

Detailed Staging Notes

It should be mentioned that these staging notes are only for the purposes of illustrating some ways in which the conceptual ideas of the project might be brought about and, as always, it will be the work done in the rehearsal room between director, performer and conductor that determines the final manner in which the staging is realised.

It has been assumed that the opera will be performed in its entirety and without cuts. This, too, could change subject to the preferences of performers and conductor.

Act 1

Violetta's Party

A raised entry way with double doors leading from SR to a sunken floor, a carpet run lining the steps. Along the US edge are more raised steps that lead to a gauze wall which has been painted to look like the rest of the room when lit from the front. Beyond it is a small garden courtyard which is only visible when the gauze is lit in a certain way. US left there is an entrance from garden into main space. Above is a slanted glass roof suspended above.

When the curtain opens, we see the assembled chorus already in the space, but frozen as silhouettes against a bright light that fills the courtyard US of the gauze wall. During the prelude, Violetta will slowly make her way from this space and into the main space.

While the US space remains lit, the main body of the space remains dark, and it is only Violetta in a follow spot that allows us to see any detail as she passes through the frozen ranks of chorus. Violetta carries a candle, with which she lights the chandelier that is the middle of the room and when that is raised to its highest position, the new music to announce the party starts, with those who are frozen in the space beginning to dance, as if they had just been stopped in mid-waltz.

There is much laughter and greeting noise as people arrive through the door and watch the dancers. A sudden burst of arrivals prompt the chorus to start singing and Violetta crosses quickly to greet Flora and the newcomers. Violetta is having a great time as hostess, and her recent ill-health seems behind her.

Alfredo arrives and Gastone, who has already been at the party, hurries over to him to introduce him to the hostess. Violetta announces that dinner is ready, and several servants bring out plates of food that are placed on the tables in the main space. Guests mill about to go and look at the spread, and some other couples start dancing to the new tempo, still others line up to give their greetings to Violetta, and it is this line which Alfredo and Gastone join.

As Gastone approaches, Flora tells Violetta that she will go and do some reconnaissance on the newcomer and interjects herself between Alfredo and his target.

The chorus re-enter the space for *'Beviam'* and look on expectantly *'si, si, un brindisi'*. Alfredo, reluctant to do a toast at all, is finally convinced not by Gastone but by Flora, and makes his way to the steps on SR. When Violetta joins the toast, she moves from SL to the centre of the space, which holds everyone spell-bound. The rest of the brinidisi occurs with Alfredo and Violetta on CS, engaging in a dangerous love affair with body language that is recognisable to all.

'Che e cio?' the lights flicker, breaking the spell between Violetta and Alfredo. Violetta's invitation to dance is to the whole crowd, who start to assume dancing positions in the main space. Violetta's excuses *'nulla, nulla'* are accepted by the crowd who are impatient to dance and as they begin to dance, Violetta moves DS by the tables to lean on them for support. Alfredo follows her a little way to watch – the only one of the gathered crowd who is more concerned with Violetta than with showing off on the waltzing floor. Violetta picks up a champagne glass to steady her nerves and notices how pale her hands are *'O qual pallor!'*. Alfredo goes to get her another champagne glass as an excuse to get close to her, and she turns sharply when he offers it to her *'voi qui?'*. After a moment, Violetta insists on going to dance floor *'sto meglio'* and, to remain talking with her, Alfredo partners her for the dance. They converse while dancing, and then the lights change and the chorus dance in slow motion when Alfredo breaks the tempo of the music *'Ah, si!'*. While the rest of the world is in slow motion, Alfredo and Violetta are free to move about the room in real time as they sing their duet. The room moves in real time again when Gastone interrupts Violetta and Alfredo *'Ebben? Che diavol fate?'*, and then as everyone else dances, Alfredo and Violetta have to be careful to ensure their interactions are kept low-key. Alfredo takes the flower that Violetta gives him and exits.

The chorus all applaud at the end of the waltz and then turn to Violetta to say their goodbyes; everyone leaves through the SR door. Violetta, left alone, thinks on her meeting with Alfredo and is interrupted by Alfredo's voice, which sounds from the US room, although it is lit in such a way that we can't see him. She listens to his voice and then, in the cabaletta, has a true battle within herself. On Alfredo's second vocal entrance, the lighting changes so that we can see him in the US room – she is unable to shake thoughts of him off, and the act ends with her making a decision to go to Alfredo in the US space.

