

TOSCA

A tale of love and torture

TEACHERS NOTES

Subject areas: Drama, Music, Media Studies, Human Society in its Environment/Social Studies.
Also a useful career guide resource. **Levels:** Secondary, Tertiary



Mid-winter and money is tight at Opera Australia as rehearsals begin for Puccini's perennial favourite *Tosca*, a story of love, betrayal and murder set amid the political turmoil of 19th century Rome.

Popular diva Joan Carden has played the passionate title role many times. But her two co-stars are new to the production. With only three weeks before the curtain goes up, not everyone is sure they will make it—least of all rehearsal director Cathy Dadd and renowned Scottish conductor Roderick Brydon.

Award-winning filmmaker Trevor Graham (*Mabo*, *Aeroplane Dance*) and acclaimed producer Patricia Lovell (*Gallipoli*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*) were granted no-holds-barred access to film behind the scenes, from day one of rehearsals to opening night at the Sydney Opera House.

The result is an intimate and honest portrait of artists at work. Drama backstage equals the soaring emotion of *Tosca* itself. The tension builds and

comes to a head in frustration, anger, tears and laughter.

Then it's opening night and they're on.

Executive Producer: Mark Hamlyn

ABC Executive Producer: Paul Clarke

Producer: Patricia Lovell

Director: Trevor Graham

Writers: Trevor Graham, Rosemary Hesp

Editor: Denise Haslem

Duration: 85 minutes

Year of production: 1999

Music by Giacomo Puccini

Conductor: Roderick Brydon

Rehearsal Director: Cathy Dadd

Mario Cavaradossi: Gregory Tomlinson

Baron Scarpia: Ian Yayne

Flora Tosca: Joan Carden

Repetiteurs: John Haddock, Vincent Colgiuri

Italian Coach: Renato Fresia

Synopsis of Puccini's opera, Tosca *The documentary, Tosca— A Tale of Love and Torture*

Rome 1800. The evil Scarpia is Chief of Police. He is pursuing a political (republican) fugitive, Angelotti, whom he suspects is being hidden by the artist Cavaradossi near the church where the painter is working. Tosca—the famous singer and Cavaradossi's lover—is tricked by Scarpia to lead him to Angelotti but to no avail. In Tosca's presence Scarpia tortures Cavaradossi, but he discloses nothing. Out of fear for her lover's life, Tosca reveals Angelotti's hiding place. Compelled by lust for Tosca Scarpia proposes that if she will accept his sexual demands he will ensure that Cavaradossi's execution is a mock up. As Scarpia makes his claim on Tosca she stabs him mortally. Fleeing to Cavaradossi as he is about to face the firing squad she warns him to expect a mock execution, but he is actually killed. Distraught with shock and grief, Tosca leaps to her death from the parapet declaiming, "Scarpia! We meet before God!".



This extraordinary documentary allows unique insights into the personal and professional struggle of opera artists to prepare themselves for performance. Singers, as well as director, conductor, language coach, chorus master and répétiteurs, are the focus of the documentary. Intimate detail of the work and lives of these artists makes the documentary even more compelling than the opera itself. Their feelings and anxieties are laid bare before the cameras. The pressure is on to produce in only three weeks the performance standard demanded, and paid for, by their audiences. And more exacting, to meet the rigorous professional standards that these remarkable artists demand of themselves. *Tosca's* theme of love and torture resounds both on and off the stage.

Joan Carden says, "I think it's probably the easiest role I've ever played. Because she's an opera singer". *Tosca's* famous aria *Vissi d'arte* proclaims "I live for art". This theme is constant throughout the documentary as we are presented with the artists at work, at home and in transit. Maestro Roderick Brydon reveals that the profession can be lonely, spending a large part of his life away from his family. In one scene the cameras show us the artists as a family sharing a meal together in a rented apartment. Their closeness and love is evident even though the tension and torture of the job constantly tries their patience with each other. They are, as it were, a family in crisis, but taking a therapeutic break from the job. At the end of this documentary one feels a close connection with these artists as through the documentary they have allowed us into their lives at an authentic and psychologically intimate level. Puccini himself would surely applaud the work of director Trevor Graham and his team in making this documentary in uncompromising *verismo* style.

Left: Joan Carden and Ian Yayne as Floria Tosca and Baron Scarpia on stage for the full dress rehearsal of Opera Australia's production of Tosca.

Glossary of relevant operatic terms

Accompaniment: Instrumental or vocal parts that are designed to support the main part.

Aria: A solo song in which a character reflects on his/her situation, intention or desires.

Ensemble: A musical piece or passage performed by more than one singer including duets (two singers together), trios (three) and so on up to any number of voices singing simultaneously. This form is used to great dramatic effect in opera as the emotions of a number of characters can be compared/contrasted to a degree not possible in spoken drama.

