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Poster of Sarah Bernhardt by Paul Berthon, 1901



Sardou and Sardoodledom, Puccini and *Tosca*

The Progression of *Tosca* from the Stage to Opera

After a performance in November 1887 of Victorien Sardou's play *La Tosca* starring the "divine" Sarah Bernhardt (as her fans called her), Pierre Louÿs wrote of her accomplishments: "Sarah is grace, youth, divinity! I am beside myself. My god, what a woman!... when shall I see you again, my Sarah? I weep, I tremble, I grow mad! Sarah, I love you!" Clement Scott, another critic, observed, "Bernhardt, knife in hand over the dying Scarpia, is the nearest thing to great tragedy ever seen in modern times." Such were the reactions generated by the combination of Sardou's text and Bernhardt's acting. The public came in droves to more than two hundred performances at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin from December 1887 until June 1888. In the following year Bernhardt toured with *La Tosca* through Italy, performing in Milan on February 14, 1889; in the audience sat Giacomo Puccini.

Nearly eleven years later, Puccini's own *Tosca* received its very successful premiere on January 14, 1900 in Rome at the Teatro Costanzi. In the beginning, Puccini had attended not only the performance in Milan, but also another, several days later in Turin. He instinctively recognized the dramatic, musical, and even more importantly, the great theatrical potential for an opera. The path to the premiere, however, would be long and arduous.

An author of over seventy-five plays and librettos, Victorien Sardou (1831–1908) created costumed spectacles that emphasized the local color of his works' settings and filled the plot with twists, reversals, and story turns: in short, the "well-made" play—*la pièce bien faite*—pioneered by the prolific playwright Eugène Scribe, whose works for the theater and opera fill more than seventy-five volumes. During Sardou's lifetime, his plays were extremely popular with the Parisian public, particularly when starring the divine Sarah. Sardou's plays with Bernhardt proved a guaranteed box office draw not only in Paris, but also during her fre-

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quent appearances in cities and small towns throughout Europe and the United States. On her tours, Bernhardt performed mostly in French. The non-French speaking public was able, for the most part, to understand the story because many of the plays emphasized visual elements, particularly gestures and facial expressions.

More than twenty composers based their operas on Sardou's plays. At one point, Giuseppe Verdi considered setting *Patrie!* (1869), based on a sixteenth-century Dutch revolutionary movement, but soon lost interest. Apart from *Tosca*, the most prominent works of Sardou's set to music were *Les noces de Fernande* ("Fernand's Wedding," 1878) transformed into *Der Bettelstudent* ("The Beggar Student," 1882), a popular German operetta by Karl Millöcker, and *Fédora* (Umberto Giordano, 1898) that is still performed occasionally. Sardou also prepared a libretto for Jacques Offenbach, an *opérette-féerie* entitled *Le roi Carotte* (*King Carrot*, 1872). With the exception of *La Tosca*, virtually all works of Sardou have fallen into obscurity.

La Tosca is the best known of all Sardou's works. Set in Rome at the turn of the nineteenth century, the first two acts at Church of Sant'Andrea (the Jesuit church, not the Sant'Andrea della Valle of the opera) followed by a grand royal reception at the Palazzo Farnese. Each is filled with long autobiographical narratives of the characters and references to the French Revolution and Napoleon. The action begins to pick up speed in the third act, set at Cavaradossi's villa at the edge of Rome where the escaped prisoner Angelotti commits suicide rather than face recapture. The fourth act opens in a small study (with an alcove bed in plain view) within Scarpia's offices at the Castel Sant'Angelo (not the Palazzo Farnese, as in the opera). Finally, the parapet of the fortress provides the locale for the final catastrophe in the fifth act. In addition to Floria Tosca, Mario Cavaradossi, and Scarpia, an additional twenty characters flesh out the play, including brief appearances by Queen Marie-Caroline of Naples and the composer Giovanni Paisiello.

Themes of love, destructive jealousy, open lust, rape, and murder along with patriotic messages would both shock and titillate the theater public. The dialogue of the key scene between Scarpia and Tosca in Act Four may raise a smile today, but in Sardou's time it was strong stuff:

Scarpia: You truly hate me, don't you?

Floria: Oh, god!

Scarpia: A woman like you, who gives herself away, a fine state of affairs!... I am filled with disgust for the likes of you. But I will humiliate your scorn and your anger... to break and twist your resistance and take you in my arms!... by God, that's the flavor of the thing, and your giving in would only spoil my feast!