- INTERVAL -

Act 2, scene i*The Country House*

The space is divided into two adjoining rooms – a bedroom with a bed and a door leading to another space; and a kitchen area with a door leading outside. The bedroom is substantial, representing the stability of Alfredo and Violetta's relationship and their feelings for one another; the kitchen wall starts to become more insubstantial as it gets higher, reflecting the incessant pressure from the outside world on their relationship. There is a difference in the floor patterns between the two rooms to help differentiate them; there is also a gauze wall dividing the rooms at a slight angle – this wall is completely transparent, representing the inability of the lovers to ever truly separate their personal lives from their public ones.

Alfredo starts in the four poster bed; he has been sleeping-in while the business of the day has gone on without him. He sings of Violetta as he dresses, looking back fondly on the bed where they spent the previous night. He goes through the door and discovers Annina, who has just entered through the kitchen door and was hoping not to be discovered. He interrogates her and then, resolving to go to Paris to set things right, exits through the kitchen door.

Violetta enters through the bedroom door, calling Alfredo's name. Annina is in the kitchen and answers. She and Violetta discuss things in the kitchen and when Giuseppe enters with letters, Violetta leaves her personal correspondence on the kitchen table and goes into her bedroom to read Flora's letter. Giuseppe announces the arrival of Germont and Violetta, hurriedly fixing her hair, moves from the bedroom to the kitchen to meet him. Annina curtsies as Germont enters and takes his hat and coat and hangs them on a hook in the kitchen. Violetta is affronted by Germont '*Donna son io, signore, ed in mia casa*' and Annina feels caught in between them until Violetta dismisses her after '*...Non l'osò finora – rifiuterei*'. Annina exits through the middle door, closing it behind her, but stays in the bedroom trying to listen in on the conversation on the other side.

Once Annina is gone, Violetta pulls out a piece of paper from the pile of correspondence on the table to show Germont. Their conversation continues with Germont at the table until the line '*due figli*' which surprises both Violetta and the eavesdropping Annina. After Violetta's '*Ah, comprendo - dovrò per alcun tempo da Alfredo allontanarmi*', Annina feels she has overheard enough and exits through the Bedroom door. Violetta struggles to understand what Germont really wants of her, and when the realisation dawns, she reacts with violence '*Ah no! - giammai!*' and then flees to her bedroom to be alone '*Ah! preferiro morir!*'.

She lies sobbing on her bed while Germont from the kitchen side of the door tries to talk her around '*E grave il sacrificio...*'. Violetta, crying on her bed, nevertheless stands to listen to what he has to say and slumps with her back against the door '*Grand dio!*'. Violetta staggers to the bedpost for support '*E vero, e vero*', while Germont, sensing she is listening, redoubles his efforts to talk to her through the door. As Violetta sinks to the bed '*Così alla misera*' Germont slowly opens the door to look into her bedroom and watches her from the doorway.

Violetta looks up, straight ahead, and fighting back tears gives in '*Ah! Dite alla giovine*', which brings Germont into the bedroom, to lean against one of the bedposts and accept Violetta's sacrifice. As she finishes, Violetta lays on her bed and cries into her pillow at the unfairness of it all. Germont, feeling fatherly towards her, tries his best to comfort her from the bedpost. Violetta sits up slowly to repeat her vow that she will leave Alfredo; this time, Germont sits on the bed with her and shows an almost paternal care for her, holding her while she cries.

Suddenly aware of her situation, Violetta stiffens and moves downstage, facing away from Germont and wiping the tears away from her eyes – '*Imponete / Non amarlo ditegli*' It is a hard conversation for Germont to have with Violetta, having just seen her so upset – he almost has to force the words out '*partite*'. Violetta hugs him and then sits down at the desk in the bedroom and starts to write. She puts down her pen momentarily '*Morrò!*' but then continues writing, trying to dissociate herself from what she is doing. Germont watches on from the end of the bed, then stands to promise that he will one day tell Alfredo.

