



Victorian
Opera

Giuseppe Verdi

LA TRAVIATA

Education Resource

Theatre Studies



LA TRAVIATA - THEATRE STUDIES RESOURCE

INTRODUCTION



Figure 1: La Traviata - Fondazione Pergolesi Spontini © Foto Binci

“A breathtaking production, designed by one of the most influential stage designers of the 20th century whose work has never been seen live in Australia until now.”

– Richard Mills

From legendary European designer Josef Svoboda, comes a towering vision of Verdi’s famous opera, dubbed the ‘Traviata of the mirrors’. Through the extraordinary window of a giant mirror, the audience gazes into the life of the ‘fallen woman’. Violetta Valéry is a celebrated courtesan who must choose between her desire for high society and her longing for love. Australian singing revelation Jessica Pratt brings to life the tragic figure of Violetta, a role often considered the pinnacle of soprano repertoire.

La traviata | Giuseppe Verdi

17 – 29 May 2014 | Her Majesty’s Theatre

Sung in Italian with English surtitles. 2 hours and 10 minutes with two intervals.

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OVERVIEW

Music composed by Giuseppe Verdi
Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave, after the play *La dame aux camélias* (The Lady of the Camélias) by Alexandre Dumas Fils.

EXPLORING THE OPERATIC FORM AS A THEATRE STUDIES STUDENT

As a student of theatre the more diverse experiences you have, the greater the understanding you will gain with regard to the theatre forms that shape contemporary performance. Opera is a unique art form and one that uses many conventions similar to more traditional theatre performance such as narrative, characters, ensemble, drama, climax, and detailed stagecraft.

PRE-MODERN THEATRE

Opera as a theatrical style belongs in the era of Pre-modern Theatre. As a student of Theatre Studies, opera is a distinct style to which you can apply the following Key Knowledge:

- The nature of theatrical and performance analysis
- The ways in which an audience constructs meaning from a theatrical performance
- How theatrical interpretations are informed by the contexts of the playscript (libretto)
- Theatrical styles used to shape a performance
- Acting techniques applied to a play in performance
- Establishment and maintenance of actor–audience relationship
- The use of stagecraft to support and enhance acting

WHAT IS OPERA?

Opera is an art form in which singers and musicians perform a dramatic story. It includes text, called 'libretto', and a musical score. Opera as an art form has its origins in Italy in the late 16th Century. The Italian word *opera* means "work", both in the sense of the labour done and the result produced. Opera is the plural of the word *opus*. In opera there is often a large chorus, as well as key characters. The stories are told through solos, duets, ensembles and chorus work.

OPERA VOICE TYPES:

In opera, there are traditional voice 'types', and a singer's voice type or range usually means they will choose a repertoire that suits their voice range.

Female voices:

Soprano (highest in range), Mezzo-Soprano (mid-range), Contralto (lowest range)

Male voices:

Countertenor (highest in range), Tenor (high range), Baritone (mid-range), Bass (lowest range)





Figure 2: Salon, La Traviata - Fondazione Pergolesi Spontini © Foto Binci

SETTING AND STRUCTURE

La traviata (The fallen Woman) was first performed in Venice in 1853. It has three settings. The first is the salon (living room) in the heroine, Violetta's house. The second setting is Violetta's country house outside of Paris. The final setting is Violetta's bedroom.

Each of the settings is an 'Act' in the opera and traditionally each setting would be lavishly recreated on stage.

The musical structure of the piece includes an **overture** as well as **recitative** moments, **arias** and **operatic chorus**.

In opera, the music drives the story. The story is, in fact, the musical composition. Therefore, in opera, the performers, the conductor and the orchestra work as one to create the performance.

WHAT STORIES DOES OPERA TELL?

Most stories told through the form of opera are highly dramatic and often tragic. They deal with human drama and human emotions such as love, betrayal, conflict and often death. *La traviata* is a highly dramatic opera, one of love, intrigue and tragedy.

STAGING OPERA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Many operas are performed in their original language – Italian, French, or German. In contemporary performance, theatres often use **surtitles**, translations of the sung language into the language of the local audience. Surtitles are generally projected above or beside the performance on small screens.

