Tosca

Florida Grand Opera
FORT LAUDERDALE

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FLORIDA GRAND OPERA'S *Tosca* (seen April 14at Broward Center) might well have been retitled "Cavaradossi." Mexican-born tenor Arturo Chacón-Cruz, who happens to be a South Florida resident, emerged as the central figure for his splendiferous vocalism, personal charisma and ability to communicate the emotional content of his lines with direct and immediate impact.

Chacón-Cruz, who will be forty-six this year, is not a household name, but his professional biography includes more than twenty roles in major opera houses of Europe and regional companies in the United States. His voice has a baritonal quality in the middle, which blossoms into ringing bright high notes that he seems to be able to sustain forever. After a stirring rendition of "Recondita armonia," he gave the audience a taste of his chops with the high note on "La vita mi costasse"; In Act II, he literally stopped the show after a long hold on each of the three vowels of "Vittoria"; and his heartrending rendition of "E lucevan le stelle" had to be encored—something I've never seen before in seven decades of *Tosca*-going. It was not mere showing off, however: this artist acts with credibility and says something, tells a story, in every note and phrase.

Conductor Gregory Buchalter seemed to acknowledge the tenor's dominance by allowing him every liberty throughout the evening—exaggerated rubatos, pauses for emphasis, high notes prolonged at his pleasure—and it was all justified. The encore, which had not been given in Miami, was a special treat for those who made the effort to get to the performance through unexpected and unprecedented floodwaters. Fort Lauderdale had been inundated with a record twenty-six inches of rain—and access to the downtown area was difficult and often dangerous. For this reason, some scrappiness in the orchestral playing, along with sour notes from the horns at the start of Act III, should be forgiven. Everyone was under duress, on both sides of the proscenium. In some respects, this added a certain electricity to the event.

The pressures of the occasion might also explain a lack of glamour and magnetism from the main protagonist. Toni Marie Palmertree sang Tosca's music adequately, although her clear, solid high notes were more than that. Her middle register projected poorly, and her phrasing lacked variety of nuance. Tosca's part in the Act I love duet was pallid. "Vissi d'arte" was neatly vocalized but impersonal. Her confrontations with Scarpia were bland until the actual murder, which she committed with vigor and relish. In this scene and elsewhere, director Jeffrey Marc Buchman provided some compelling and unexpected touches, including a startling backward fall at the end, which the diva accomplished with admirable dexterity.

Todd Thomas portrayed Scarpia in the grand manner, exuding venom in the edgy timbre of his voluminous sound, as well as the nuances of the villain's asides to his underlings. His aria-like solos in Act II were among the evening's highlights, uncommon for passages with less melodic appeal than the opera's better-known extracts.

Neil Nelson made the Sacristan a significant cameo, singing the choppy lines as if they were pure bel canto, while balancing the character's buffo side with the underlying menace. In the dual assignments of the hunted Angelotti (Act I) and the sympathetic jailer (Act III), the sturdy bass-baritone voice and acute stage instincts of Phillip Lopez marked this FGO Studio Artist as a performer to watch for on the operatic horizon. —*Robert Croan*

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