

British Theatre Guide

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Tosca

Puccini

English Touring Opera

Hackney Empire

4 March–9 June 2017

ETO starts its spring tour with *Tosca* at Hackney Empire. It starts promisingly: runaway prisoner bursts onto set beautifully designed by Florence de Mare. He searches frantically for a hiding place whilst ETO's outstanding orchestra breathes life into Puccini's score.

Unfortunately after this energetic start, Blanche McIntyre's directing loses its bite. *Tosca* is a red-blooded tale of passion and murder. This run is double-cast, and we saw Laura Mitchell in the title role. She emphasises the girlish, sweeter aspects of Tosca's character. Vocally she sails through the score making it seem easy, but I would like a little more depth to her tone.

Her Calvadarossi, Alexander James Edwards, matches Mitchell well; he also possesses a lighter lyric tenor. He produces a beautiful Italianate tone, but lacks the projection to fill the Hackney Empire at climactic moments. Both he and Mitchell produce beautiful solos in acts two and three, but their voices resonate as Puccini leads throughout the whole opera.

The real directing downfall comes with Craig Smith's Scarpia. Smith doesn't have the edge to his voice to create a truly terrifying villain, and is upstaged in nastiness by his henchman Aled Hall (Spoletta) who seems to really enjoy the violence. Smith needed to have a more intimidating physical presence which would help ratchet up the tension onstage, giving more impetus for Tosca's murderous actions.

Tosca unfolds upon Florence de Mare's beautiful tiered set, seemingly inspired by church grates and offering a multi-use space for the three acts. There were a few clumsy moments on the levels in the earlier acts, but this will iron out on tour. Visually, the space really focuses in act three, aided by Mark Howland's moody lighting, creating an intimidating destination for Calvadarossi's execution and Tosca's suicide.

Throughout, ETO's orchestra plays brilliantly under the baton of Michael Rosewell. It is in the pit that the fire and passion is eked out from Puccini's score. The smaller roles are well cast, with enjoyable performances from Timothy Connor (Angelotti) and Felix Kemp (Jailor) and Jan Capínski does a fine job stepping in at the last minute as the pious Sacristan.

This naturalistic production by ETO ticks all the right boxes and the audience responds well. Such a famous and popular opera comes with benefits for the box office but pitfalls for the production team; all reviewers know the opera well and have high expectations. For me, this is a well packaged, pleasant but underwhelming performance.

Reviewer: [Louise Lewis](#)