

CLOSE-UP ON:***Madama Butterfly***

By Kathleen Watt

IT IS AS TYPICAL as it is unlikely that the name of playwright David Belasco should be inexorably linked with the fragile child-geisha of Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. Belasco had been scouting out a star vehicle to fill a short bill when he chanced upon a poignant novella about colliding cultures authored by an American scholar of Japanese culture, John Luther Long, and fashioned from it the play that would evolve into one of the treasures of the operatic repertoire.

Born in San Francisco in 1853, in the rough-and-tumble aftermath of the California Gold Rush, Belasco learned his stagecraft as a child actor traipsing through frontier settlements and mining camps. But his childhood is obscured in a dense fog of his own invention—according to his own accounts, he was a monastic communicant at the feet of a certain Father Maguire (of whom there is no historical record), and also a circus bareback rider called “Davido, the Boy Wonder,” touring South America and surviving mysterious fevers fatal to all but himself. This was shameless self-promotion—and it was devoured by a public hungry for sensation. By 1883—the year that P. T. Barnum walked his prized elephant “Jumbo” across the newly completed Brooklyn Bridge, and Buffalo Bill Cody launched his Wild West Show on two continents—29-year-old David Belasco was signed to stage direct at New York’s Madison Square Theater. In an age of wonders and hucksterism, Belasco was the essence of both—iconoclastic, opportunistic, ingenious.

Belasco specialized in stage lighting “to produce psychological and emotional effects,” pioneering many basic techniques of the modern stage. The baby spotlight; refracted, overhead and side-lighting; revolving transparent colored “gels” to create color and mood—all were elements of the “Belasco style,” as were the meticulously detailed sets that virtually defined “naturalism” in American theater. Belasco would stage an entire flock of real sheep, for example, as many as eight galloping horses, or a

tantalizingly aromatic restaurant that served piping hot pancakes. He toured his extravagant productions and became a celebrity, renowned nationwide as “The Great Man,” “The Wizard,” and “The Master.” And Belasco continued to invent Belasco, adopting his signature clerical collar (“homage” to the fictitious Father Maquire) and a studied affect of humble virtue by carefully disarranging his shock of white hair and gazing raptly skyward. A cunning manipulator of human nature, Belasco especially enjoyed his reputation as star-maker, paternally cajoling or ruthlessly bullying as necessary. At his best, he drew brilliant performances from his players, and helpless tears of emotion and amazement from riveted audiences.

But there were rumors of his Svengalian cruelties and flamboyant debaucheries. His theater family frequently endured Belasco’s puerile vulgarities and calculated tempests. The Belasco luster was further tarnished by accusations of plagiarism, perjury, extortion, forgery, and pornography—all of which left Belasco bitter and weary, but never so much as did the sting of becoming obsolete.

During his long career (he directed until his death in 1931), Belasco owned three state-of-the-art theaters. He helped break the New York Theater Syndicate. The French Legion of Honor conferred upon him the order of Chevalier. He won tributes worldwide from theater professionals, thespians, heads of state. He saw American theater develop from footlighted bordello melodrama to sensational spectacle—Belasco’s specialty—and beyond. But as dramatic literature advanced with Ibsen, Chekhov, O’Neill, and Shaw, Belasco aligned himself with a fast-fading past. He continued to mount mawkish, censurable plays as showcases for the now “hideous realism” of his special effects. And he continued to pack the theatres. Indeed, Belasco spoke for much of his loyal audience when he pronounced the newer theatrical styles “the diseased output of diseased minds.”

In 1900, when Belasco first read John Luther Long’s *Madame Butterfly* serialized in a popular magazine, he recognized instinctively its power to rend hearts, and in spite of himself, midwived the birth of a masterpiece. Belasco considered his lighting design for *Madame Butterfly* his “most successful effort in appealing to the imaginations of

those who have sat before my stage...” And it must have been, for when Puccini saw Belasco’s London production, he fell under the Belasco spell exactly, even though he understood not a word of the English text. We may imagine in Puccini’s tender “Humming Chorus”, which accom-panies Cio-Cio San’s nocturnal vigil, something of the authentic Belasco Style, at its best.

—Kathleen Watt writes frequently on the performing arts.