Libretto: The text, story or words of the opera.

Mark: Practice of singing softly, or half singing, to save the voice in production rehearsals.

Overture: The orchestral music played before the curtain rises, usually introducing some of the operas musical themes. *Tosca* has a brief musical introduction rather than an overture. It opens with recitative firstly from Angelotti, then the sacristan.

Recitative: Sung-spoken dialogue usually inserted between arias and ensembles. In recitative the natural rise and fall of the speaking voice determines the vocal line. Recitative is used to advance the narrative, filling in the detail of the opera.

Repertoire: The stock of operas that a company can stage and perform. Opera Australia is a repertory company meaning that it varies the operas it performs from night to night. Thus *Tosca* may be performed over a few weeks two or three times a week.

Repetiteur: A pianist who coaches the singers, assists the conductor and plays for rehearsals. Famous Australian conductor Simone Young began her career as a repetiteur with Opera Australia.

Score: The book containing all the words (libretto) and the musical parts of the opera

Supernumerary: Actors with non-singing parts in the opera—for example, the firing squad in *Tosca*.

Tempo: The pace, or speed of the beats at which passages of music are performed.

Verismo: A 19th century style of opera that advocated “truth” or realism, characterising “ordinary” people and subjects (although with heightened dramatic effect) rather than kings, queens, gods and mythical settings. Puccini’s *La Boheme* is the most often quoted example of the verismo movement because its story and characters are considered “ordinary”. The characters and story of *Tosca* are generally considered somewhat less “ordinary” than those in *La Boheme*, so that *Tosca*, although having elements of *verismo*, is not generally regarded as an example of the *verismo* style.

Required learning resources for all curriculum areas

- Film Australia’s documentary video of *Tosca—A Tale of Love and Torture*.
- These notes for teaching and learning.

Recommended learning resources

- Other documentary videos can be used to compare directorial approaches. An excellent comparative documentary is *Rats in the Ranks*, which is also available from Film Australia. Other Film Australia documentaries can be used to demonstrate different directorial approaches.
- *The Pan Book of Opera* edited by Arthur Jacobs and Stanley Sadie, 1984, Pan Books, London, is a helpful source for the story of Giacomo Puccini’s opera, *Tosca*. It also has some concise music commentary. A wealth of books and internet sources can be used to obtain information on opera in general and Puccini in particular.
- A video, or audio recording of the opera, or selections from the opera would be useful to demonstrate the musical conventions of opera form. It would also be useful to illustrate the place of music as a dramatic element.

Suggested learning strategies for Drama

PREPARATION

- Read the story of the opera *Tosca* by Italian composer Giacomo Puccini.
- View the documentary *Tosca—A Tale of Love and Torture*.
- Find out about the dramatic conventions and structure of opera that are referred to in the documentary. The glossary of opera terms on page 3 may assist you as a starting point.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Discuss parallels between Puccini's opera *Tosca* and the Film Australia documentary *Tosca—A Tale of Love and Torture*.

- What is meant by the saying, “life mirrors art”?

(i) Can this saying be applied to this documentary film? Discuss.

(ii) What is the dramatic significance of this saying in Puccini's opera and in Film Australia's documentary on the artists' preparation for the opera? Discuss.

- How and to what extent is dramatic tension achieved in this documentary film? Discuss.
- Does this documentary provide insight into the special dramatic needs of opera production as distinct from straight spoken drama? Discuss.
- What special dramatic considerations might need to be observed by opera directors that would not be necessary in spoken dramatic productions? Discuss.

ACTIVITIES

- Prepare a presentation on what particular characteristics are peculiar to opera. How do these characteristics enhance or detract from the drama? Discuss in terms of one or more of the following elements:

- setting
- characterisation
- narrative and plot development
- costumes, make-up, accessories, art finishing

- stage movement and direction
- stage/set design
- dialogue, diction and delivery
- lighting
- sound/music

- *Tosca: a Tale of Love and Torture* is a documentary. Plan an imaginary project based on people at work using a documentary approach. Explain your objective for the project (for example, to entertain or to educate) and the rationale used to achieve it. Your project may be a dramatisation using any dramatic convention that you consider appropriate to achieve the outcomes you have planned.

Suggested learning strategies for English

PREPARATION

- Read the story of the opera *Tosca* by Italian composer Giacomo Puccini.
- View the documentary *Tosca—A Tale of Love and Torture*.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- Puccini is considered to be a “romantic” composer. What is the meaning of “romantic” in English literature?
- What are the characteristics of English romantic literature? What were its main forms and genres?
- Is there a contradiction in the claim that Puccini represents the verismo style of opera and the claim that he is a romantic composer?
- The genesis of this documentary comes from sources both literary (the opera libretto) which includes the singer, Tosca, and “real life” (the work being done on the opera). To what extent are these two elements used to structure this documentary?
- What is the point of view expressed in this documentary? Discuss using examples.

