

Overall Concept

When re-reading *La Traviata* (and the novel upon which it was based – *La Dame aux Camélias*) in preparation for this project, we were struck by the way Violetta's world seemed defined by her relationships to 'things'. Indeed, the novel begins with the narrator attending an auction of the recently deceased courtesan's belongings, and ends with the Violetta character (in the book, Marguerite) on her death-bed, surrounded by men repossessing things in order to pay the debts she has accrued.

This led us to think about her world as a construct – everything beautifully crafted to fashion a world where she can ignore her impending mortality and instead create a façade to mask her fragility. We therefore determined to create a world made up of these objects, where the characters literally, as well as figuratively, build their lives out of the objects that define them and their place in society.

Oversized objects dominate our sets and take advantage of the compact playing space to allow performers to occupy different levels, as well as symbolising the societal constructs that dominate the lives of the protagonists. The heightened world of 19th century Parisian society is reflected in these over-large objects, helping us to create a world that is based in reality, but overblown to the point of hysteria – these are not the simple things of ordinary people but the décor of an elite section of society with its own codes of behaviour.

Mirrors also play a large part in our aesthetic design choices as they allow people to see themselves both as they want to be and as they really are. Violetta may preen in front of the mirror in Act 1, but it also the mirror that tells her when she is looking dangerously pale. The through-line of our mirrors is explained in more detail below, but it is this duality of honest reflection that we want to play with most of all.

Another key idea was the role of Alfredo's sister, Blanche, in the action. We wanted to have her present in Act 2 when her father confronts Violetta both as a means to expand the story beyond its central protagonists, and also as a representation of the next generation of Parisian society who, history shows us, were profoundly influenced by the actions and decisions of their forebears.

Generally speaking, the dramatic action is to be played naturalistically, with thought given to best reflecting the story that Verdi (and Piave) wanted to tell. We favour an approach that places emphasis on the relationships between the characters which should be heightened, not curtailed, by their non-naturalistic surroundings.

Costume

The costumes are to be in the period of mid-19th century France that Piave and Verdi desired for the piece. They will reflect the elegance and opulence of the aristocracy, and will use colour and texture to differentiate the sartorial changes between the different social settings depicted in the production.

The Set

Constant throughout the opera is the floor, which is fashioned to look like white Carrara marble and forms the base for all the scenes of the opera. A symbol of luxury, and also flexible enough to be incorporated into a number of different scenes, we felt that this was the best flooring option to complement our aesthetic choices.

Act 1 is the scene of Violetta's party and a melange of over-sized objects which both create 'walls' limiting the space and 'platforms' to allow performers to be staged on several different levels at once.

On SR standing upright are several sheets of piano music – the title of the music is visible: *Invitation a la Valse* by Weber. Not only is this music of the period and an appropriate title for Violetta's party, but in the novel it was also the music that Marguerite played in her home when first meeting Armand. DS of the sheet music is a large porcelain statuette of a nude – in the Saxe style of overglazed decoration

On the SL side of the stage is a large, open fan. It is made of painted silk in a floral motif with a carved handle, reflecting the fashion of the time, and extends off into the SR wings. DS of this wall is an oversized gilt-edged mirror with a reflective surface. (this surface is slightly frosted in order to dull the intensity of the stage lighting being refracted, but polished enough that it reflects clear outlines of a person). It is raised at one end, supported by a large emerald-green hard-back book. On the protruding surface of the book, we can see in gold lettering the title: 'Manon Lescaut' - this being the book that Armand gave to Marguerite in the novel and the story which she most loved and identified with.

Act 2.1 is in the country house to which Alfredo and Violetta have escaped in order to continue their love affair. This is a key scene in their journey, as they are trying to build a life together while the rest of society seems intent on tearing it down.

US is a huge pile of boxes, packing cases and half-covered objects that are stacked somewhat precariously, none of which appear to have been opened. At first glance it should be unclear whether someone is in the process of moving in or moving out.

A mess of period leather luggage, tin travel trunks, and wooden packing cases are assembled SR to create a spiral staircase that leads up and off into the SR wings. A set of treads offstage will allow performers to effectively 'climb up' the stairs into a different space. This element was intended to represent the transitory nature of the two lovers' happiness and the fact that their collective baggage is what will ultimately drive them apart.

On SL is a giant envelope with both Alfredo's and Violetta's name written on, along with the address of their country house. This, we felt, was a reflection both of the fact that they were now living openly as a couple, and that their address was no secret. It is this openness which allowed word to spread back to Alfredo's father and began the chain of events that would lead to their ultimate separation.

Leaning against the envelope and half-covered by a dust cloth is a mirror, which has both a symbolic value – having thrown a party where the main feature was a giant mirror, Violetta now seeks to distance herself from that life; and a practical one – once uncovered, characters will be unable to avoid looking at themselves as they leave the space.

Finally, in the DS-SL corner is a giant cherry mantle clock, its face turned into the DS-SL corner, as though Alfredo and Violetta are trying to escape from time itself. Of course, as we discover, time for their love – and Violetta's life – is fast running out.

Act 2.2 is Flora's party, and for this we wanted to create a space that was distinctly Flora's. Where Violetta's party was about allowing the guests to freely enjoy the space, we viewed Flora as someone who would more tightly control her party guests. Where Violetta has an appreciation of fine art and elegance, Flora is less interested in artistic merits and more focussed on creating a 'grand entertainment'.

With this in mind, the set is an oversized jewellery box, which seats two rows of men on each side and contains in its centre a thrust stage. The thrust thus becomes a literal stage both for the dancing and for the card game between Alfredo and the Barone, with the chorus able to gather outside and look in, in the manner of an audience at a boxing match.

The theme of mirrors is continued in this act by a tri-fold reflective wall at the rear of the jewellery box which both enhances the spectacle of the dancing by reflecting every angle of the gypsies, and can also be used to show Violetta in her moment of humiliation isolated like the ballerina in a jewellery box

Our **Act 3** set is based on the idea contained in the novel that Marguerite's house was ransacked as she lay on her deathbed by those to whom she owed money. The sheet music wall has gone, and a single page of the music lies trampled on the floor. The statue has been covered with a large sheet, as has the mirror which has been turned into Violetta's bed. The fan takes on a slightly more dominant position in the set, as though to re-assert that none of this would have happened if Violetta had not given up life as a courtesan. During the prelude, we see men removing boxes of items from the space, echoing the repossession recounted in the novel: *"They had come to seize my things. The bailiff ... opened the drawers, wrote down what he saw, and did not even seem to be aware that there was a dying woman in the bed..."*

Although in the novel Marguerite dies alone, pining for Armand, we were keen to respect Verdi's ending and so wanted to feature a redemption not only of Alfredo but of the other characters in the opera. Just as Society now looks upon Violetta as a subject worthy of empathy and forgiveness, we wanted to mirror this in our staging.

At the very end of the scene, as Germont Père arrives, so too does the male chorus, so that Violetta's death may be witnessed and the guilt for it felt among the male population of the opera. At the very end of the opera, as Violetta dies, Alfredo will pick her up from the mirror and take her off upstage. As he carries her, he will pull the white sheet off the mirror which gives the male characters an opportunity to see their own reflections and thus their own shame.