Floria: Oh, demon!

Scarpia: Demon it is, then! A haughty creature such as you charms me, and you belong to me... with your rage and your tears! That I feel your indignant soul struggle... your body shudders with revulsion that is forced to surrender to my detestable kisses, and all your flesh, slave to mine! I will be revenged on you, with vengeance for your scorn, vengeance for your insults, this lovely voluptuousness that will be my pleasure from your torture... Oh, how you hate me!... Me, I want you, and I promise to take a diabolical glee by mating my desire and your hatred!

Top row, left to right: *The Company's first Tosca*, Bianca Saroya, 1923; Lawrence Tibbett sang the role of Scarpia in 1928, 1936, and 1949; Claudia Muzio in the title role of the production that inaugurated the War Memorial Opera House, 1932

Middle row, left to right: Lotte Lehmann (*Tosca*) and Dino Borgioli (*Cavaradossi*), 1934; Jussi Björling (*Cavaradossi*) and Renata Tebaldi (*Tosca*), 1956; Franco Corelli sang the role of Cavaradossi in 1965

Bottom row, left to right: Louis Quilico (*Scarpia*), Dorothy Kirsten (*Tosca*), and Plácido Domingo (*Cavaradossi*), 1970; Carol Vaness (*Tosca*) and James Morris (*Scarpia*), 1997

Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) was the key to the success of *La Tosca*. One of the finest actresses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Bernhardt's unique talents of speech, gesture, body movement, and, most importantly, facial expression were crucial to her triumphs. Equally skilled at using all visual aspects of her craft, she added clever manipulations of costumes and stage props. Studio photographs by the famed Nadar family documented her first act grand entrance; she posed with an inquisitive expression as if seeking her lover, Mario, while wearing a wide-brimmed hat and long gloves, holding a tall cane, and carrying a large bouquet of flowers.

Her moments with the knife before murdering Scarpia in Act Four rank as one of Bernhardt's finest theatrical achievements of her career. Sardou's stage directions and text moments before Scarpia's murder offered her the opportunity to create and sustain enormous dramatic tension:

Floria reaches the table, where she takes with a trembling hand the glass of Spanish wine poured by Scarpia. With this movement, when she has already brought the glass to her lips, she catches sight of the carving knife with a sharp pointed blade on the table. She stops and throws a quick glance at Scarpia whose back is turned to her while he writes, and, trying not to be surprised in her movements, slowly lowers her glass and draws the knife within her reach.

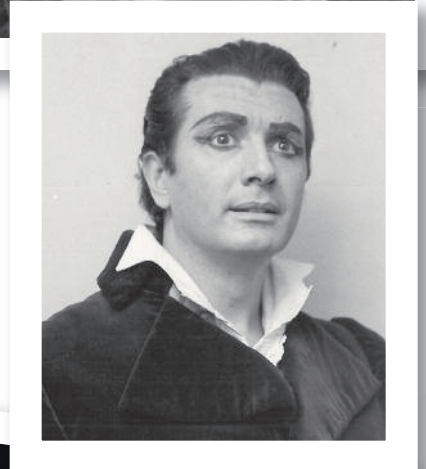
[Scarpia then turns to Floria and stands close to her. After reading her the document, he hands her the letter of safe conduct. Floria pretends to read the letter, then lowers her glass while at the same time surreptitiously takes hold of the knife.]

Scarpia: Now, you are mine! (He embraces her and ardently kisses her bare shoulder)

Floria: Take this! (She plunges the knife into his chest)

Scarpia: Ah, damn you! (collapses at the foot of a chair)

Nadar also photographed Bernhardt staring with ferocious concentration at the knife in anticipation of the murder. These instances, along with positioning the cross upon the chest of the murdered Scarpia and her placement of the candelabras at his sides would influence the interpreters of the operatic *Tosca* for all time.



Sarah Bernhardt in the title role of Sardou's *La Tosca*

Not everyone, however, approved of *La Tosca*. George Bernard Shaw, the great Irish critic and playwright, loathed Sardou's work. After attending a London performance of *La Tosca* in January 1890, he fumed, but grudgingly recognized that the story might be appropriate for an opera.

