

Overall Concept

The Nightmare Traviata

The story of La Traviata is one of the most popular and well-known in the operatic canon. Its grand themes of love, betrayal and hierarchy remain almost universal in their application and the allure of its titular heroine – at once a courtesan and a sympathetic lover – has enthralled audiences who are attracted as much to her glamorous lifestyle as the tragedy of her death. While contemporary audiences of the opera's premiere would have been intimately acquainted with both the story and the societal structures that provide the framework for the narrative, modern opera-going audiences are several generations removed from this time. Rather than highlighting the nuanced relationships within the social hierarchy of the piece, then, I have chosen to re-frame the story in a manner which highlights the grand-scale of the piece's emotional content in a world that mirrors the context of the original. In order to achieve this, I have employed a **minimalist** and **abstracted** design concept that removes the elaborate trappings that are often employed for this piece and, in so doing, hope to focus keenly on the emotional journeys and the relationships between the protagonists.

By electing to present the piece in a minimal set, we will achieve an extreme clarity in the story of the relationships. There is nowhere for the performers to hide, no elaborate sets to distract the audience from their experience with, and judgements of, our main characters. In addition to the minimalist set we will play with space and time, with a use of non-naturalistic movement, pause and repetition allowing us to further highlight individual moments between characters.

The first key element is **identity**. Dumas fills in the novel which inspired Traviata gives his courtesan a name and an identity of her own: Marguerite. Indeed, it is only in passing that we learn of her nickname *Camélia* – a shortened version of *La Dame aux Camélias* which was a name given to her on account of her shopping habits at a Parisian florist. Verdi and Piave are not so kind – our heroine is defined absolutely by her role as a courtesan; everyone refers to her by her courtesan name and she's never given an opportunity to escape it. For this reason, I want to make a feature of her other name 'La Traviata' within the set.

The second key element in my exploration of the piece is the **violence** displayed by the men of the world of the opera. The chorus are usually staged as a passive, fairly benign *en bloc* representation of society, yet they are described in *La Dame aux Camélias* as men who would '*despise a woman at first sight*'. Indeed, writing of the moment which in the opera is Violetta's Act 1 stumble, we are told that '*Of those who were at the supper, [Alfredo] was the only one who had been concerned at her leaving the table.*' By commenting directly on the aggressive animalistic appearance of the men in this piece, I aim to create a world in which the **brutality** of the treatment of women is so omnipresent that Alfredo and Violetta's relationship is seen for what it really was – a rare thing snuffed out too soon.

Set

The minimalist set contains very few elements, with the majority of the focus being on the interpretation of the text and the relationships between characters.

Sign

A large sign with individually illuminated letters in two parts spelling the words 'La Traviata'. The sign is flown in and hangs over the scene in Act 1, before being lowered to the floor during the Act. It returns as a light fixture in Act 2.1, the card-playing table in Act 2.2 and deconstructed on the floor in Act 3.

The sign is both a reference to the way that Violetta is defined by the male-dominant society in this world and also to the sense of identity she feels she has to uphold in order to be happy. It is both a sense of extreme discomfort when alone and a character she can assume in order to keep herself protected in a society that values her as a courtesan and not a person.

Doors

A series of doors – exactly like rehearsal room doors, mounted on a wooden frame and with wheels on the bottom – which can be manipulated by the chorus to create entries, exits and rooms. They are manipulated by the chorus, who as 'Society' are able to re-frame and re-construct the world according to their collective whims.

Unfinished Walls

For Act 2.1, the backdrop is of white walls that have had a house sketched out on them. This abstracted and unfinished representation of what should be a cosy domestic scene is meant to speak clearly about how a society built on hierarchy won't allow anyone to set out on their own path. The house, just like Violetta and Alfredo's dream for a future together, will never be allowed to be realised.

Chairs

There are chairs in each of the acts that stand as representative elements for the furniture and décor of the scene. They are, like the moving doors, merely functional pieces of set that are deliberately devoid of embellishment. They can be utilised by characters to give themselves status (or remove it from others) and to highlight the particular emotions of characters who, for dramatic purposes, might want to stand apart from the crowd.

Prosthetics

Prosthetics and make-up will be used to create characters whose appearance is dictated by their 'inner selves', with the chorus and servants grotesque, the friends of the lovers less so, and Violetta and Alfredo as themselves.

All performers (male and female) except for Alfredo and Violetta will be wearing prosthetics to make their faces look like pigs; This nightmarish combination of elements will serve to emphasise the disgust and fear of this society and those who are involved in it. This is a society that degrades and is degraded, that debases and is debased. Hair and other make-up will differentiate between class, gender and age.

Costumes

Costuming will be updated to the 1920s period, with Violetta's party more elegant and Flora's party more inspired by the 'flapper' movement.

Violetta & Alfredo

The only characters to not be fitted with prosthetics, their 'inner selves' are drawn to the purity of a love that is forbidden by the rest of their society. They stand out like two angels among a sea of demons, and so we as an audience are on their side.

Violetta's costuming and make-up to be consistent with the styles of Gloria Swanson, star of the silent film era and queen of melodrama. Swanson was known for her unhappy love-life, her mistreatment at the hands of husbands who believed they 'owned' her and, in this way, has at least some aspects of her life mirrored in the story of Violetta (and of Marguerite in Dumas' novel). This additional layer of theatricality to her costume and make-up will re-emphasise the difference between her and the other courtesans.

Alfredo's make-up will be similar in style to the male silent-era film stars, which will also help to differentiate him from the other characters on the stage.

Gastone, Flora & Annina

The friends and accomplices of the lovers, they are nevertheless part of the corrupt society of the aristocracy. Their prosthetics will not be grotesque, but rather an attractive mix of porcine and human features.

Germont pere, Grenville, the Marchese, the Barone

Aged and enmired in the quagmire of societal morality and their respective places in the aristocracy, their costume will reflect their stations while their grotesque faces will hint at their inner corruption.