



## eye4:arts

### OPERA IN THE PARK

**Madama Butterfly takes place on Friday, February 22, at the Supreme Court Gardens. Admission is free.**

Opera can be an intimidating medium for the uninitiated, but the City of Perth's annual Opera in the Park, a free event run as part of the Perth International Arts Festival, aims to make it a little more accessible.

For this year's Opera in the Park, the West Australian Opera will perform Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* – a piece so popular it tops Opera America's list of the most performed operas in North America – in the Supreme Court Gardens on Friday, February 22.

*Madama Butterfly* is set in 1904 in Japan and follows the story of Cio-Cio-San, or Butterfly, a geisha who marries an American sailor named Lieutenant Pinkerton.

Butterfly is rejected by her own people as a result of the marriage and, when Pinkerton later abandons her, is left isolated.

Despite this, Butterfly never loses faith that Pinkerton will return and continues to raise the child she has borne him.

The opera ends in tragedy, with Pinkerton returning to Japan with his new, American wife, leading Butterfly to commit suicide.

Cast-member James Clayton – who plays Butterfly's uncle the bonze, a monk who condemns her for marrying an outsider – agrees that Opera in the Park is an ideal introduction for those curious about the art form.

"It's like a soft intro for people to come, they can sit down with their wine, sit down on the grass, they can talk, they can do whatever they like," he says.

"We usually get around about ten thousand people, apparently; it's usually a very big event."

James stumbled across opera entirely by chance, auditioning for the WA Opera chorus after meeting some chorus members while performing in an amateur production of the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

"The first show I did was *La Boheme* and that was five years ago," he says.

"I was in the chorus for three years and then I was in the young artists program for the last two years, during which time I started to do a lot more solo work and now I'm at the point where I only do principal roles, I don't sing in the chorus at all."

While James admits to having mocked opera when he was growing up, he says he has now fallen firmly in love with the tradition and technique involved with the art form.

"It fascinates me because it's an acoustic art form, there's no amplification and microphones involved and the technique of having to sing in a hall and reach the back of the hall without anything electronic, that's something that would have been the same two hundred years ago as now, so the tradition of it has remained the same," he says.

"I wasn't really an opera buff before I joined the company and I've slowly fallen in love with it."

It's not surprising that the training associated with the performance of opera is extensive and James admits that the last couple of years have been "very intense".

Such training involves not only weekly lessons in technique, which James describes as "learning how to get the best possible sound without hurting myself...so that I could basically do it until I'm 70 without losing my voice," but also coaching sessions once or twice a week.

"That's learning about what conductors would do in certain pieces, what speed things go because not everything's written into the score, how to pronounce languages and all of that kind of stuff," James explains.

"And then there's everything else in between, like acting, and within the acting there's period movement, learning how people would have moved two hundred years ago, how they would have approached a prince, how they would bow or curtsy, learning about class structure, so when you're in a room you know this person is above you or below you so you would behave in that way to them. It's very detailed."

While in the past opera performers generally employed a style of acting that James describes as "stand and deliver" – "you would stand, you would sing your aria or sing your bit, then walk over to the next spot where you need to stand" – naturalistic acting has become increasingly important in order to appeal to modern audiences.

"I think the acting side of opera has really come up dramatically in the last thirty or forty years because it has had to really to keep up with musical theatre," James says.

"People started to move away from opera because it started to become a boring art form and with musical theatre it was kind of like, 'Oh, this is kind of like opera, only more exciting.'"

"It's about finding a balance between what the art form is about, which is beautiful sound and beautiful voice production, but also trying to engage the audience, because audiences are smarter now."



Indeed, appealing to these "smarter" audiences is central to an event such as Opera in the Park and James says that efforts such as these to attract a younger, more diverse crowd are definitely paying off.

"Nowadays audiences seem to be a lot more broadminded, I've noticed in recent times a lot more young people coming to the opera; there are lots of young people I've met at functions who absolutely adore the art form," he says.

"I think it would be a tough job to try to market an art form that's so old and frankly has quite a lot of different stigmas attached to it...but I think the marketing department at the company is doing a really good job because we've been selling out."

James says that people are frequently pleasantly surprised upon attending the opera for the first time and often end up coming back for more.

"There are people in my life who have come to see me once because I was in it or I gave them a free ticket and now they're regulars and they come all the time because they love it," he says.

Certainly James, along with the rest of the company, is hoping that their art form will win some new fans at Opera in the Park.

"From that ten thousand people who come, if a hundred of them decide, 'We should go and see the next opera,' that's a hundred people we're introduced to the art form that perhaps might not have been interested," he says.

"The generations that were into opera in the past, they're not going to be around forever, so we really need to nurture that [new generation of opera fans] to make sure there's a new generation to take over."

**GEMMA NISBET**

