

Metamorphosed *Butterfly* to play Hult Center

By Ming Rodrigues
Emerald Contributor

This is not the famous Puccini opera *Madame Butterfly*. To an extent it is a takeoff, but this 1988 Tony Award winning play is more bizarre because it's based on something that actually happened.

M. Butterfly, Asian-American playwright David Henry Hwang's story of love and deception, was born from a news story of events that took place in the world of international spy rings between Paris and Beijing during the Vietnam War and the aftermath of those events.

The real French diplomat, Bernard Boursicot, fell in love with Shi Peipu, a popular Chinese opera singer who he thought was a woman.

Legend has it that Boursicot eventually passed classified information to Peipu under the belief that 'she' would be harmed by the Chinese government otherwise. But it wasn't until they were both jailed that Boursicot discovered Peipu's true gender.

"This is one of your more thought-provoking, social-commentary type of intellectual plays," said Patricia Cusick, assistant director of marketing at the Hult Center.

"And from the way tickets are selling out over the more traditional, lighter plays and musicals, the dramatic appeal of *M. Butterfly* has been more than anticipated."

M. Butterfly ran for 777 performances on Broadway — the longest-running play since

Amadeus. Its first national tour played 25 cities in 52 weeks, becoming one of the longest and most successful opening tours of a straight dramatic play.

When first researching the story, Hwang found a quote from Boursicot that was an attempt to account for the fact that he had never seen his Chinese "girlfriend" naked.

"He said, 'I thought she was very modest. I thought it was a Chinese custom,'" Hwang said in a press release.

"Now, I am aware that this is not a Chinese custom, that Asian women are no more shy with their lovers than are women of the West," added Hwang. "I am also aware, however, that Boursicot's assumption was consistent with a certain stereotyped view of Asians as bowing, passive flowers."

"He probably thought he had found his *Madame Butterfly*," said Hwang, adding that in Chinese-American slang, a "Butterfly" is a woman who personifies the Western cultural stereotype of the passive Oriental woman.

Thus came the idea of deconstructing Puccini's classic opera about a young Asian woman who pines away and finally dies for her love of a cruel American naval officer.

Hwang came up with his own twist to the play: The Frenchman fantasizes that he is Pinkerton (the naval officer) and his lover is Butterfly.

By the end of the piece, however, he realizes that it is he



The characters of Boursicot and Peipu fall into a love complicated by deception in David Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, which will play at the Hult Center beginning Sept. 30. File photo

who has been Butterfly, in that he has been duped by love, and the Chinese spy who exploited that love is the real Pinkerton.

But one might ask how such a delusion could possibly be carried through.

"From my point of view," Hwang wrote in his script's afterword, "the 'impossible' story of a Frenchman duped by a Chinese man masquerading as a woman always seemed perfectly explicable; given the degree of misunderstanding between men and women and

also between East and West, it seemed inevitable that a mistake of this magnitude would one day take place."

If anything, *M. Butterfly* is intended as a challenge for the audience to question the essential relationships of East and West, men and women, fantasy and reality.

"I consider it a plea to all sides to cut through our respective layers of cultural and sexual misperceptions, to deal with one another truthfully for our mutual good," Hwang said.

"Those who prefer to bypass the work involved will remain in a world of surfaces, with misconceptions running rampant," he added. "This is, to me, the convenient world in which the French diplomat and the Chinese spy lived."

M. Butterfly opens the Hult Center's On-Broadway series Monday, Sept. 30 at 8 p.m. in the Silva Concert Hall. Tickets are \$25, \$22.50, \$18.50, and \$15 and are available at the EMU Main Desk or by calling the Hult Center at 687-5000.

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