

story. Unfortunately, it's reminiscent of three excellent movies from last year that were superior. Cage did self-loathing even better in "Adaptation." In "Punch-Drunk Love," Paul Thomas Anderson out-directed Scott at visualizing borderline insanity. And "Catch Me If You Can" was ultimately a more emotionally engaging con-artist movie because it skipped the implausible trick ending that has become mandatory since "The Usual Suspects." ■

Rated PG-13 for thematic elements, violence, some sexual content, and language.

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MUSIC

[*Puccini: His Life and Works*, Julian Budden, Oxford University Press, 198 pages; *Puccini: A Biography*, Mary Jane Phillips-Matz, Northeastern University Press, 384 pages]

Touched By God's Little Finger

By R.J. Stove

DEPLORING HIS OWN musical tastes' unpretentiousness, writer Max Beerbohm told *New Yorker* scribe S.N. Behrman, "Anything above Puccini is above me too." That Beerbohm of all people, hardly enslaved to fashion, should have felt guilt at esteeming the Italian operatic master indicates the disdain that Puccini has traditionally aroused among ideologues since his death (mere weeks before his 66th birthday) in 1924. Communists damned him for being "fascist"; fascists, for being "internationalist"; self-conscious modernists, for being "sentimental," or "vulgar," or "eclectic," or, worse still, "reac-

tionary." So multifarious a coalition of the unwilling suggests that Puccini should have invented the epigram—alas, apocryphal—long attributed to Brahms: "If there is anyone here whom I have not affronted, I apologize."

The defensiveness of Puccini's first major biographer, the late Mosco Carner, is characteristic—as, unhappily, is Carner's Freudianism. Presumably *Madama Butterfly's* creator just could not cut the mustard unless fitted out with an adequate supply of phallic symbols and mother-fixations. Anti-Puccini sneers in one Joseph Kerman's best-selling 1956 textbook *Opera as Drama*—which called Puccini's style "false through and through," singling out *Tosca* as "that shabby little shocker" of "café-music banality"—must by now have been approvingly quoted by tens of thousands of college students in their coursework. The scholarly justice that Puccini began receiving from the 1980s onwards made precious little impact outside Italy. Over in the boondocks, of course, even Carner's polite applause remained unthinkable. Anyone who endured Australian universities' Cold-War-era music schools will remember the prevalent baying of scorn for late-Romantic Italians in general and for Puccini in particular, who needed to be flushed from students' digestive tracts by wholesale force-feeding of Anton Webern, Pierre Boulez, Elliott Carter, Iannis Xenakis, and other such high-modernist castor-oils.

Nevertheless, the two volumes reviewed here suggest that *finis* has now been written beneath this nonsense. Obviously some deep law of physics operates whereby, after a major musician has gone for ages without an English-language biography, two biographies appear at once. Half-forgotten Edwardian Sir Charles Villiers Stanford benefited several months ago from such a biographical double-whammy. So, in 1999, did Camille Saint-Saëns. Now Puccini gets his turn. The well-heeled Puccini buff will snap up both publications; the less affluent or less devoted reader should assess his own priorities before choosing.

Julian Budden's tome excels when

surveying Puccini the composer, Mary Jane Phillips-Matz's when surveying Puccini the man. Budden (a former BBC radio producer in the days when "the Beeb" positively gloried in its elitism) writes brisk, culturally literate British English: all muscle, no fat. He faults the grammar of a Latin phrase that Puccini chose for *Tosca's* Act I finale; splendidly dismisses the French play that Puccini reworked for this opera as a "clockwork mechanism lubricated by historical erudition"; and makes delightful vignettes from the book's supporting cast. Nothing in Phillips-Matz's observations matches, for sheer vividness, Budden on Puccini's Milan acquaintance Marco Sala ("among his less savory diversions was the teaching of improper songs to prim young Englishwomen, who would perform them without understanding a word") or on Puccini's choleric librettist Luigi Illica ("a duel had cost him part of an ear"). Phillips-Matz has spent decades interviewing, it seems, *everyone* who even tangentially impinged on Puccini's temporal existence. If you want each familial scrapbook marginalium, each school report card, each detail of Puccini's diabetes, résumés for almost all who performed him in his lifetime, you must read her. Yet occasionally she can resemble the most clichéd Californian therapist, as when describing Puccini's tempestuous marriage: "A modern counselor might say that both were enablers." Yes, a modern counselor might say many other things too, equally generalized, equally ineffectual.