The characters

Violetta Valéry, a courtesan
Alfredo Germont, a young bourgeois (middle class) man from a provincial family
Georgio Germont, Alfredo's father
Flora Bervoix, Violetta's friend
Annina, Violetta's maid
Barone Douphol, Violetta's protector

Marchese d'Obigny. Friend of Flora
Dottore Grenvil, a doctor who attends Violetta
Gaston Vicomte de Letoreres
Giuseppe, Violetta's servant
Flora's servant
Messenger



SYNOPSIS

In her Paris salon, the courtesan Violetta Valéry greets party guests, including a new admirer, Alfredo Germont. When they are alone, Alfredo confesses his love. At first Violetta protests that love means nothing to her but something about the young man's sincerity touches her, and they meet again. Some months later Alfredo and Violetta are living in a country house near Paris. Trouble intrudes with the appearance of Alfredo's father who demands she renounce his son: the scandal of Alfredo's affair with Violetta has threatened his daughter's engagement. Violetta reluctantly agrees to leave. Later Alfredo, believing Violetta has thrown him over for another lover, confronts her at the party and denounces her. Six months later, Violetta has tuberculosis and does not have long to live. Alfredo discovering the truth rushes to her bedside. The lovers plan to leave Paris forever but after a last resurgence of strength Violetta falls dead at her lover's feet.



Figure 3: Giuseppe Verdi

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

Giuseppe Verdi was born in Roncole, near Busseto in Italy and died in Milan. He wrote over 30 operatic works, of which half are still performed and considered some of the finest in the operatic canon. As a child, Verdi was given lessons in composition and became interested in composing for local theatre. He fell in love with a young woman, Margherita, the daughter of a town merchant. They married in 1836 and had two children, who unfortunately both died in infancy. Their passing was followed by the death of Margherita in 1840 which devastated Verdi.

Verdi's first opera, *Oberto* premiered in 1839. This was followed by an intense period of hard work. It is believed that Verdi's personal tragedies were a contributing factor in the emotionally charged and dramatic compositional style he developed. Verdi's inspiration was patriotic themes, romantic stories, and contemporary and classic literature including drawing inspiration from Victor Hugo, Byron and Shakespeare.

He is considered to have brought Italian Opera to its peak through his technique and musical style.

Some of Verdi's well-known operas include *Macbeth* (1847), *Otello* (1877), *Falstaff* (1883), and *Nabucco* (1842). When Verdi died in 1901 he was admired, revered, and acknowledged as one of the greatest composers Italy had ever produced. His works had virtually monopolised the Italian operatic scene for most of the nineteenth century.

Want to know what some opera terms mean?

<http://www.operaamerica.org/content/education/learningCenter/glossary.aspx>



PRE-VISIT EXPLORATION

1. RESEARCH AND FAMILIARISATION

Seeing opera for the first time can be quite challenging. In its day, opera was a highly popular art form attended by all classes of people. It was the popular culture of its time offering grand stories, glorious music and rich design. Attendees understood its conventions and performance elements. However, contemporary Australians are less familiar with opera. In order to prepare yourself to see *La traviata*, we invite you to do some research:

- Read the story of *La traviata*, its creation, its narrative and the characters:
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/603665/La-traviata>
- Watch a performance:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-jHlfm3_oI
- Explore some images of various interpretations of *La traviata*:
<http://goo.gl/FrQdvp>

2. QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER BEFORE WATCHING LA TRAVIATA

- From your research, what do you anticipate the performance of *La traviata* will be like?
- Why do you think opera is still performed?
- Have you ever watched a performance that had 'surtitles' or 'subtitles'?
- How do you imagine surtitles will impact on the audience?
- What do you imagine the characters of Violetta and Alfredo will be like?
- What is a 'courtesan'?
- Who might Violetta and Alfredo be in a 21st century context?

Victorian Opera has set itself apart from other opera companies with a program that ventures beyond the traditional repertoire, but has chosen one of the world's most popular operas for its season this year.

Verdi's *La traviata*, a mainstay of opera houses everywhere, will be presented by the Melbourne-based company this May 2014, in a 1992 production by Czech designer Josef Svoboda.

