

British Theatre Guide

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Tosca

Giacomo Puccini

OperaUpClose

The King's Head Theatre

2 October–10 November 2012

OperaUpClose looks set for another smashing quirky updated opera—it has a company artistic director in charge of *Tosca*, a neat orchestral reduction and a cleverly transformed libretto. Yet this turned into an incredibly frustrating two hours sat in the King's Head.

Replacing lavish lakes and castles, director Adam Spreadbury-Maher moves the action to repressed East Berlin. The poverty and cruelty matches the stark pub theatre setting. The large cast has been reduced to four singers, with Steven East multiple playing multiple roles of Caretaker, Angelotti and Spoletta (in this version an amalgamation of three characters).

Tosca (Demelza Stafford) is a singing diva, very much in love with painter boyfriend Mario Cavaradossi (Sheridan Edward) who paints all day long at the lightbulb factory. The pair have an easy chemistry, Stafford twinkling as she teases and preens.

Mario helps escaped prisoner Angelotti, taking him back to his flat to hide down the well in his garden. Scarpia, an officer for the Ministry of State Security Prison, realises in flushing out Angelotti, he can claim Tosca as a reward.

The success of OperupClose's productions can usually be attributed to a fantastic cast that bring to life the director's mad new interpretations. The singers are usually a mix of young, raw talent, not yet ready for the huge stage of the Royal Opera House but a treat to hear nonetheless. This, combined with superb acting quality, is why we're hooked to see these operas imbued with relatable plots and gripping emotions just five feet from our noses. This time the casting is a huge let down, and in turn cripples this new production.

Sheridan Edward repeatedly failed to reach the higher notes, and by act two each attempt was matched by a desperate expression. Despite giving a charming performance, no love duet can be taken seriously when each soaring climax is a vocal letdown. It seems cruel that Edward is cast in a role he seemed incapable of performing, when he excelled in every other aspect.

This *Tosca* is full of groping onstage, plenty of smooching and sexual brutality. There are also a lot more laughs than in the original libretto. The comedy aspect really gets the audience warmed up and giggling, but Spreadbury-Maher doesn't know when to leave the gags alone to let the true tragic story unfold.

This means the production loses its charm, and the vulgarity feels added for a cheap laugh at the story's expense.

To ensure success of Spreadbury-Maher's libretto, Scarpia needs to be a hugely threatening presence onstage, emitting an undercurrent of violence. This then would make sense of the

direction. Instead Scarpia (Francis Church) is lacklustre, his devilish intent never really emphasised. As he interrogates Tosca for information, he shreds photos of Mario (the whirring of the shredder gets a giggle every time) but this is as far as we get with the implied threat. With no real pressure on Tosca, the ease with which he breaks her silence means the audience can't relate to Tosca's predicament. She seems uncharacteristically pathetic.

Stafford is the exception. Having previously played Minnie for OperaUpClose, she resembles the singers mentioned above. Wonderfully wringing out the emotion in this pared-down Puccini, she is incandescent entering the stage, a constant reminder why it's great to get up close and personal with the cast.

This is one of two casts and I would be intrigued to see whether Spreadbury-Maher's vision can be successfully realized with the other set of singers. Despite Stafford's best efforts, the combination of sketchy casting and constant glib humour meant this *Tosca* palls in comparison to the OperaUpClose [Bohème](#) gem.

Reviewer: [Louise Lewis](#)