I have just been to *La Tosca*... I felt nothing but unmitigated disgust. The French well-made play was never respectable even in its prime; but now, in its dotage and delirium tremens, it is a disgrace to the theatre. Such an old-fashioned, shiftless, clumsily constructed, empty-headed turnip ghost of a cheap shocker as this *Tosca* should never have been let past the stage door of the Garrick. I do not know which are the more pitiable, the vapid two acts of obsolete comedy of intrigue or the three acts of sham torture, rape, murder, gallows, and military execution, set to dialogue that might have been improvised by strolling players in a booth. Oh, if it had but been an opera!

Several years later, Shaw mocked Sardou with the epithet *Sardoodledom* (which later received its own entry in the complete Oxford English Dictionary) as "a fanciful word used to describe well-wrought, but trivial or morally objectionable, plays considered collectively; the characteristic milieu in which such work is admired." *Sardoodledom* is a conflation of the name Sardou, with that of *doodle*, a silly or foolish fellow, also a "noodle"; *-dom* is the abstract suffix of state.

The story of *Tosca* as an opera is so well known, it seems fitting to relate only Sardou's contribution to its creation and, in view of recent new documents, a surprise to the third act of the libretto. Creating a libretto is difficult work, particularly with the volatile temperaments of Illica, Giacosa, and Puccini. Illica provided the scenario and the prose; Giacosa would versify much of the text. As with *La Bohème*, Giacosa worked more slowly and encountered greater creative difficulties. A distinguished writer and playwright in his own right, he hated versifying text and considered the labor as demeaning hackwork. Giacosa felt that the structure of the libretto constrained him from providing soaring poetry on the stage as well as in the printed libretto, which he expected the public to read during the performance. (The practice of dimming of auditorium lights was not yet widespread.)

The finished libretto in three acts is a marvel of compression. Puccini sought a tightly constructed libretto following his emphasis on "the means of depicting the characters, shaping the scenes, the verisimilitude of the dialogue, and the naturalness of passions and situations." Consequently, Acts Two and Four of the play were combined into one, transferring Scarpia's office to the Palazzo Farnese (originally the site of a grand reception for the Queen Marie-Christine). Cavaradossi's villa outside of Rome for Act Three was jettisoned, and much of the political and historical references along with many characters deleted.



While Sardou had relatively little direct involvement with the actual creation of the opera, his contributions were significant. After attending his first performances of the play in 1889, Puccini enthusiastically wrote to his publisher Giulio Ricordi entreating him to obtain the rights. In late 1890, Ricordi negotiated with Sardou and came to an agreement several months later. Sardou at first was cool to the idea of Puccini composing the opera; up to that time, Puccini had only produced two works—*Le Villi* (1884) and *Edgar* (1889)—and neither were very successful. Ricordi firmly believed in the composer's gifts however, and anticipated the artistic and financial success of future operas. Sardou eventually was won over, and his compensation would be a fee along with a percentage of the gross box office receipts.

In early January 1891, Ricordi contracted Luigi Illica to create the scenario followed by the completed libretto. The preparations for *Manon Lescaut* occupied much of Puccini's time, however, as it did for the librettists Illica (who also was working on Giordano's

Victorien Sardou, photographed in 1875

Andrea Chénier) and Giacosa. The composer showed signs of waning enthusiasm for *Tosca* and agreed to give up the rights in favor of Alberto Franchetti, who had recently completed the score for *Cristoforo Colombo* (1892) set to Illica's libretto.

