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MUSIC

Boston Lyric Opera plans metamorphosis for 'Madama Butterfly'

By A.Z. Madonna

GLOBE STAFF

The first time Melanie Bacaling saw Giacomo Puccini's opera "Madama Butterfly," she was an undergraduate music student in Illinois. The music was gorgeous, she said — but that wasn't what stayed with her. "My initial reaction was like 'Wait, this is the piece that everybody loves?' I didn't quite understand it," said Bacaling, now a director, producer, and Boston Lyric Opera emerging artist alumnus. For her, the beautiful music didn't cancel out "the very problematic and minimizing stereotypes of Asian culture, and Asian women especially," she said in a phone interview.

Since its 1975 founding, BLO has staged "Madama Butterfly" four times, most recently in 2012. It was planning for a fifth in fall 2021, but in the wake of the pandemic and so much political and social change, the company is now pulling back the curtain with The Butterfly Process, an ongoing educational initiative to re-

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GETTY, ADOBE, ALLY RZESA/GLOBE STAFF

Eying a metamorphosis for 'Madama Butterfly'

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Imagine the way both companies and audiences engage with "Madama Butterfly," one of the world's most frequently performed operas.

Canceling "Butterfly" is not and never has been the goal, according to Butterfly Process consultant Phil Chan. "We're figuring out a way to keep this work alive for a multiracial audience."

Born in Hong Kong, Chan is the cofounder of Final Bow for Yellowface, an organization whose mission is to eliminate offensive stereotypes of Asian cultures that often show up in classic ballets such as "The Nutcracker" and "La Bayadere."

In his work with Final Bow for Yellowface, Chan has heard comments from people who are fearful that "Nutcracker" — or its popular "Chinese dance" — will be canceled. "It's like no, we still want a Chinese dance! We just

don't want the 'Chinaman' anymore," said Chan. "Like, put a cute dragon instead — or something that is respectful and actually from our culture."

So exactly what kind of changes does BLO have in mind for "Butterfly"? That's still being figured out, says Chan, but he has some ideas. "For me, I question the beauty in the tragedy that comes at the expense of the Asian woman," Chan wrote in a follow-up email. "I'd also love to see more 'Butterfly's' that highlight the American imperialism in the opera."

Chan also envisions systemic changes: "Can we use this opportunity to allow more Asian creatives to be hired," he continued, "for this AND other operas as well that don't take place in the fantasy Orient?"

For now, BLO has no existing plan to mount a staged production of "Butterfly," but the current road map for The Butterfly

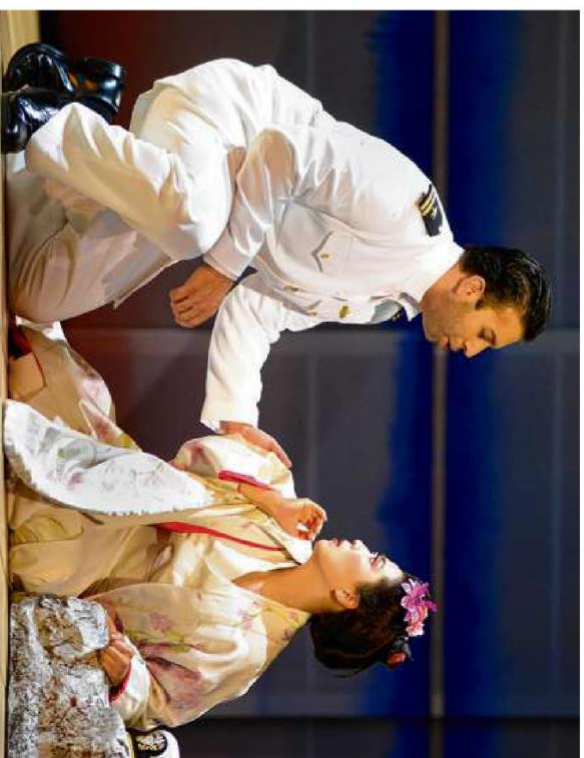
Process includes a six-part open discussion series covering such topics as the history of the opera itself, Orientalism, and casting, with the first public discussion, about the opera's history from its premiere to World War II, taking place on Dec. 14 over Zoom.

BLO also plans to create a free public educational resource on its website, intended for use by the general public as well as other companies. In addition, a live performance inspired by the process is in the works for February, featuring the "Butterfly" principal artists and directed by Bacalning.

Bacalning outlined her plans in broad strokes. "The vision is definitely amplifying Asian voices," she said. "The goal of the performance is to celebrate opera as a multicultural art form and to be actively inclusive, instead of the norm, which has been to be actively exclusive."

In September, Chan partnered with the newly formed Asian Opera Alliance to hold a closed discussion over Zoom.

"We talked about all sorts of different issues that came up with 'Butterfly' . . . how we all feel about it, what we take away, what hurts," said Asian Opera Alliance cofounder and mezzo-soprano Nina Yoshida Nelsen. Despite some critical takes, "I don't think there was a single person who said, 'let's never produce 'Butterfly' again,'" said Yoshida



ERIC ANTONIOU

Nelsen. "We all came to the conclusion that it was a piece that is important, and instead of canceling it, let's find ways to reimagine it and do the education that takes."

Originally premiered in 1904, "Butterfly" tells the tale of the doomed marriage between a pure-hearted Japanese teenager and the cadish American naval officer who gets her pregnant and abandons her. For some, it is a heartrending story of innocence betrayed. For others, like Bacalning, who describes herself as a "multicultural Filipino-American," the opera's depiction of Asian people drags the entire show down.