Known as the "Traviata of the Mirrors", the production uses a large mirror suspended above the stage to enhance its visual splendour and add a moral perspective.

"The mirrors are a reflection of Violetta and her world. At the end, the audience sees a reflection of themselves, their own lives and hypocrisies."

Richard Mills, Artistic Director

Article from *The Australian* on this Production

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/stage/violetta-through-the-looking-glass/story-fn9d344c-1226706003795>

Josef Svoboda – 1992 production of *La Traviata*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gfvvlvkSHw>



POST- PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

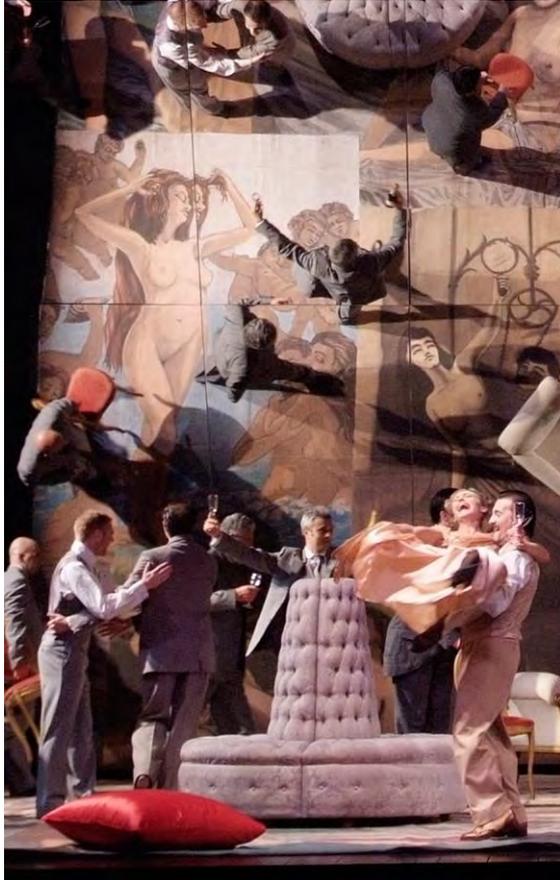


Figure 5: Fondazione Pergolesi Spontini - La Traviata © Foto Binci



Figure 4: Fondazione Pergolesi Spontini - La Traviata © Foto Binci

THEATRICAL STYLES

- Opera is a unique theatrical style. However, what conventions of other theatrical styles did you see in *La Traviata*? Discuss specific examples.
- Were there elements of naturalistic acting?
- Was there melodrama?
- Were there aspects of comedy?
- Were there heightened emotional moments?

INTERPRETATION

- From your research and reading of the libretto, how was this production interpreted to the stage?
- Did the interpretation seem traditional?
- Was the story recontextualised and to what time and era?
- Was this recontextualising effective?
- Is *La Traviata* a story that transfers to the 21st century or is it too old-fashioned?



MEANING

From your viewing of the performance think about how meaning was conveyed and how you, as an audience member, understood what you were seeing and hearing.

Music:

- How did the music create mood, atmosphere, and emotional response?
- Select some key moments of drama or heightened emotion and describe them.
- How did the music drive the story?
- Did the music reflect the era in which the story was set?
- Did the music reflect any recontextualising choices or was meaning lost?

Direction:

- What directorial choices were made that allowed you to make sense of the story?
- How did the directorial choices enable you to get to know the characters?
- Did the directorial choices create specific actor/audience relationships?
- How did the directorial choices allow for ensemble and chorus moments?
- How effective were the directorial choices in the more intimate moments?

Acting:

- Violetta and Alfredo are the main characters in the opera
- How did the performers use their expressive skills to portray these characters?
- How would you describe the theatrical styles used to express and convey these characters?
- How did the music and singing contribute to creating the characters and building the relationships between them?

Themes:

- What do you think are the key themes or concerns of La traviata?
- Are these universal themes? Do they carry across time, culture and identity?
- Were the themes clearly conveyed?



