



Madama Butterfly 2017 (Baus)

“This is not Madama Butterfly”: Hotel Pro Forma’s triple transformation of Puccini’s Madama Butterfly

By Lars Qvortrup

In 1928-29 the Belgian artist René Magritte painted his iconic painting of a pipe with the title: *The Treachery of Images*. Under a picture of a pipe he wrote: “Ceci n’est pas une pipe”. (This is not a pipe). Images are not things, they are signs of things.

Eleven years earlier, in 1917, the French artist Marcel Duchamp submitted his artwork *Fountain* for the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, the first annual exhibition by the Society to be staged at The Grand Central Palace in New York. The piece was a porcelain urinal. It was signed “R. Mutt”, because it had been bought from the J. L. Mott Iron Works in New York, and it was titled *Fountain*. Again, the main message was that a thing is not what it seems to be. A urinal is only a urinal in its conventional context. In another setting it transforms itself into a piece of art. Actually, Duchamp’s idea was much more radical than Magritte’s. While Magritte was playing on the relationship between sign and reality, Duchamp put a question mark against the meaning of things as things. The meaning or the significance of a thing depends on its context, i.e. on the position and the context of the observer. With this message Duchamp and Magritte initiated the philosophy of postmodernism: that “reality” depends on the observer, who herself is part of the reality that is being observed.

There is a direct line from these early postmodern works to Hotel Pro Forma’s staging of *Madama Butterfly* at La Monnaie, Brussels in February 2017. Here, the basic message is that the main figure, Cio-Cio-san, is not Cio-Cio-san. “Ceci n’est pas Cio-Cio-san” (This is not Cio-Cio-san). In this way, Hotel Pro Forma puts itself into opposition to the normal and dominant opera staging practises. Currently, there seem to be two popular possibilities. One is to stage an opera in a naturalistic way, i.e. in *agreement* with the original score. A second possibility is to stage an opera in *opposition* to the original score. Wagner’s “Der Ring des Nibelungen” is staged as if it is taking place in Nazi Germany. Mozart’s *Così fan tutte* as if it were a 21st century swingers club, etc. Maybe this is not naturalistic in the classical sense, but it is just transformed naturalism or hyper-naturalism. Still, the intention is that the audience should believe in what they see, but at the same time also adopt a critical position to the original score. The audience should believe not Wagner, but the stage director.

This is not what Hotel Pro Forma does. The main approach, and the radical innovation of existing staging practises, is that the main figure, Cio-Cio-san, is represented by a full size puppet led by three puppeteers, dressed in black.

As a result the well-known story is transformed into a new story. The well-known story, the story about colonialism and post-colonialism, as well as Puccini’s opera in itself, has almost become a cliché, and what do you as a stage director do with clichés? You criticize

the story from inside, is the normal answer. But that is not what happens here. The cliché is not criticized or destroyed; it is transformed from being a boring cliché into becoming a beautiful cliché, just as if you took a piece of well-known furniture and gave it new life.

The cliché goes as follows: The story is about the young Japanese geisha, Cio-Cio-san, with the nickname Butterfly, who after their first meeting accepts a pro forma marriage with the American naval officer, Pinkerton. Pinkerton arranges a wedding ceremony with Cio-Cio-san and spends a love night together with her. When leaving the next day, he promises to come back by the following spring. However, three years pass, and Butterfly keeps waiting, together with her maid Suzuki and her child, the fruit of her night with him. Finally, Pinkerton returns, but now accompanied by his American wife, Kate, in order to take what he sees as his son with him back to America. When Butterfly realizes that she will never become his wife, she kills herself.

Indeed, this is a cliché, although a very beautiful cliché. But what do you do with clichés, whether they are pipes, urinals, or well-known stories about evil men versus heroic women, innocent Eastern tradition versus American imperialism? You transform the cliché, and suddenly the urinal reappears as a beautiful fountain – and Madama Butterfly as one of the most beautiful operas in the world.

Replacing the “real” Cio-Cio-san by a puppet leads into a triple transformation:

1.

