

British Theatre Guide

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Finding Butterfly

Giacomo Puccini

The Wedding Collective

Limehouse Town Hall

3–20 October 2012

Customs in opera houses have been changing rapidly—and the traditional park and bark role simply doesn't exist anymore. The Wedding Collective approaches opera from the dramatic perspective—originally their projects were spoken word. This is their third project since they moved into the world of opera, and their *Finding Butterfly* provides a perfect training ground for talented young stars to hone their acting skills.

Stephen Tiler (director) sets his *Butterfly* in Nagasaki as Puccini intended but from a re-imagined perspective. Pinkerton's son, aged 26, returns to the hospital where his mother, Cio Cio San (Butterfly), died in search of his past. Led to the abandoned hospital by an older Suzuki, he finds a box of documents revealing his mother's institutionalisation after her handsome American left.

The opening is gripping. *Finding Butterfly* is playing in the old Limehouse town hall, a building of seriously decaying grandeur. These flaky, whitewashed walls and high ceilings make the perfect backdrop to the dilapidated old hospital. Pinkerton Junior enters in a thunderstorm—with the rain lashing down outside this is truly atmospheric with rumbling noise and banging windows and doors. He is suddenly confronted with the ghosts of the past—and relives Butterfly's final years watching her spirit extinguish.

She is surrounded by a chorus of hospital patients—not professional opera singers but a mix of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. They provide an animated backdrop, each portraying a strong individual character that was never lost—as interesting to study as the main drama.

The show is a melting pot of language: initially Japanese and English dialogue before Italian and English singing. Subtitles are not used, instead summaries of the current action are projected onto the walls. The emotional spirit behind the lines is always conveyed, Italian used to convey present hospital things and English when reminiscing about her American lover. Unfortunately this is let down by a lack of diction from the majority of the cast.

After a strong opening, *Finding Butterfly* becomes fairly arduous, the large amounts of reminiscence lacking direction and hard to follow. Despite beautiful vocals, it isn't helped by a general lack of musical direction; at times passages of the score are waded through in a treacle-like fashion.

The second half more than makes up for this though as Butterfly relives her wedding and wedding night in a live fashion. The beds are upended in childlike way, making a den in which to playact her wedding.

The wedding night is a glorious mix of sublime singing and sensual sex scene done in the best of tastes. It demonstrates beautifully the technical supremacy of Can Xie (Butterfly) and Joe Morgan

(Pinkerton senior) as they cavort between the sheets without a note out of place. This raptuous love duet was a delight to experience so close to the action—no audience member is more than 10 feet away.

From here on we are on an emotional rollercoaster, heightened constantly by Can Xie's fantastic dramatic presence. She oozes energy from every pore, her collapse at the audience's feet eliciting gasps and true shock as they watch a breakdown up close and personal. Unable to tear our eyes away, we watch her tragic goodbye to her son and, when she finally dies, it is a ball of energy extinguished from the stage.

It is cast well, and unusually with appropriate ethnicity. This makes for interesting viewing and also presents two new gems to the English stage, Xiaoron Wang (Bonze) and Can Xie, both of whom I hope to see gracing larger houses very soon. They are rising stars worth watching.

This is a show with flaws, but truly deserves to be reworked for a second airing. The quality of the singing is let down by the piano playing, but throughout the dramatic ability of the cast pulls us through and this could easily go from being an interesting new take to an unmissable adaptation.

Reviewer: [Louise Lewis](#)