Puccini's less publicized achievements included confirming—along with his contemporaries Edward Elgar and Richard Strauss—that brilliance combined with ordinariness will always make a much scarier spectacle than brilliance combined with dottiness, let alone with outright madness. His own censure of those "who think they require dandruff to be geniuses" epitomizes his sleepless compositional methods in one piercing phrase. No flies on his musicianship; no dandruff flakes, either. Years after he could have coasted upon his fame, he fretted as pitilessly over each new creation as if he

remained a twentysomething neophyte dreading peevish examiners. (So much for the myth of Puccini as avaricious, tear-jerking cynic.) A musicologist's nightmare, he regarded every score as a work-in-progress. With his first masterpiece, *Manon Lescaut*, he subsequently tinkered for 30 years. He risked the paralyzing humility of a congenital perfectionist. After every operatic feat, he set the bar higher. Budden rightly calls him "as parsimonious with notes as was Berlioz. Nor was it mere indolence, but rather a reluctance to commit to paper any idea of whose value he was not convinced."

At least Berlioz finished most of his musical conceptions. Puccini, by contrast, repeatedly aborted operatic projects—many times after months, occasionally after years, of anguished labor. Some of these cancellations scarcely warranted enthusiasm even as consummations; the world is unlikely to have lost much when he scrapped one opera based on a French soft-porn S&M novel. Still, music could well be the poorer for his abandonment of operas devoted to Marie Antoinette, to the 13th-century saint Margaret of Cortona, and (surely the saddest deficit of all, given the common ground between Puccinian and Kiplingesque vehemence) to *The Light That Failed*.

The thinness of Puccini's skin remains a marvel, as does the inanity of the press notices he attracted. *La Bohème*, journalists assured 1890s readers, "will not leave much of a mark on the history of our lyric theater" and had "no principle of musical organization whatever." "With *Tosca*," pontificated some other expert shortly afterwards, "Puccini has not composed an original opera." *La Fanciulla del West*, similarly, lacked "any appeal beyond that of emphasizing the meretricious elements of the libretto." "Puccini is a decadent manipulator": thus a certain Fausto Torrefranca (what, you've not heard of him?), who recklessly predicted that said manipulator "will be forgotten within a few years."

If newspapermen were not savaging him, his spouse Elvira (*née* Bonturi) was. Grimly aware of her husband's womanizing penchant, she sprinkled

bromide over his trousers, to no discernible effect. He covered his tracks so well that some of his mistresses remained undiscovered by outsiders for a quarter of a century after his funeral; of one, we know even today only her Christian name, "Corinna." Elvira—acquiring a characteristic vise-like grip on the wrong end of the stick—hounded to suicide a maidservant with whom, improbably enough, Puccini's dealings seem to have been wholly innocent (and who undeniably died *virgo intacta*).

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The lady who most interested Puccini's mind felt, surprise surprise, little or no interest in his body: Sybil Seligman, a banker's wife whose relations with the composer—she coaxed from him most of what few aesthetic reflections he wrote—appear to have been platonic.

She probably could not, certainly did not, assuage his lifelong melancholia. Aged 52, he moaned to a correspondent, "I have always tried to love people; but no one has ever understood me, that is, people have always taken me wrong. Now it is too late; I am too old. ... Please go on being my friend." Addicted to cigarettes, he died of throat cancer with his last and greatest opera, *Turandot*, unfinished. It is somehow appropriate that critic after critic derided the completion of *Turandot* by Neapolitan musician Franco Alfano, wholly unaware that the completion as it stood was not Alfano's intention at all. Toscanini so disliked Alfano's contribution (thinking it overly individual) that he hacked and gouged it mercilessly, reducing it from 377 bars to 268. Not until the 1980s, both Alfano and Toscanini having long since died, did Alfano's original handiwork attract serious academic and executant consideration. This means that all pre-1980s *Turandot* critical commentary—not 10 percent, not 90 percent, but all—is now worthless and should be acknowledged

as such. Regrettably, most opera houses (and record labels everywhere) have ignored the earlier Alfano version: a dereliction of artistic duty that would now be unconscionable in Mozart or Janáček, but that Pucciniphils are expected to tolerate in silence.

Near his life's end Puccini wrote a much-quoted credo: "Almighty God touched me with His little finger and said: 'Write for the theater—mark you, only for the theater!' And I have obeyed the divine command." "Divine command"—how

oddly such words must sound to those unfortunates who habitually explain all inspirations from Desdemona to Donald Duck in terms of economic determinism, or Great Eurocentric Patriarchal Conspiracies, or whatever other grand Theory Of Everything Susan Sontag propounded in *The New York Review of Books'* latest issue. Yet how plausible, indeed how inevitable, the notion "divine command" seems to those with the slightest grasp of what a rare thing consistent melodic invention is: let alone of the mastery needed to develop such invention for hours at a stretch. Wagner called composing not "the art of melody" but "the art of transition." Had not Puccini—like Wagner—possessed such art at an extraordinary level, no amount of thematic vigor could have brought him sustained dramaturgical greatness. (Witness those Purcell, Handel, Rameau, and Schubert operas now on CD: melodically abundant but, on the whole, theatrically inert.) Fortunately both Budden and Phillips-Matz leave intact, in their very different ways, the mystery of Puccini's muse: a mystery almost as impenetrable to him as it shall always be to us. ■

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BOOKS

[Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy, Carlos Eire, The Free Press, 388 pages]

Dreaming of Cuba Libre

By Jonathan Chaves

The eternal fountain is unseen.
How well I know where she has been
in black of night.
—St. John of the Cross

CARLOS EIRE IS ANOTHER who has found the eternal fountain, in the depths of the blackest night. This book, which has brought me to outright belly laughter and to tears repeatedly, proves it.

