

I've felt pain of a Madam Butterfly baby, says star tenor

VICTORIA LAMBERT

ONE OF Britain's best-loved tenors will take to the stage this week as Pinkerton in a spectacular new production of Puccini's *Madam Butterfly*.

But unbeknown to his fans, James Edwards will draw on years of personal anguish to inform his portrayal of the allous lieutenant.

In the opera, Pinkerton deserts his Japanese lover, Butterfly, leaving her pregnant, only to return three years later, proposing to take the child away.

The agony caused by the separation of an infant from its mother is a pain that Edwards feels all too keenly.

The star was adopted as a baby and, in an emotional interview, he has spoken for the first time of how the torment caused by his abandonment endures to this day.

In later life, Edwards discovered his biological parents living within five miles of his adoptive family and, as a teenager, he went to the same nightclubs as his half-sisters, without then knowing of their existence. Although recon-



Edwards reintroduced his birth parents at an opera he was in

ciled with his birth parents, he believes it is impossible for adopted children to "get over" the pain of being put up for adoption.

"I was adopted, no - abandoned," he says. "I experienced that intense sense of emotional loss that all children who are placed with a family other than their genetic one, whatever the circumstance, go through."

Edwards, who is about to sing in the Raymond Gubbay production of *Madam Butterfly*, was adopted at birth in 1975, and brought up in Southend-on-Sea, Essex.

He is still close to his caring adoptive parents Susan Edwards, now 68, a retired local government officer, and David Edwards, 69, a retired tailor. They also raised four other adopted and foster children: Angela, 48, Jacqueline, 46, Jason, 37 and Emily, 35.

In 2006 Mrs Edwards took a call from a reunification

service saying that his biological parent wanted to make contact. "It was painful for Mum," says Edwards. "Initially she thought someone would take her son away - a stranger from the past."

Edwards began to exchange letters and photos with Janet Weaver, his birth mother, who lived a few roads away and who thought of him as Alex, her preferred name.

"When I first read a letter from my mother it broke me," he reveals. "It said: 'I have thought about you every day, wondering what you are doing.'" He adds: "I cried for 24 hours. The world seemed different to me, my feelings more powerful. It doesn't matter whatever the scenario is when a child is given up by birth parents. The child only sees it as abandonment."

A few weeks after receiving the letter, Edwards went to meet his birth mother. "I stood there and said: 'I'm Alex.' And she said: 'Of course you are'. We had an instant affinity; it was very calm." It emerged that she had been 16 when Edwards was born. The baby was taken away as she was told she was too young to look after it. Her relationship with Edwards's father, her 16-year-old boyfriend, broke down. She later married for 10 years, but had no other children.

"Janet was a bus driver," says Edwards. "It became apparent after the reunification that she possibly drove Susan and me on a job for the company she worked for."

A few years later, Edwards traced his birth father, Chris Stracey. He was married, with two children, and lived close by, on Canvey Island.

"Suddenly I had a mother and a father, and a stepmother and half-sisters, as well as my adoptive parents and siblings," says Edwards.

Edwards is a father himself, to a 15-year-old daughter who lives with his first wife, and a seven-year-old son and a daughter, five, by his second marriage, to mezzo soprano Marie Elliott, 37, with whom he lives in Corsham near Bath. He supports others, via PAC-UK, an independent adoption support agency.

"There are would-be adopted families who want to give all the love they can to children in need," he says. "And there are children who need loving, safe homes. I get that. But there has to be an acknowledgement that the children come first."

For details of support for anyone affected by adoption, contact www.pac-uk.org