

STAGING AN EPIC

Puccini's *Turandot*, which is set in China, will have more than 120 performers on stage at the Palais Theatre. The production, imported from Italy, includes eight statues copied from the terracotta soldier figures recovered from a heritage burial site in China.

WHAT'S IN IT?

- 150 costumes
- 40 lances
- Eight huge flags — all contained in four ship containers en route to Melbourne
- 84 musicians conducted by Melbourne's Richard Divall
- 12 dancers from Victorian College of the Arts
- 100-strong choir, including 30 students from Carey Grammar
- A \$40,000 lighting system
- *Turandot* is played by Italian soprano Maria Dragoni
- Her suitor, Prince Calaf, is played by Spanish singer Antonio Ordonez



Scenes from *Turandot*, above, and, below, the elaborate stage.

GRAPHIC: J. BOWMAN/THE AGE 6/11/2004

Company looks to Puccini connection for an operatic changing of the guard

With a million-dollar international production of *Turandot* coming up, Melbourne Opera is continuing to think big. **Robin Usher** reports.

FOR A small opera company, it is a big statement. In a move designed to position itself as Victoria's main opera group, the fledgling Melbourne Opera is to bring the \$5 million Italian production of Puccini's *Turandot* to Melbourne next month.

With a budget far exceeding the combined total spent on the two-year-old company's six productions to date, the piece represents a clear challenge to the Sydney-based Opera Australia.

The version of Puccini's last work had its world premiere last July at Italy's most famous opera event, the open-air Puccini Festival at Torre del Lago in Tuscany. The massive set, designed by Pietro Cascella, a

leading Italian sculptor, is being brought to Melbourne in four 12-metre sea containers, along with 150 costumes by Cordelia von den Steinen.

But while the two leads — Italian soprano Maria Dragoni and Spanish tenor Antonio Ordonez — will be jetting in this month, all the other 120 cast members, including soprano Rosamund Illing, are local. The 84-member orchestra will be conducted by Melbourne maestro Richard Divall in his first appearance for the company.

Melbourne Opera chairman Peter Donnelly said the collaboration showed the company was serious about promoting the careers of Victorian artists through international collabor-

ations. "This is a major event for Victoria and it is amazing that we are behind it so early in our existence," he said. "We are committed to promoting opera in Victoria for the long haul."

Donnelly led a delegation, including philanthropist Lady Primrose Potter, to see Premier Steve Bracks two months ago seeking \$2.3 million a year for the next three years in state funding for the company.

"This shows that we can back up what we are saying about our commitment to opera," he said.

The connection with the Puccini Festival was forged last year when the company's director of finance and international affairs, Manuel Jimenez-Navarro, was performing in Italy. He met executives from the event who told him the production was available to tour.

"The opportunity was too great to let go," he said. "The great tenor Placido Domingo has sung at Torre del Lago and

now we are bringing a production from the same festival to Melbourne."

The Puccini Festival was established in 1930 near the villa where Puccini lived and worked. The festival now attracts about 40,000 spectators a year and is spending \$60 million on a new outdoor theatre and associated facilities.

Turandot premiered in Milan in 1926, two years after the composer's death. It is set in China where Princess Turandot has decreed that she will marry only the suitor who can answer three riddles. All who fail are immediately executed.

Although love triumphs in the end, and the work includes the song *Nessun Dorma*, perhaps the world's favourite aria for a tenor, the opera is overshadowed by death and the threat of more executions.

The production's director, Italian filmmaker Daniele De Plano, said the design was influenced by the terracotta sol-

diers found guarding ancient grave sites in China, and included eight statues copied from the figures. He said the sense of threat was heightened by a giant sword sharpener that loomed over the set.

De Plano describes *Turandot* as "my obsession". After being assistant director at Torre del Lago for eight years, he directed his first production in 1998, an earlier version of the opera. "I have since directed all over the world but I love Puccini's music and I love the country where he lived and worked," he said.

Melbourne choristers involved in the production will have the chance to win a trip to Torre del Lago and an opportunity to sing there next year. Mr Jimenez-Navarro said the raffle was meant as an incentive to the chorus members, who are all volunteers.

Turandot is at the Palais Theatre on December 14, 16 and 18.