ACTIVITIES

- Plan and write, or present orally, a critique of this documentary. In your introduction mention the elements/issues on which you have chosen to focus in your piece and explain why you have chosen those elements/issues as your focus.

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- Research romantic writers and prepare a presentation explaining the romantic characteristics in some of their works
- Choose one or more pieces of contemporary literature (poem, song, article, play, film, novel etc) that you consider romantic and one or more you consider the opposite of romantic. Explain your choices.
- Debate the following: “Opera is fake and documentary is real”.

Suggested learning strategies for Music

PREPARATION

- Read the story of the opera *Tosca* by Italian composer Giacomo Puccini.
- View the documentary *Tosca—A Tale of Love and Torture*.
- Listen to at least some of the highlights of the opera including the opening orchestral music (with Angelotti and the sacristan’s recitative) a chorus, tenor aria, baritone aria, soprano aria and an ensemble. One of *Tosca*’s duets with Cavaradossi and/or Scarpia would be useful if time permits, to show how musical devices are used to advance the drama, particularly in characterisation.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- What do we learn about the operatic form in the documentary? Discuss.
- What musical careers are represented in the documentary? Discuss.

ACTIVITIES

- Choose a poem or text and set it to a melody and accompaniment in the romantic style.
- Find a contemporary poem or text and explain how you would treat the following elements to give it a “romantic” sound:
 - melody
 - rhythm
 - texture
 - harmony
 - instrumentation
 - expression and articulation
 - form

- Plan a presentation to illustrate, with examples from the opera *Tosca*, to what extent it is a romantic opera.

Suggested learning strategies for Human Society in its Environment, History, or Social Studies

PREPARATION

- Read the story of the opera *Tosca* by Italian composer Giacomo Puccini.
- View the documentary *Tosca—A Tale of Love and Torture*.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- To what extent does the opera *Tosca* contribute to our understanding of Italy in 1800? Discuss.
- To what extent does this documentary contribute to our understanding of current issues in Australia? Discuss.
- Explore the role of Australian documentary filmmakers throughout, or in a particular period of, the 20th century in forming our understanding of Australia in that century.

ACTIVITIES

- Prepare a presentation comparing this documentary with at least one other Australian documentary in terms of its usefulness and veracity as a contemporary historical source.
- The opera *Tosca* is set in 1800. Locate, name and use primary and secondary sources to comment on some aspects of that period in Australia. Use these suggestions as a guide:
 - government institutions
 - the role of religion in Australia
 - political movements
 - political prisoners
 - performing arts/artists
 - entertainment
- Design a study of Australian fashion in 1800. Describe the methods you use in researching your study and present evidence to validate your sources. Explain how you chose the particular costumes

TOSCA—A TALE OF LOVE & TORTURE

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presented. Describe the context and purpose of the costumes and include descriptive sketches.

- Research the political situation of Australia in the year 1800 and draw comparison with the situation in Italy and Europe at that time. Explain any European political influences on Australia that you can find.
- Present a picture of the cultural life of Australia in 1800, focusing on live performance and visual arts.

Suggested learning strategies for Media Studies

PREPARATION

- Read the story of the opera *Tosca* by Italian composer Giacomo Puccini.
- View the documentary *Tosca—A Tale of Love and Torture*.

DISCUSSION

- To what extent is the “point of view” evident in this documentary; whose point of view? Discuss.
- To what extent is the editor evident in this documentary? Discuss.
- Compare the directorial viewpoint in this documentary with one or more other documentaries that use a similar approach (for example, *Rats in the Ranks*) and/or with documentaries that take a different directorial approach.
- To what extent do you regard this documentary as a realistic portrayal of opera singers, conductors and music and production staff? Discuss
- Has this documentary changed your attitude to, or understanding of, opera as a vocation or as an art form? Discuss.

ACTIVITIES

- Design a television campaign to sell a live performance of the opera *Tosca*.
- Prepare a media kit to pitch the documentary *Tosca—A Tale of Love and Torture* to overseas markets.
- Name some of the personnel or job roles involved in making this documentary and explain their role in the production.

- Use ideas from this documentary to plan your own documentary on the subject of careers for young people aged 15 to 18. (This is not to suggest that *Tosca—A Tale of Love and Torture* either encourages or discourages people in an opera career choice) Explain your rationale and objectives for making the piece and how you will use the documentary format to achieve the intended objectives.



Conductor Roderick Brydon

ABOUT THE WRITER

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ORDERING THE VIDEO

To order a copy of *Tosca—A Tale of Love and Torture*, or to find out more about Film Australia programs and accompanying teachers notes, please contact:

Sales Office, Film Australia
Email: sales@filmaust.com.au
Tel: 02 9413 8734
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