was told that the booing could be heard on the other side

of town. The Festival's *Tosca* at least had a conventional staging, but one of such visual ineptitude and with such an inability to use effectively the large stage area, that its dramatic impact was sadly diminished. Let us hope that next year's 25th Anniversary season at Macerata, offering *Aida*, *La Gioconda* and Gounod's *Faust* will demon-



Turandot at Torre del Lago in an impromptu open-air auditorium was a very different style of production to that seen in Macerata. Photo. Riccardo Bianchi.



ENO's *La Traviata*. Set model designed by Stefanos Lazaridis. Director David Pountney. Lighting by Chris Ellis. Photo. Clive Barda.