STAGECRAFT AND DESIGN

Set & Properties

- Describe the set design including fixed and moving elements
- How does this production make use of 'theatre technologies'? What are they?
- How would you describe the aesthetic of the design?
- What textures and tones does the design have?
- How would you describe the theatre configuration e.g. Proscenium, end on, thrust, arena?
- Does the design reflect the original contexts of the opera or does it reflect a new interpretation?
- Make a list of key props that you can recall.
- Which characters used them?
- Were some props frequently used?
- Did some props take on symbolic meaning?

Costume, Hair and Makeup

Select two characters from the production of *La Traviata*.

- Describe their costume/s in as much detail as possible
- Consider: colour palette, silhouette, texture, form, representation
- Discuss how hair and make-up complemented costume
- How effective was costume, make-up and hair design in assisting to create the characters?
- What do you consider were the practical choices made about costume in this production?

Lighting

- Theatre lighting traditionally functions to light the actors and the setting
- What particular lighting states do you recall?
- For example, the three settings in *La Traviata* are all interior settings.
- Were there different lighting states within these settings?
- Did lighting help to create mood or atmosphere?
- Did lighting differ during chorus/ensemble moments?
- How did lighting enhance the mood and atmosphere of the final scene with Violetta and Alfredo?
- Did the lighting reflect the interpretation? For instance if the setting is 1850s France, was the lighting complementary to that?

Music/Singing:

- Opera is sung!
- Discuss in detail how the singing of a story impacted on your understanding of the narrative
- Did listening to a sung narrative prove challenging?
- How did the singing help to establish characters, relationships and emotions?

Finally, Victorian Opera hopes you enjoy *La traviata*. It may be your first opera experience but hopefully not your last. Opera is a rich theatrical style to experience as part of your studies in theatre and drama.



POST VISIT REFLECTION

Visit the *La traviata* 'Wall' to explore the behind-the-scenes, read the blogs and watch the timelapse videos of the design online victorianopera.com.au/latraviata.

The Wall

COUNTDOWN

22 DAYS TIL OPENING NIGHT....
[BOOK NOW >](#)

DISCOVER LA TRAVIATA

Get up close and personal with the team from *La traviata*. Learn about the creative process, including a short performance and Q&A session. Monday 28 April, 6pm, The Wheeler Centre. [Find out more >](#)



LA TRAVIATA COMES TO LIFE!



WHEN RICHARD MET JESSICA

Richard Mills recently caught up with Australian soprano Jessica Pratt following her triumph in Lucia di Lammermoor at Milans' famous La Scala theatre. [Read the blog here >](#)



THE SITES OF JESI



Master of Music (Opera Performance) student blogpost

After the performance, reflect on what you have experienced. Also discuss this with your peers. What did you like best about the performance? Who was the most memorable performer? Who was your favourite character and was this different to your expectation? What surprised you? If you were a critic for a newspaper, what would you write? Do you think their responses would be different if it was premiered in 2014?

- Who was the most memorable character? Why?
- What type of scenery was used?
- What were the costumes like

Read the reviews from the critics. An article is usually published in the newspapers a few days after opening night. There may also be reviews in other print media, radio, tv and online.

- What did the critics write about this performance?
- Do you agree with the critics? If you were a critic what would you write?



EXTEND YOUR OPERA EXPERIENCE

Visit our website to explore behind-the-scenes, sign up to workshops and browse through our resources online victorianopera.com.au/education.

The screenshot shows the Victorian Opera website's education page. At the top, there's a navigation menu with options like 'Overview', 'Opera for Schools', 'Youth Opera Program', 'Professional Development', and 'Online Learning'. A video player is embedded, showing a scene from an opera. Below the video, there's a quote from Artistic Director Richard Hill: "Here at Victorian Opera, we believe that the opera is an extraordinary art form with the power to enlighten all ages, and it should be shared with as many curious minds as possible." There are links to 'View our Education Brochure' and 'Download the printable brochure'. The main content area is titled 'The Wall' and features several workshop listings: 'WEEKEND ARIAS' (Ensemble singing and children's chorus repertoire), 'FOR MUSIC THEATRE LOVERS' (Planning your next music theatre production), 'PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CREATING MUSICAL THEATRE WORKSHOP ADULTS' (Gain invaluable industry insights), 'THE RIDE OF YOUR LIFE' (Become a Victorian and experience an international production), and 'GO BEHIND THE SCENES'.

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CONTACT US

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