

#### WA DEBUT

Teddy Tahu Rhodes, seated, as the police chief Scarpia and Anke Hoppner as the snappily dressed Tosca, left.



## New Tosca on song

### OPERA

#### Tosca

WA Opera

His Majesty's Theatre

REVIEW **WILLIAM YEOMAN**

**I**'m not sure how simulated fellatio with a bust of the Virgin Mary and other extreme iconoclastic gestures, both political and religious, would go down (if you'll excuse the pun) at La Scala.

But director Christopher

Alden's gritty, modern-day production of Puccini's *Tosca*, premiered by UK's Opera North in 2002 and revived last year by Opera Australia amid a mixed chorus of boos and cheers, seems set to win over Perth audiences, if this opening night performance by WA Opera is anything to go by.

In the opera's first great *romanza* *Recondita armonia*, the painter Cavaradossi sings of mixing the images of his beloved Tosca and another woman who's caught his eye together in a painting: "Art, in its mysterious way, the contrasting beauties blends together."

Alden's production is a bit like that, except it blends the ugliness of a dingy church basement, replete with a filthy sink, upended chairs, religious paintings and plaster statues in various states of disrepair and campaign posters from Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* party, with the glorious hyper-romanticism of Puccini's score.

At first the effect is uncomfortably dissonant, the modern staging at odds both with the music and the libretto. But then something kicks in, and you accept the outrages and absurdities with the same ease as you do that of opera itself.

When escaped political prisoner Angelotti (James Clayton) seeks refuge in the chapel where Cavaradossi (Dario Volonte) is working, the latter agrees to help him. But his plans are severely compromised by a jealous Tosca, who is convinced Cavaradossi has taken another lover.

When Cavaradossi is captured by chief of police Baron Scarpia (Teddy Tahu Rhodes) and tortured Tosca

is compelled to reveal Angelotti's hiding place, and, later to give into Scarpia's lustful demands in exchange for her lover's life.

Throughout, Puccini's verismo style is both heightened and subverted. A confessional becomes a torture chamber, from which Cavaradossi emerges wearing a bloodied metal band around his forehead like a crown of thorns. Andrew Foote's wonderfully characterised sacristan/jailer is a seedy cigarette, coffee and TV addict.

In his WA Opera debut, Tahu Rhodes' swaggering, arrogant Scarpia fills the stage whenever he's on it, a cross between SBS TV's Inspector Montalbano and a baleful Cleo centrefold, the bad boy of every woman's dreams. When we first meet her, Anke Hoppner's snappily dressed Tosca looks like she might just have come from her evening *passeggiata*, with barely a hint of the avenging victim of violent rape she later becomes.

Performances are dramatically strong if vocally variable. Tahu Rhodes inhabits the character of Scarpia with frightening ease, his rich, powerful baritone registering the multiple layers of irony the modern setting makes possible with a withering existential abandon, Milton's Satan personified. And while Volonte's *E lucevan le stelle* and Hoppner's *Vissi d'arte* were respectively underpowered and wayward on this occasion, the former convincingly portrays a man rent asunder by competing loyalties, the latter a woman equally undone by one all-consuming loyalty.

US conductor Joseph Colaneri elicits from a very much on-form WA Symphony Orchestra a warm, transparent sound that is wholly sympathetic to the singers while doing full justice to one of Puccini's most beautiful scores. **A**

**Tosca** is performed on April 5, 7, 9, 12, 14 and 16.