Annina half-enters the room through the Bedroom door, but retreats quickly when she sees that Germont is still there. Violetta and Germont embrace before their first '*Addio*'. Germont is almost through the middle door when Violetta says '*Conosca il sacrificio,*' – he looks back, clearly having destroyed the life of a young girl so like his daughter, and all he can say is '*si*'. Violetta closes the middle door on Germont '*Felice siate, addio*' and he exits through the Kitchen door, while Violetta collapses to the bed and weeps.

Violetta sings through her tears on the bed, looking at the desk where she has written the letter. Annina re-enters through the Bedroom door and sits on the bed, holding Violetta. Violetta stands and makes her way to the desk, she gives the letter to Annina, who takes it and exits through the Kitchen Door. Violetta sits down to write her letter to Alfredo at the desk, facing DS so she doesn't realise when he arrives home until he loudly closes the Kitchen door, which causes Violetta to panic and try to hide the letter. Alfredo enters the bedroom, pacing and pre-occupied until he sits on the edge of the bed in frustration. Violetta joins him on the bed, holding him close and rocking with him. She then stands up and runs out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, where a confused-looking Giuseppe has just entered. She pushes past him and out the Kitchen door and Giuseppe gives chase a little way before returning to the house through the kitchen door, which he leaves open.

Giuseppe and Alfredo have their conversation and the Messenger steps into the house through the open kitchen door with the letter from Violetta. Alfredo takes it and tries to make light of it in front of Giuseppe and the messenger '*A raggiungerla forse ella m'invita*' but his nerves get the better of him and he takes the letter into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. Giuseppe escorts the Messenger out through the kitchen door, but leaves it open. Alfredo continues to read the letter and then attempts to run after Violetta – he flings open the middle door and finds his father standing in the kitchen doorway. He reacts with surprise and then embraces his father, who sits him down by the kitchen table. He takes the letter from Alfredo and talks to him earnestly '*Di Provenza il mar, il suol*' trying to take his mind off Violetta. Alfredo listens, trying to work out what his father is trying to say through the haze of his own despair. After the first stanza, Alfredo stands and walks away from his father into his bedroom and runs his hands absent-mindedly over the desk where Violetta wrote the letter only moments ago. Germont follows his son into the bedroom and talks to him from near the doorway, being careful to observe his son's reactions. He gathers Alfredo and leads him to the bed, then sits on the chair that was at the desk. He gently tests the waters with Alfredo '*Né rispondi d'un padre all'affetto?*', who then jumps up from the bed and runs back into the kitchen in an attempt to work it all out himself '*Mi lasciate!*' Alfredo finally looks at his father in the eyes '*Dunque invano trovato t'avro?*' and then bursts into tears and hugs him – he's a young man who thought everything was going to be fine and suddenly he doesn't know what to do.

Germont is taken aback by this and attempts to comfort his son as best he can '*No, non udrai rimproveri*'. Alfredo sits at the kitchen table in despair while his father sings over the top of him.

If there is a cabaletta, Alfredo stays at the table getting more and more hurt and angry as his father tries to talk reason to him, eventually storming into the bedroom to rip down parts of the bed canopy and perhaps overturn the desk in the bedroom. It is then that he sees the invitation from Flora and, brandishing it, runs out through the kitchen door. Taken by surprise, Germont calls out after him through the middle door and then follows him out through the kitchen door.

- INTERVAL -

Act 2, scene ii*Flora's Party*

The space is framed on 3 sides by slightly raised small booths, each with a small round table and 2 bench seats and able to be curtained off by heavy velvet curtains. The two side rows of booths widen as they go towards DS and US the booths run from SL to SR connecting with the two side booths. At the bottom of the booths are steps leading onto the main space. The centre floor contains six square tables around which are several chairs. The atmosphere is thick and hazy – we are joining the party mid-way.

The gypsy girls come streaming from booths on either side to entertain the guests who turn upstage to look at them; the Marchese and Flora can then have their argument on DS-CS. The Matadors reveal themselves in the US booths and then flood the CS area while the dancing gypsy girls mount the tables (re-inforced, of course, in order to be load-bearing) and begin to dance along. Some of the Matadors will move tables towards the gypsy girls and they will then dance as partners over two tables, allowing us to use the lower central space for the chorus and Gastone.

During the dancing, Alfredo enters the space and watches on. After the dance has finished, Alfredo gives the company (and Gastone) an ironic round of applause and they all turn to look at him. He holds a resentment for each of them, especially Flora and Gastone whom he thinks should have told him about Violetta and the Barone.

