



Entertainment

Thigpen singing Puccini's *Tosca*

interview by John Charles

A few weeks ago during rehearsal, Martha Thigpen lay on the stage floor of New York's famous Metropolitan Opera, in a costume of tattered suede, and gazed out at the empty theatre.

"I'm really here!" she thought.

It was a small role — Ortlinde, one of the eight Valkyries in Wagner's *Die Walkure* — but it's still an important step for the soprano from Louisiana.

This week Thigpen takes another big step, in Edmonton: singing her first *Tosca*, the title role in Puccini's popular opera which ends the Edmonton Opera's season.

"*Tosca* is bigger than life," Thigpen said. "She's a great opera singer in Rome, with all the temperament of a big opera star today, I love her fire and passion."

Thigpen will be singing the Sunday afternoon performance of *Tosca*, which is a budget-priced matinee aimed at students and music lovers who don't subscribe, or can't afford tickets to the opera's main series, where Carol Neblett will sing the role.

First performed in 1900, *Tosca* has been called a "shabby little shocker" by one eminent music scholar, but is adored by opera fans for its gutsy energy and lush melodies. In swift, dramatic strokes Puccini tells a dramatic tale of love, jealousy and politics, with a villain who threatens to torture *Tosca*'s lover to death if she doesn't yield to his embraces.

It's frustrating to sing just one performance, because Thigpen won't find out how her stamina holds up in this challenging role over a series of five or six performances, which is the customary situation in an opera house.

Good old fashioned American cowboy ethics

Shepard off-off-Jasper

by Randal Smathers

Aliens, cowboys and a '57 Chevy. A warehouse-turned-theatre, with "Urban Decay" spray-painted on the side (more neatly than the sign announcing the show on the front). Throw in two plays for the price of one, and what do you have?

You have the Tiger Hill Theatre, Edmonton's newest and possibly most experimental theatre company. They are offering Sam Shepard's *Cowboys #2* and *The Unseen Hand*, in what is being optimistically called the Café Theatre. The show opened yesterday, and runs until this Sunday.

Cowboys #2 is a two-man play written by Shepard in 1967. In the words of Tiger Hill's Arnie MacPherson, it "explores the improvisational nature of what theatre can be," and "blows apart the parameters of theatrical experience." It involves two men in "a small, undefined space . . . playing improvisational theatre games . . . to keep themselves alive."

Cowboys #2 was added to the bill in order to provide "a cohesive evening of theatre," and is a new piece for Tiger Hill. The company came together initially for last year's Fringe Festival, where they did *The Unseen Hand* to good reviews.

This is where the promised cowboys, aliens and Chevrolet come in, along with an aging cheerleader. The plot of this comedy deal with a 120 year-old cowboy returning from the dead to go shoot up the alien's planet. The Chevy represents good old-fashioned American cowboy ethics, vanishing before technology. I'm not sure about the cheerleader yet.

Given some of the logistical difficulties encountered, it is amazing that the play was presented the first time, let alone this production. Witness the tactical squad from the police breaking into a rehearsal in a garage in



Martha Thigpen

"Puccini is bam-bam: there's a dramatic explosion, then you have to pull back. It's very exciting," Thigpen says. "Wagner, on the other hand, has to be sustained for long

periods. I'm not that interested in Wagner right now. My heart belongs to Puccini."

Thigpen, who declines to reveal her age, but appears to be in her early 30s, grew up in a town of 4,500 in Louisiana. When she was in high school, people in her church choir told her parents she had a singing talent and arranged for her to take lessons 40 miles away.

"I wasn't serious about a career, but at college I majored in singing, then got an apprenticeship at Santa Fe's summer opera program," Thigpen recalls.

She made her debut with New York City

Opera in 1977, having just completed one of her toughest roles ever, in Leonard Bernstein's ill-fated Broadway-bound musical *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*.

"We were doing try-outs in Washington, Philadelphia and all over," the soprano said, "but the show's concept kept changing. It was about the slaves and servants in the White House, over 100 years, but the directors kept getting fired, songs were added and taken out, and the producers even bought our days off so we'd keep practicing new material. It had some lovely songs, but when it finally opened on Broadway it was a fiasco, and folded."

Six years ago Thigpen dropped out of the opera scene. Her voice was changing — and growing — and she wasn't sure what to do about it, so she quit and moved back to her home town. But after a year and a half she missed singing terribly.

"I'm still feeling my way slowly and carefully," she said. "This is the beginning of a new process. It's like starting all over, but my career is beginning to move. I've only had a manager for a year."

Thigpen has sung the Countess in Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, and Minnie in Puccini's *The Girl Of The Golden West*, and her voice is appropriately described as a full lyric soprano. She wants to do some Verdi, but that's a few years from now. Right now she's learning the role of Micaela, the virtuous girlfriend of Don Jose, in *Carmen*.

She's delighted with *Tosca*'s guest conductor, Richard Bradshaw, from San Francisco.

"He's so expressive and clear, and he likes singers!" she exclaimed. "Some conductors are inconsiderate — they really fight the singers. But opera is meant for voices, and what's the point if they can't be heard because the orchestra's too loud?"

Thigpen has a boyfriend in New York, but he won't be able to come out to Edmonton.

"This is the first time I've done a major role without close friends being around," she said wistfully. "Still, I've wanted to sing this role for years, and I'm very excited."

Tickets for the Sunday matinee of *Tosca* are available at BASS or at the door.

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