Last June, at a conference held at Boston College on the role of the Jesuits in “cultures, sciences, and the arts, 1540-1773,” I encountered him for the first time. He and I were both participants. Eire, the T. Lawrason Riggs Professor of History and Religious Studies at Yale, spoke at a plenary session on “Juan Eusebio Nieremberg, S.J. (1595-1658), Baroque Best-Seller.”

In his talk, Eire presented Nieremberg as a counter-figure to several of the worst aspects of modernity. But beyond this, he contrasted the writings of his author to the moral confusion of our own intellectuals, especially in light of 9/11, in a way one no longer expects to hear from an academic. He came across as a real human being.

And then, last spring, there was Eire in the pages of—*People* magazine, accompanying a very positive review of a new book of his memoirs of growing up in pre-Castro Cuba! I knew I had to get the book and read it. This I did, right away.

For two decades, there has not been an American book as gripping and moving as this one. As a poetic and humor-

ous reminiscence about boyhood, it calls to mind such masterpieces as *The Lost Grove* by Spanish poet, Rafael Alberti, or Pablo Neruda's autobiography. I was reminded too of *Report to Greco* by Nikos Kazantzakis, as well as the only Asian book of this kind worthy to be included in this company, *Something Like an Autobiography*, by—amazingly enough—the great Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa.

But no, these comparisons prove unfair to Eire because he actually surpasses them all. He has their deep poetry, their realization that no “magic realism” is required when reality *qua* reality is itself innately numinous, and he has their ability to bring to life the often hilarious ways in which boys explore, discover, and experiment ... but he has something they lack. He has seen the hand of God somehow hidden beneath the kaleidoscopic wonder of it all. When he tells us that the one book he was allowed to take with him when he was airlifted from Cuba in 1962 at the age of 11, never to return—Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*—actually saved him, we believe him. William F. Buckley Jr. famously complained in *God and Man at Yale* that God had been banished from that institution; but now He has been returned.

It is impossible to select just one scene to epitomize Eire's sure touch in conjuring up his childhood adventures. Sending a lizard to the moon? Killing off all the lizards within the area of one square block? Co-ordinating with four friends to hit with homemade peashooters the world's biggest butt? The greatest breadfruit fight in history? And countless others.

Mark Twain captured the magic and wacky humor of boyhood in *Tom Sawyer*, as did Booth Tarkington in *Penrod*; Eire tells us truly that “Memory is the most potent truth,” and he too possesses a power of memory that is able to translate into prose such glorious moments of boyhood as his encounter with the toy soldiers in the dusty bin of a *quinalla*, or little neighborhood general store:

I couldn't resist the pleas of the poor, neglected toy soldiers. These weren't Cossacks. They were American army men. Nice and green. ... bazooka guy, radio-telephone guy, crawling-with-rifle guy, standing-up-shooting guy, kneeling-shooting guy, grenade guy, bayonet guys, binoculars guy, pistol guy, flamethrower guy, mortar guy, minesweeper guy. ... They called out to me: ‘Take us home. We're yours. We belong to you. Free us. We will fight for you.

Or there is the plight of his friend, Ernesto, after a rock fight in which the boys simply heaved little boulders at each other:

Few noises in the world compare to that of a large rock breaking someone's nose. I won't even try to describe it. ... Ernesto passed out. He was knocked out cold. [He] was bleeding as none of us had ever seen anyone bleed, not even in a movie. Blood was streaming out of what had been his nose like two small rivers. Not at all like the champagne that had spurted out of Jorge's nose for a few seconds at that wedding where he and I got drunk. Not at all like the tiny rivulets that dribbled down Kirk Douglas's face in *The Vikings*, when his eye was mauled by a hawk's talons. These were two swiftly flowing rivers pouring forth from Ernesto's nose, two strong red gods.

Nor can one single out the best of the many symbols that haunt the imagination of boy and man: clouds shaped like Cuba? Rainbow waves of parrot-fish? Bottomless abysses beneath the ocean that surrounds the island? Swimming pools filled with ever-growing populations of sharks?

Eire's portrayals of his family members and Cuba's cast of bizarre characters are unforgettable. There is Eugenio, a neighborhood friend who was “the luckiest and craziest of all of us. ...