"Love me with a little love . . . as you would love a child," the title character, Cio-Cio-San, sings to her new husband in the famous love duet that ends Act I as the couple prepares for their wedding night. From the stage



EMMA SORENSEN

Boston Lyric Opera emerging artist alumnus Melanie Bacalning will direct a Butterfly Process project. Top: Dinyar Vania and Yunah Lee in BLO's 2012 "Madama Butterfly."

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There are always two sides to every story.
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of La Scala to “Miss Saigon” (an adaptation of the opera) and “Full Metal Jacket,” many have found fault with “Butterfly” for spreading an enduring stereotype of Asian women as submissive and dependent.

Boston Lyric Opera originally planned for “Butterfly” to open its 2020-21 season, which was canceled due to the pandemic. The opera was then pushed to the opening slot for the 2021-22 season, but when BLO announced its upcoming season this past spring, “Butterfly” wasn’t on the schedule. Acting general and artistic director Bradley Vernatter indicated in the season announcement that the company would instead undertake a yearlong process to “examine how we can engage more thoughtfully and responsibly with the music, dramaturgy, and modern cultural implications of ‘Butterfly.’”

“In considering our planned production of ‘Butterfly,’ it became clear that this is not the moment for BLO to present a theatricalized version of the opera,” Vernatter said in the season announcement.

Like many of its peer arts organizations, BLO issued a statement of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement shortly after the May 2020 murder of George Floyd. In the following months, the company established a diversity, equity, and inclusion council; staff participated in a 16-week learning initiative through the equity-focused nonprofit Arts Connect International; and BLO partnered with YW Boston’s diversity and inclusion consulting service, InclusionBoston, to create a process specific to the company.

Amid those projects, BLO “took a pause to reflect” on “Butterfly,” said Vernatter. “And since then, we’ve continued to ask these questions . . . Why would BLO be presenting this? Why did we choose this originally? And, what is it that we have to say with this piece right now?”

According to FBI data, anti-Asian hate crimes increased 73 percent in 2020. A 2021 study in the American Journal of Public Health linked former president Donald Trump’s repeated reference to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” to a rise in anti-Asian sentiments on Twitter.

Chan, who lives on Long Island, says he recently saw a man mockingly scream “stop Asian hate” at a group of Asian women and chase them off a commuter train, and he was personally harassed and told to “go back” to

China by a man in an elevator. “I’m literally standing there with my cat carrier,” he said.

Vernatter was familiar with Chan’s work through Final Bow for Yellowface, and BLO contracted Chan to guide the yearlong Butterfly Process project. “There’s a sense that we need to do better. We can’t just post a black square on Instagram and do things the way we always did,” Chan said, referring to the performative activism he saw on social media after the murder of George Floyd.



ELI SCHMIDT

‘We’re figuring out a way to keep this work alive for a multiracial audience.’

PHIL CHAN, *Final Bow for Yellowface* cofounder and *Butterfly Process* consultant

He’s eager to work with BLO, he said, because “they actually get it.”

Chan noted that some other organizations he’s worked with have been “terrified” when he comes in to speak to artists and leadership. He has worked with ballet companies that have requested he not talk to their dancers, he said, because “a lot of [the dancers] are still really young, and they’re not really prepared to talk about race,” he paraphrased. “And it’s like, well, as a Chinese person in America, at what age do you think I learned about race?”

That wasn’t the reception he has received at BLO, where staff, artists, and board members have approached him to express not

fear but excitement, he said.

Bacaling, who has been involved in several of BLO’s diversity and inclusion initiatives, said she’s been heartened by the company’s commitment to the process. “It was really encouraging to see the actual action being taken, and the conversations actually happening to learn — and many of them very difficult conversations, especially as a woman of color being involved,” she said.

The intent is not for The Butterfly Process to begin and end with “Butterfly,” said Vernatter, but to create a framework for BLO and other opera companies to apply to historical operas like “Butterfly,” which include elements that could alienate a diverse, modern audience. “We’re learning new ways to engage with our artists, our community, and internally,” he said. “We intend for it to have a greater impact beyond this piece.”

For Bacaling and Yoshida Nelsen, those “new ways” have already made an impact. “I’m not sure I have ever worked with a company that has been more open to learning, growing, and creating positive lasting change than Boston Lyric Opera,” said Yoshida Nelsen, a Japanese-American mezzo-soprano who sang the role of Mamma Lucia in BLO’s “Cavalleria rusticana” this fall. She was scheduled to sing the role of the loyal maid Suzuki in the original “Butterfly” cast.

According to Yoshida Nelsen, the next important step for opera is making sure nonwhite singers don’t get pigeonholed into roles based on their races. “I love Puccini, I love the music,” she said, but she takes issue with “the fact that I have been tokenized into Suzuki.”

A friend once asked Yoshida Nelsen how many roles she sang in a given season that weren’t a specifically Asian character. Nelsen looked over her performance history and found only three in the 10 years from 2009 to 2019, compared with “over 150 performances as Suzuki throughout her career.”

“When I’m really sitting down and being honest with myself, it hurts me that I’m cast based on the way I look,” said Yoshida Nelsen. “So it’s been an interesting journey. Yes, I love the opera — but I’m also really excited to sing things other than Suzuki.”

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