

THE new Opera Australia touring production of *Madame Butterfly* is an event with a capital E for a number of reasons.

It will offer a rare opportunity to see professional opera in Tasmania.

It will be a career event for soprano Jane Parkin in her first major role.

And it is Shakespearean director John Bell's first opera work for 30 years.

Opera is often thought of as a gloriously ostentatious form of melodrama — large, loud and colourful. But Bell's production of Puccini's opera will be small and intimate, for both practical and aesthetic reasons.

"*Madame Butterfly* can be done very grandly, with an 80-piece orchestra and lots of geisha, but the emotional content can be swamped in the pageant," Bell says.

"*Madame Butterfly*, *La Boheme* and *Carmen* are about very simple people, not grand god-like people. The settings are very simple. You can get rid of the spectacle and glamour.

"We have just approached it very simply as a drama, and people have commented that it has a great humanity about it," he says.

The Oz Opera production will have 10 singers and a chamber orchestra of 11 musicians, conducted by Simon Kenway.

In a gruelling three-month tour of southern Australia they will perform at 29 different theatres.

Bell's expertise and local knowledge, after 18 years of touring the Bell Shakespeare Company, suited him perfectly to the task of mounting such a production.

He took on the job because he wanted "a bit of a change" and says he would love to do another opera when his Bell Shakespeare commitments permit.

Bell's only other experience of directing opera was not very happy: "I directed *Don Giovanni* 30 years ago for Opera Australia. It was my first opera and I had a huge show on my hands, and I wasn't ready for it," he says.

This time around it has been a breeze.

For a start, Bell says the singers all arrived knowing their roles. "That doesn't happen with actors in Shakespeare plays."

"Shakespeare is harder than opera because the ideas are so complex," he says. "The language in opera is quite simple.

"Of course, the music dominates everything. Once you understand it, it give you the emotional colour and pitch, the movements."

He went through the score, studying it bar by bar, for several months with Kenway, who is the musical director as well as the conductor.

"The big difference between opera and a straight play is that there's not much room for interpretation — the score is so definitive, everything is set," Bell says.

"The only interpretive difference you can make is in the design concept."

The main design decision Bell took was to bring the action forward 60 years, from Nagasaki in the 1890s to Nagasaki under US occupation in the wake of World War II.

"I think the danger of a piece like this is that it can be a bit too decorative, a bit too pretty.

"*Madame Butterfly* is about occupying troops and women being abused and abandoned by them, which goes on today. Armies of all nations have always been involved in that sort of abuse.

"By moving it out of the decorative 19th century and into something a bit more gritty, we are reminded of that," Bell says.

"But it still has a very beautiful Japanese aesthetic."

A major consideration in the design was those many theatres it will be staged in and their respective physical constraints.

Puccini writes his libretto in Italian, but this production will be sung in English. The decision not to use surtitles was partly because of the difficulty of setting them up in all the theatres. But it was also part of Bell's plan to make the opera as intimate an experience as possible.

"It works really well in English, it means it's really accessible," says Parkin, 32, who will alternate with the more seasoned Elisa Wilson as



LOVE FOOL: Jane Parkin as Cio-Cio San and David Corcoran as Pinkerton in Opera Australia's new touring production of *Madame Butterfly*.

Human butterfly



applaud
GABRIELLE RISH

the tragic Japanese girl Cio-Cio San, who falls in love with the US lieutenant Pinkerton.

"I initially learned it in Italian because I wanted my voice to flow, then learning it in English wasn't too much of a problem because of my acting training," Parkin says.

"One of the hardest things was that I'm nearly six feet tall and I tend to talk with my hands and with my body going in all directions.

"Both Elisa and I are very strong people. We had to learn to channel our inner Japanese schoolgirl.

"John had a Japanese lady come in as a cultural adviser and she taught us how to move. Gradually my arms came down and I started

"It's mainly Puccini who wrote spinto roles — he loves to put young girls through tortures."

becoming more demure."

Parkin has been in the Opera Australia chorus for two years, since finishing a diploma of opera at the Sydney Conservatorium.

Her biggest role for the company prior to *Madame Butterfly* was singing Fiametta in *The Gondoliers* as an understudy, so Cio-Cio San represents a huge leap.

"The role is a gift — you go through such a huge musical and emotional journey," she says.

"You come on 20 minutes in and sing almost constantly to the very end of the opera. You are pushed to the limit emotionally and vocally."

Puccini wrote the role for spinto soprano, which Parkin says is an unusual category.

"There are five or six categories of soprano, mostly to do with how high or low you sing.

"Spinto is an extension category — a lyric soprano pushed to extremes because of the nature of the role.

"Normally, lyric soprano is for young girls who fall in love. Spinto is for young girls who fall in love and then go through some incredibly awful stuff, like *Tosca*. It's mainly Puccini who wrote spinto roles — he loves to put young girls through tortures," she says.

Parkin will appear as Cio-Cio San on the second night of Hobart performances and is

particularly excited about that show.

"My singing teacher for the longest time, Jane Edwards, is now in Hobart," she says.

"She was teaching singing at Wollongong University, where I did my Bachelor of Creative Arts. I kept on going back to her for 10 years and was really upset when she moved to Hobart.

"But I'm really excited that she will see me performing in Hobart."

● **Madame Butterfly will be at the Theatre Royal, Hobart, on July 24, 25, and 26.**

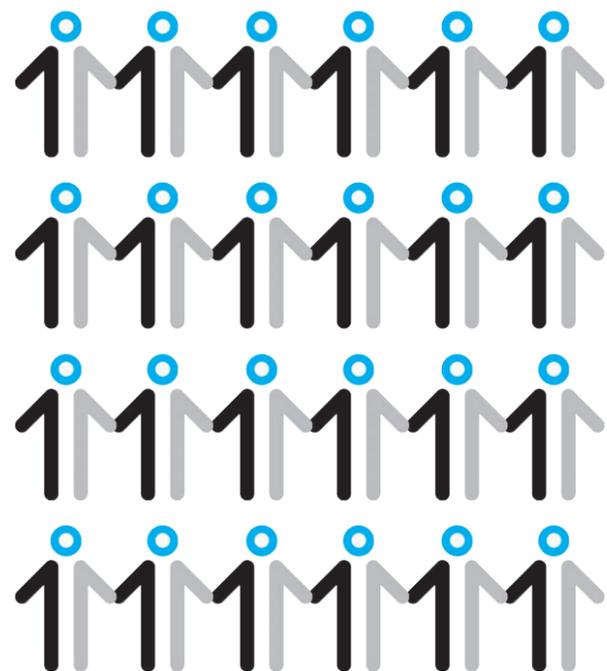
On show

Today: Mimmie Ngum Chi, from the Cameroon Grasslands, will open the *Art of Cameroon and her Neighbours* exhibition at the Sidewalk Gallery, Castray Esplanade, Hobart, 2-5pm. The exhibition includes more than 160 works in wood, ivory, clay and bronze.

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