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//Casa Verdi — where dreams and reality merge

IL BACIO DI TOSCA (Tosca's Kiss)

Directed by Daniel Schmid
Rated G
The Dandy Cinema

The Casa Verdi opened in Milan in 1902, a year after the death of the great composer himself. He is said to have regarded it as his finest achievement.

It is a home for old musicians, particularly the men and women of the opera — those "less fortunate in life than I and who were not endowed with the gift of thrift".

His royalties supported it for 60 years, but it has relied on benefits and donations since the copyright expired. More than 1,000 composers, conductors, musicians and singers have passed through there.

This is the setting for Daniel Schmid's feature documentary, *Il Bacio Di Tosca*, one of the most moving films you could see this year.

It was screened at this year's Sydney Film Festival, where it was widely praised. It might easily have been grotesque but for the compassion and affection in every frame.

Schmid, a Swiss filmmaker who has worked mainly in feature films (*Hecate*, *Shadow of Angels*), concentrates on the dreams and reality of a handful of the guests of Casa Verdi, and we are constantly aware that the line between the actual and the imagined is very tenuous.

The star of the show is Sara Scuderi, a great diva of the 1930s, particularly in the role of *Tosca*, Puccini's tragedy of an opera singer.

But there is also Giovanni Puligh-eddu, the composer with long wispy



Former diva Sara Scuderi — one of Schmid's accomplices.

hair who is never satisfied with the performances during the sing-alongs, Leonida Bellon, a barrel-chested romantic tenor with a flair for the dramatic, and Giuseppe Manacchini who keeps his beloved costumes in a trunk in the cellar.

Schmid has said that he regards every shot in a film as an act of "terrorism and pornography" because of the presence of the camera, "the film-maker as vampire" complex. This can certainly be true,

but in this one it is hard to know who's feeding on whom.

The people at the Casa Verdi are natural exhibitionists. They become Schmid's accomplices. Their co-operation with the camera becomes playful, even conspiratorial.

For example, there is a scene, perhaps the most charming in a film packed with charm, in which we see Sara wandering down a dim corridor, quietly singing an aria from *Tosca* to herself.

The camera is behind her, and as she reaches the crescendo, she stops, seemingly lost in her memories. It is haunting and disturbing and beautiful all at once, but just when you think the scene is over, she turns and looks directly into the camera and giggles.

In moments like these, I could not tell if it was a rehearsed or just the documentarist's luck. This is intentional. Schmid is out to blur the lines between feature and documentary as well as between dreams and reality.

One scene starts in darkness. Then a door opens and Giuseppe Manacchini gropes for a light, before opening the trunk where he keeps his costumes. The camera was waiting for him, and there is no pretence that it is not there, as there would be in a *cinema verite*.

Schmid's camera roams around the halls of the Casa Verdi like a spirit, pecking into the rooms where one or two or 20 may be gathered for a recital, or into the private rooms for a tour of the memorabilia.

There are set pieces, in which the musicians perform for the camera. After one of these, Sara Scuderi smiles self-consciously at the camera and says: "How silly of me. I feel like crying." We know just how she feels.

For some, the memories brought back by these recitals are distressing. Their virtuosity does not match their depth of emotion and it is very personal and painful.

The kiss of the title is both the kiss of art and of death. Death is constantly in the wings, but so is life. As one person remarks: "We know the meaning of life here. We weigh it out gram for gram."

One does not have to love opera to enjoy the film because it is not about that. It's about the extraordinariness of ordinary people and I cannot recommend it too highly.

— PAUL BYRNES //