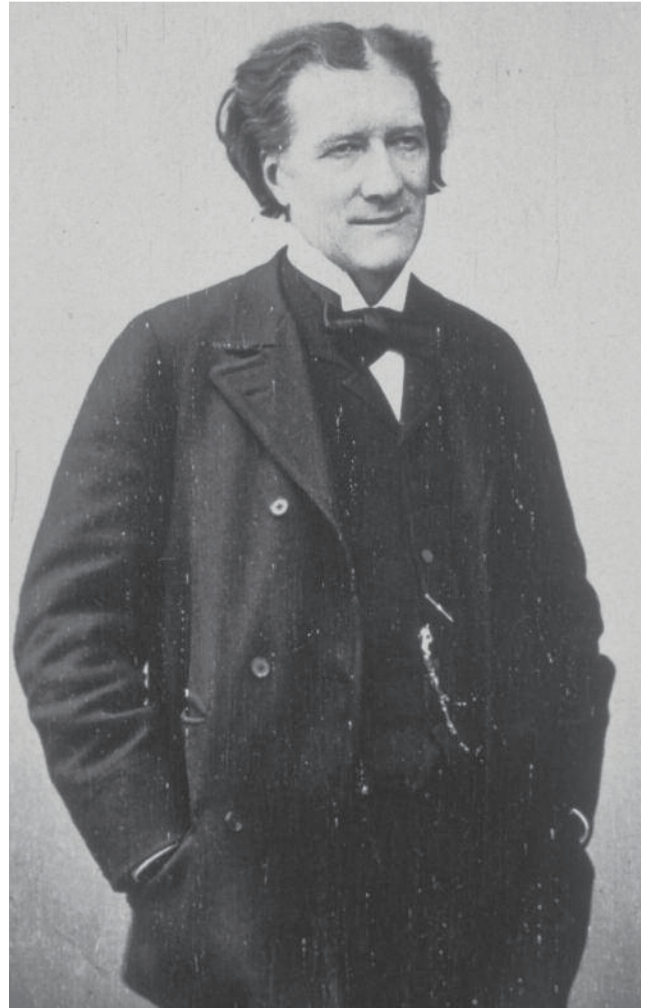
By 1895, Puccini regained his passion for *Tosca*, and Franchetti withdrew from the opera. Although Puccini, Illica, and Giacosa again were fully absorbed in preparations for *La Bohème*, work on *Tosca* commenced and Giacosa completed a draft of the libretto by December 1896. Six months later, Puccini traveled to Paris for the first of several meetings with Sardou, although he had not yet begun serious composition. At Sardou's residence, they discussed the libretto and Puccini improvised the music for the first act at the piano.

The ending of the opera proved problematic. Instead of leaping to her suicide after Cavaradossi's death, the librettists proposed that Tosca would lose her sanity and sing an aria. Sardou opposed this idea, thinking that such a scene lacked theatrical power and would not keep the audience to the very end. Puccini had similar thoughts and noted in the libretto, "this is the 'overcoat' aria" (*aria del paletot*), referring to the thought of the audience getting up to retrieve their coats and leave the theater. Sardou leapt up and shook Puccini's hand stating, "I can see you are a man of the theater!"

Nonetheless, Giacosa and Illica continued to push for Tosca going mad. Two years later at another meeting with Sardou—where he continued to insist on Tosca's suicide—Puccini made the final decision to cut the mad scene in favor of the suicide. In a letter to Ricordi, Puccini regaled that Sardou wanted that "poor woman dead at all costs! He accepts the insanity, but would like her to faint and die fluttering like a bird...." Sardou even suggested that she leap from the Castel Sant'Angelo directly into the Tiber, which should run between St. Peter's and the fortress itself. Puccini pointed out the geographical impossibility and that "the river passes on the other side, underneath, and he, calm as a fish, said, 'Oh that's nothing!' What a fellow, all life, fire, and full of historic-topographic-panoramic inexactitudes!"

Although it was known that the librettists favored the mad scene, the details remained obscure. Recent discoveries in Giacosa's family archives now allow a reconstruction of the scene: The text is twenty-six lines, drawing macabre images—phantoms of women dragging their dead children on their backs as if bearing a cross, ghosts attempting to seize Cavaradossi from the marriage bed on a symbolic gondola. As the gondolier fights off the grasping ghosts, Tosca claims that Mario is not dead. Instead he is asleep and not to be disturbed. The scene was to conclude with Tosca singing, "don't sing, gondolier; softly, softly. I want a great silence around us; eternal silence with eternal love." [Tosca, with Mario's head on her lap, remains still, with a finger on her lips in the act of imposing silence on the imaginary gondolier whom her mind's eye sees. The curtain falls.]

Puccini's instinctive feel for the theater justified the deletion of the mad scene. It would have otherwise stopped the build-up of the dra-



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matic tension and closed the opera with an anticlimax. This example is only one of many that demonstrated Puccini's genius for music and his instinct for the theater. His insistence upon the theatrical atmosphere that would effectively hold the audience in its thrall and stimulate the public's emotional reactions to their fullest was among his core beliefs. Puccini successfully combined the remarkable elements of Sardou's play with his own magnificent music, thus making *Tosca* one of the greatest and most popular of all operas.

For those wishing to learn more of *Tosca* and her world:

Susan Vandiver Nicassio: *Tosca's Rome: the Play and the Opera in Historical Perspective* (Chicago, 1999).

Deborah Burton, Susan Vandiver Nicassio, Agostino Ziino: *Tosca's Prism. Three Moments of Western Cultural History* (Boston, 2004).