

La Traviata – Overall Concept Summary

<u>Time Period:</u>	Third French Republic (1880)
<u>Costume:</u>	In-keeping with period
<u>Set:</u>	Starts naturalistic and gets progressively less so
<u>Intervals:</u>	2 - after Act 1 & after Act 2 (i)

When preparing for this project, we were intrigued by the idea that tuberculosis was commonly known as consumption because it seemed to ‘consume’ the sufferer; slowly draining them of colour, weight and life. We thought this a good place to start with set design, where we have attempted to draw a parallel between the physical world of the set and Violetta’s medical condition.

Our sets are based on naturalistic spaces - rooms that are laid out as their historical counterparts would have been – but with part of those spaces beginning to fade, to become translucent and lose substance. Just as Violetta struggles with a world that is slowly disappearing (her health, her love for Alfredo, her society of friends - all slowly are leached from her), her world shows signs of disappearing as well.

In the novel *La Dame aux Camélias* upon which the Traviata story is based, the Violetta character shares with the Alfredo character her true thoughts of society life; the Alfredo character remarks on her ‘*sad life, of which I caught some glimpse through the golden veil which covered it ... whose reality the poor girl sought to escape in dissipation, drink, and wakefulness ...*’. It is this ‘golden veil’ that we intend to remove from Violetta’s world piece by piece as she gets sicker and sicker.

To heighten this interplay between reality, time and space, we will seek to reflect in the set design a manifestation of Violetta’s illness – starting with naturalism then becoming less and less literal until in the final moment of the opera we abandon any semblance of the realistic completely. Just as Violetta’s grasp on her world becomes less and less stable, the artifice of the theatre becomes less and less necessary.

We were also interested in using the bridges between the scenes themselves to draw closer links between action and consequence. Dumas writes that a courtesan dies twice – the first time when her beauty fades. To this we might also add that she dies if she loses the men who support her life as a ‘kept woman’. We see the events of Act 2 (ii), when Alfredo publicly shames Violetta, as the beginning of her final descent which reaches its conclusion in Act 3. By running these scenes together without the usual interruption of an interval before Act 3, we hope to more closely show the relationship between the events of Flora’s party and Violetta’s death and to also create a closer focus for the audience on Violetta’s struggle for life. With an interval interrupting the action, it is easier to isolate the actions of Alfredo and Germont from Violetta’s final illness; by staging these last two scenes together, we aim to make it much more difficult for them to avoid the guilty association between their actions and the death of Violetta.

Act 1

A naturalistic entryway with a door on the SR of the set leads down some stairs to a sunken floor. Along the US wall another row of stairs leads to a landing. This US wall is made of gauze with the decorations of the wall painted onto it. When lit from the front it appears as solid as the other walls, but when lit from the back becomes ghostly and semi-transparent. US of this wall is a space only ever inhabited by Violetta – it is the place of her mind. Several tables are in the DS space, which is also dominated by a chandelier.

Party guests will start in this space at the very beginning of the opera, frozen in place, while Violetta uses the music of the prelude to move among them. She starts her journey from the upstage room, journeying from the transparent world of the death that nearly claimed her back into the world of the living. She carries a candle which she uses to light the chandelier – this is her attempt to steel herself and summon the courage to rejoin society.

At the end of the act, Alfredo appears firstly in Violetta's imaginary space US and then, when she makes the decision to be with him, she joins him there and abandons the naturalism of the rest of the space for the promise of his love.

Act 2 (i)

This space is again dominated by a combination of naturalistic, substantial elements and the ghostly, insubstantial symbols of Violetta's illness and ill-fated love encroaching on her reality. On SL is the lovers' bedroom – as this room contains the fullest expression of Alfredo and Violetta's love, it is the most naturalistic space in the scene, with a large 4-poster bed and a writing desk. Wooden roof beams are also visible and on the wall hangs a portrait of Manon Lescaut reading a book (in the novel, the Alfredo character gifts the Violetta character a copy of *Manon Lescaut*).

On the SR side is a kitchen area with a table, a stove against the US wall and a door leading outside. The outside world has already begun to encroach on their private world, and so the US wall of the kitchen is semi-transparent and some of the garden outside can be seen through parts of the wall. Separating the two rooms is a third wall, attached to which is a door through which characters must travel to go from one room to the other. This wall is already so 'consumed' that it is completely transparent – a symbol of Violetta and Alfredo trying to sustain their lives together even as the walls between their romantic fantasy and reality become ever thinner.

This use of a split-space for Act 2 (i) has a number of aesthetic choices at its core; it will appear a smaller space than the party of Act 1, and also carries a more domestic atmosphere - there is an honesty here that is not in Act 1. Dramatically, a split-space also lets us play with ideas of public and private - there is something heart-warming if we open the act with Alfredo still in bed, thinking on his love for Violetta. Equally, there is something desperate about Germont pursuing Violetta into her bedroom to beg her to break it off with Alfredo.

Act 2 (ii)

We wanted to create a stark aesthetic contrast to Violetta's party, so Flora's party is almost the opposite – where in Act 1 we had a space that was full of open space and lightness of air, Act 3 is dark, smoky and dominated by small booths with heavy velvet curtains that invite privacy, intimacy and secrecy. In the main space are several square tables on wheels that dancers can stand on and that can be pushed around during the matador dance in a choreography that utilises the whole space. These tables are also pushed together to form a giant rectangular table for the card game. Instead of the set containing any 'semi-transparent' element (we are, after all, in the heartland of Society at Flora's party), our insubstantial element comes from Violetta's costume – her wasting illness is being mirrored in her dress. It still carries its period silhouette and shape, but is now becoming more leached of colour.

We repeat the dramatic device of a chorus freeze here, when usually they would all disappear for dinner, to allow Violetta and Alfredo to feud. Again, this symbolises the omnipresence of a society that won't allow our lovers to remain together. Violetta and Alfredo argue on top of the card table and when he throws his winnings at her, she remains there in shock – her first death.

Act 3

The transition to Act 3 is achieved by everyone exiting the space at the end of Act 2, leaving Violetta on top of the card table. White gauze walls are flown in to obscure the booths of Flora's party and we are now in a completely sterile space – Violetta's illness has now drained all colour from the world. The card table is now Violetta's deathbed and it is here that she dies her second death. By linking these 2 scenes so closely, we leave no doubt that it is the actions of the male protagonists that are to blame for creating the environment in which her happiness will finally be consumed, and her life soon afterwards.

Dumas tells us in the novel that the Violetta character '*had not a single real friend by her bedside during the two months of her long and painful agony.*' We feel the best way to support this idea, and bring to a satisfactory conclusion our non-naturalistic design thread, is to have Violetta retreat into her mind for the majority of Act 3. After she has sent Annina out to give her money to the poor, Violetta descends into hallucination brought about by her obsessive re-reading of Germont's letter and the carnival outside, and imagines a happy ending for herself where all is forgiven and she ends up with the man she loves. Every other voice in this final scene would be delivered from behind one of the walls, where a shadow would be projected to show Violetta's hallucinations. When she dies, all the walls will be flown out to reveal the bare theatre and the full company standing US. A light shines on them from the very back US wall and Violetta makes her way towards it. In the final moments, then, we see the last stripping away of the 'golden veil' – death needs no theatrical set.