The small square tables are all pushed together for the card game, forming one big rectangle in the centre of the space. People crowd around to gamble and watch.

When dinner is announced, all the guests stay to watch the confrontation between Alfredo and the Barone. After the last 'Andiam', everyone starts to move towards their booths. On the change in the music, the lights change and the chorus move into slow motion, still on their journeys towards their booths. Violetta and Alfredo argue during the slow-motion sequence, and when Alfredo calls the chorus to join him, the lights change again and everyone hurries back in real time to see what's going on.

Alfredo mounts the table and towers over the top of Violetta while he accuses her in front of the crowd; he pulls his wallet from his pocket and takes out notes which he showers over the top of her, finishing by throwing his wallet at her, which causes her to crumple. Alfredo walks around the table expecting chorus sympathy but is surprised when everyone is on Violetta's side. Flora and Grenville help Violetta to a chair on DS-SL and everyone else faces in at Alfredo, who is suddenly trapped on his island of tables.

Germont suddenly appears in one of the US booths and walks forward to survey the scene. Alfredo, seeing him, races up to him and attempts to hug his father, but Germont pushes him away and goes instead to Violetta. The chorus follow to gather around Violetta, leaving Alfredo again estranged and on his own.

Violetta stands and the crowd moves back to allow her passage through to Alfredo, where she talks honestly to him in front of the assembled crowd then returns to the table to cry as she completes the act.

The act finishes with Violetta standing on the table as the chorus slowly moves back to their curtained booths. Germont walks up to Alfredo, shakes his head and then exits. The Barone walks up to Alfredo, stares him down, then spits his disgust at Violetta and exits. They leave so that by the time the last chord of the act is played, it is just Violetta and Alfredo left in the scene, she standing on the table imploring him to forgive and return to her, he looking up at her disillusioned and hurt. There is a moment of silence between them and then, slowly he leaves through the only box with its curtains open and shuts them fiercely – he has made his decision and won't see her again. After a moment, the music of the Act 3 prelude begins.

Act 3

Violetta's Death

As the music of the act 3 prelude starts, Violetta sinks slowly to the centre of the table. She has already died her first death – public humiliation and the loss of her patron the Barone – and now we see her physically assume the characteristics of the illness that will cause her ultimate death.

As the prelude progresses, large gauze walls are flown in to cover the booths (which can then be removed). Violetta is now completely surrounded by the symbol of her illness, without escape. Annina enters the space before the walls have hit the ground and looks on with pity before falling asleep DS of the table.

The conceit of this act is that while Annina and Grenville are real, Violetta imagines the rest. This is more in-keeping with the ending of the novel, in which Marguerite dies alone and without being reunited with Armand. We know from the novel that it took her two months to die and, consumption being a wasting illness, was liable to induce hallucinations.

Grenville enters from US and tends to Violetta, before moving US to talk privately with Annina. He exits the same way. Violetta instructs Annina to leave and she does so. From this point on, Violetta enters into her own delusions; drifting into hallucinations brought on by re-reading the letter and hearing the carnival outside.

The carnival is characterised by shadows thrown onto the walls – carnivale masks of grotesque animals on sticks to gain height and create a terrifying backdrop to symbolise Violetta's descent into madness.

Annina's next vocal entrance is from offstage, her shadow appearing on the US wall as a representation of her in Violetta's mind. Similarly, Alfredo, Germont and Grenville (when he reappears) only appear as silhouettes on the US wall. Violetta acts out the scene as if they were there in the room with her. This Act will require intensive work with the performer playing Violetta, as aspects of mime, characterisation and rapid changes of focus will be required for this ending to work. Done well, this will be a tour-de-force scene which will show clearly the depth of love that Violetta has for Alfredo.

The image that she gives Alfredo is the locket that she has worn all through the opera – she offers it up and lets it fall. She is immediately consumed by the imagined voices of her lover and his father, which rouse her into a last reverie of love, before she collapses back onto the table. Right at the end of the act, as she appears to feel better, she stands and walks straight downstage. As she does so, the 3 translucent walls lift, revealing the bare theatre around her. US the entire chorus and principals have gathered, standing still and facing DS. A light shines from behind them, calling Violetta towards it. As the opera ends, she is making her way US towards the light.