The young Japanese geisha, Cio-Cio-san, is not a tragic and heroic Japanese woman who is betrayed by an evil American officer, Pinkerton, as a representative of American imperialism. What we see is an *image* or a *representation* of a young, heroic Japanese woman being betrayed by a uniformed American male person. From the very beginning the audience understands that it is looking at a cliché from a position outside the cliché. We – and Puccini – are not for or against American imperialism, but Puccini is putting music to a cliché that is neither true nor untrue, but beautiful as a cliché. We, the audience, are transformed into a new and unknown observer position, from which we can enjoy the beauty of the musical score. And this is exactly what happens: the music flows in its beauty as a long, sad, and enjoyable melody accompanied by the most beautiful staging ever seen. This first transformation creates a new story.

2.

But neither is this an American or Italian, i.e. self-critical, picture of a young and heroic Japanese woman who is being betrayed by Captain Pinkerton. This is not yet another piece of post-colonialism. For the puppet is created in accordance with the Japanese tradition of Bunraku puppet theater. Bunraku is a form of traditional Japanese puppet theatre, founded in Osaka in the beginning of the 17th century. Three kinds of performers take part in a Bunraku performance: the “Ningyōtsukai” or “Ningyōzukai”, i.e. the puppeteers, the “Tayū”, the chanters, and “shamisen”, the musicians. This is exactly what we see in Hotel Pro Forma’s staging of *Madama Butterfly*. We have three puppeteers, leading the full-size marble-white puppet of Cio-Cio-san, a singer at the front of the stage, singing Cio-Cio-san’s score, and the opera orchestra. Consequently, this is not a Western, self-critical setting, but a picture of a young and heroic Japanese woman displayed on traditional,

Japanese cultural-historical premises. What does this imply? It implies that the basic story is radically changed. We do not see the story of Cio-Cio-san versus Pinkerton, innocence versus violence. Instead we see a story of Cio-Cio-san told by herself. While Cio-Cio-san as the puppet is marble-white, beautiful and innocent, Cio-Cio-san as the opera singer is an old, gray-haired woman. Gradually, we understand that what we are seeing is Cio-Cio-san told by herself, or it is the old ghost of Cio-Cio-san telling and retelling the story of her own life with a focus on the unseen in the opera: the untold three years of waiting from when she was left alone by Pinkerton till they meet again and she kills herself. Consequently, in this staging the opera is divided into two acts instead of three as in the very first version from Puccini. The first act includes the meeting, the wedding, the love night, and Pinkerton's departure – and then starts the waiting time represented by a silent scene that emphasizes that the opera and the slowly flowing music are about waiting. This silent scene is followed by the famous aria “Un, bel di vedremo”. After the intermission, which then becomes part of the waiting time, the second act starts by repeating the end of the same aria, as if Butterfly has been singing it for the three years that have passed from Act One to Act Two. Thus, this second transformation creates a new thematic focus.

3.

Finally, however, it is not only Cio-Cio-san and the point of view of the story that are transformed into new observer positions. Also the whole opera is being transformed. This gives a double meaning to the title “Ceci n'est pas Madama Butterfly”. The main figure is not Madama Butterfly, but a puppet. And the opera “Madama Butterfly” is not the opera, that we know so well, but a transformation of Puccini's well-known opera. Thus, just as René Magritte called his iconic painting of a pipe *The Treachery of Images*, this staging might be called “The Treachery of Madama Butterfly”. It tells the story of the iconic opera that for more than a hundred years has betrayed us by becoming an opera cliché. Now we have to listen to and to see this iconic opera as a new oeuvre. All dust is blown away, and what appears on the stage is a new work of art: an opera about the beauty and endlessness of waiting for something that will never appear. Thus, this third transformation creates a new opera.

By transforming *Madama Butterfly* in this way, Kirsten Dehlholm and Hotel Pro Forma have done the same to Puccini's iconic opera as Marcel Duchamp did exactly one hundred years ago to an uninteresting and ugly urinal: he transformed it into a fountain, a symbol of beauty. With her triple-transformation Kirsten Dehlholm transforms a cliché into a piece of art about the beauty of endless waiting time.

Thanks to Kirsten Dehlholm's notes on the staging: “Madama Butterfly as a ghost story”