

MEDIA RELEASE – SYDNEY SUMMER SEASON 2015

Passion and heartbreak in John Bell's *Tosca*

Directed by John Bell



One of Australia's most distinguished actors and directors, **John Bell**, Artistic Director of Bell Shakespeare, has taken on one of the great opera classics to high acclaim. Bell's 20th century retelling of Puccini's *Tosca* received overwhelming praise at its Sydney premiere in 2013. Now it's returning to **Sydney Opera House from 13 January to 17 March, 2015**.

"John Bell's *Tosca* is a triumph for Opera Australia." *The Daily Telegraph*, 2013

Tosca demands three outstanding singers, and for this Sydney season, Opera Australia presents one of the most exciting singers of her generation, South African soprano **Amanda Echalaz**, making her Australian debut. She will be joined by Italian tenor **Riccardo Massi**, who wowed Sydney audiences in 2013 with his powerful performance in *The Force of Destiny*; and Italian baritone **Claudio Sgura** as Scarpia, a role he performed in Melbourne in 2014 to high acclaim, with *The Age* called him "suavely menacing" and the *Daily Review* as "deliciously diabolical". To conduct, Opera Australia is excited to welcome young Italian maestro **Andrea Battistoni**, who at 27 years of age, makes his company debut.

Bell keeps the opera's original setting in Rome, but moves the date from 1800 to 1943. Instead of Napoleon's army occupying the city, it is the Nazis. The transition works incredibly well, bringing the story forward into an era that resonates with today's audiences.

Tosca is the first mainstage production John Bell has directed for Opera Australia (he directed *Madama Butterfly* that toured regionally). "*Tosca* is not a melodrama," says Bell. "It is a heart-wrenching story of oppression, resistance and a woman blackmailed to save the life of a loved one. The era I have chosen is a time close enough for its history and images to stir our memory and our emotions. *Tosca* is a dark story, but one alleviated by Puccini's glorious music, which celebrates the heroism of those who choose death over loss of liberty."

"Bell's is an unforgettable production: moving and confronting yet never so gruelling as to overwhelm Puccini's romantic masterpiece." *The Herald Sun*, 2014

The curtain rises on a breathtaking recreation of the Sant'Andrea della Valle by award-winning set designer **Michael Scott-Mitchell**. It is in this magnificent basilica church that the three main protagonists are introduced – an artist who offers to hide his fugitive friend; a woman who has dedicated her life to art; and a man who is determined to have that same woman at whatever the cost. Scott-Mitchell's designs propel the story, from the sheer magnificence of the church, to the austerity of Scarpia's quarters, and finally to the stark oppression of the prison. Bell's vision and Scott-Mitchell's designs are complemented by the work of costume designer **Teresa Negroponte**, including a stunning evening gown for Tosca.

"A darkly thrilling evening of total theatre." *The Sun-Herald*, 2013

About the opera

Puccini was a true theatre composer, using every means available to move the emotions of his audience. In *Tosca*, Puccini's aim was for dramatic truth, using the sweep and flow of the music to propel the riveting drama of love, jealousy and sacrifice with astonishing vigour and force.

Puccini based the story on Frenchman Victorien Sardou's 1887 play, *La Tosca*, written specifically for Sarah Bernhardt. At the time of the 1900 première performance in Teatro Costanzi in Rome, Puccini was well-established in his career, with the opening night attracting considerable attention including dignitaries and royalty. The opera had an impressive first season, quickly followed by premières at La Scala in Milan, Royal Opera House in London, Metropolitan Opera in New York and Opéra-Comique in Paris. Within a few years, *Tosca* was playing in opera houses around the world.

Tosca takes place over just two days, with its heartbreaking story of love and death unravelling at startling speed. It is centred on an opera singer, Floria Tosca, forced to make a terrible sacrifice to save her lover, who has been imprisoned and tortured for harbouring an escaped political prisoner. The narrative is driven by the actions of Scarpia, the Chief of Police, a man who knows no boundaries in his determination to claim Tosca for his own.

About the artists

John Bell is one of Australia's most acclaimed theatre personalities. In a career of acting and directing, he has been instrumental in shaping the Australian theatre industry as we know it. In 1990 he founded Bell Shakespeare, one of Australia's most prominent arts companies.

Hailed as one of the most exciting singers of her generation, South African soprano **Amanda Echalaz** has appeared at all the world's major opera houses including the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Santa Fe Opera, Berlin Staatsoper and Polish National Opera. Admired for her rich, powerful voice and exceptional dramatic abilities she has been described as the "leading Tosca of her generation".

Italian baritone **Claudio Sgura** hasn't looked back since winning the 2005 International Opera Competition of Viterbo, Italy. He has had a string of performances throughout Europe from La Scala to Royal Opera House Covent Garden. His most recent performance of Iago in *Otello* was at La Coruna Festival in Spain. He made a highly acclaimed debut with Opera Australia in *Otello* (2014) followed by *Tosca* (Melbourne in 2014).

Since his operatic debut in 2009, Italian tenor **Riccardo Massi** is rapidly earning international recognition as an exciting spinto tenor, and has performed at the likes of Teatro alla Scala in Milan, Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, Teatro Giuseppe Verdi in Trieste, Berlin State Opera and Bavarian State Opera in Munich. A specialist in handling ancient and medieval weapons, he financed his musical studies working as a stuntman in films including Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*, ABC's *Empire*, and in HBO's *Rome*. He made his Australian debut in *The Force of Destiny* (2013).

A line-up of popular Opera Australia singers complete the cast including **Jacqueline Mabardi, Diego Torre, Shane Lawrencev, David Parkin, Graeme Macfarlane, Benjamin Rasheed, Adrian Tamburini** and **Tom Hamilton**.

GOVERNMENT PARTNERS



PRINCIPAL PARTNER

Creatives

Conductor **Andrea Battistoni** (until 6 Feb)
Nicholas Milton (7 Feb - 6 Mar)
Brian Castles-Onion

Director **John Bell** by arrangement
 with Bell Shakespeare

Rehearsal Director **Roger Press**

Set Designer **Michael Scott-Mitchell**

Costume Designer **Teresa Negroponte**

Lighting Designer **Nick Schlieper**

Choreographer **Nigel Paulton**

Cast

Tosca **Amanda Echalaz** (until 21 Feb)
Jacqueline Marbardi

Cavaradossi **Riccardo Massi** (until 6 Feb)
Diego Torre

Scarpia **Claudio Sgura** (until 6 Feb)
Shane Lawrencev

Angelotti **David Parkin**

Sacristan **Luke Gabbedy**

Spoletta **Benjamin Rasheed**

Sciarrone **Adrian Tamburini**

Gaoler **Tom Hamilton**

With **Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra,**
Opera Australia Chorus and
Opera Australia Children's Chorus

Performance information

Evenings at 7.30pm

January 13, 17, 21, 29, 31
 February 4, 6, 11, 13, 18, 26, 28
 March 6, 11, 14, 17

Saturday matinees at 1pm

January 24, February 17

Saturday matinee at 12.30pm

February 21

Running time

Approx 3hrs with two intervals

Performed in Italian with English surtitles

Bookings

Adult tickets from \$69 (fees may apply)

Group and concession prices available for most performances.

Student Rush available for most performances:
 \$50 (fees may apply)

Opera Australia Box Office

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Image: Alexia Voulgaridou as Tosca and Yonghoon Lee as Cavaradossi in *Tosca* (Sydney 2013)

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