

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

LA TRAVIATA

BY GIUSEPPE VERDI | SEPTEMBER 26, OCTOBER 1, 3, 5, 2014

'TRAVIATA' STARTS LYRIC SEASON

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By Kelly Luck

KCSTAGE

Some day, we're all going to have to sit down and have a really good think about the sheer number of "inappropriate" women getting killed off in opera. Seriously: Carmen, Aida, Tosca, Cao-Cao San, Mimi, Violetta... even if everyone else manages to make it to the final curtain, if the soprano is the socioeconomic "inferior" to the tenor--and/or the kind of girl you wouldn't take home to mother--her clogs are as good as popped. It's odd when you think about it, and yet for some reason we keep coming back to this story again and again.

Take La Traviata (lit: "The Fallen Woman"--see? Even the title gives it away) for example: eminently respectable Alfredo Germont (Scott Quinn, ten) attends a party hosted by Paris courtesan Violetta (Joyce El-Khoury, sopr) whereupon he declares his undying love. Violetta, aware that she has a terminal illness and having never experienced real, actual love, decides to give him a shot. They move out to a charming place in the country, which she keeps up by selling all her stuff on the sly.

But you can't run from your past, and when Alfredo's father Giorgio (Anthony Michaels-Moore, bar) shows up and guilts her into leaving, she flees back into the arms of her erstwhile lover, Baron Douphol (Robert McNichols, Jr, Bass-Bar). Alfredo follows her and, in a rage, disgraces her in front of everyone. Giorgio, torn by guilt, confesses everything to his son, and they arrive just in time to say their goodbyes as she expires.

The Lyric's production of Traviata is a suitably lavish one: this reviewer has mentioned before their increasing experimentation in sets and design, and this production certainly follows in that trend. Desmond Heely's set designs are lavish and baroque, but with a dingy sort of patina to them, like an oil painting of a grand palais that has been left to moulder in an attic forgotten. This puts an aura of impending mortality over the gaiety of the sets and environs: just like Violetta, the presence of death is always hanging over us, awaiting its time. Ward Holmquist & the rest of the orchestra do right by Verdi, and generally everyone was in fine voice, even if the mikes did occasionally burst into a staticy chorus of their own. Ah, first nights.

As Ms El-Khoury stepped out for her first curtain call at the end of the night, she looked physically and emotionally wrung out. This is understandable: Violetta is a demanding part, and an effective performance demands a lot of whomsoever would assay it. And effective it was, indeed: "If some young girl in the flower of life should give her heart to you," she sings on her deathbed, "Marry her - I wish it. Then give her this portrait: Tell her it is the gift of one who, in heaven among the angels, prays for her and for you." In the light of cold criticism a silly line, pure operatic corn, but handled well (as last night) it never fails to reduce this reviewer to a blubbing wreck. Well, so be it.

Generally speaking the principals and chorus all turned in fine performances, though I do wish the characterization of Giorgio had been taken a little differently: the mask never quite slips away during the second act, and it is only at the end that his human face

really shows. Ashley Wheat makes a good Annina, and reminds this reviewer that she's always wanted to see a story about the secondary characters, the Anninas and Leporellos and so on who carry on looking after things as their masters and mistresses footle about being operatic at each other. The chorus were quite good, and it is a shame they didn't get to share in the curtain calls at the end.

In the end, tragedy is about catharsis, and it is this reviewer's belief that no medium more truly brings about that catharsis than opera. There is something about the combination of music and dance and the just sheer over-the-top exultance that opens up the emotional pipeworks like nothing else. One leaves a tragedy drained but cleansed, wrung out and hung up and quietly thoughtful through the night. And when the spell fades, as in time it must, one finds oneself curiously refreshed. Verdi reminds us why opera endures, and for this we are humbly grateful.