

# LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

## LA TRAVIATA

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

---

PASSION WITH A FLICKER OF FIRE: LYRIC BRINGS ATTRACTIVE PRODUCTION, FRESH VOICES, TO VERDI CLASSIC

September 30, 2014

By Paul Horsley

*The* INDEPENDENT  
WWW.KCINDEPENDENT.COM

The challenge of Verdi's *La traviata* is to present plausible characters and convincing emotional heat within the context of a famously, perhaps notoriously, contrived story line. This is a tall order even for the greatest opera companies, which have tended to rely on fabulous singing, high production values and Verdi's durable if problematic music. The Lyric Opera of Kansas City's season-opening production, which opened September 27th at the Kauffman Center, leans heavily on **Desmond Heeley's** gorgeous, Tony Award-winning sets and costumes (designed for the Lyric Opera of Chicago, with fantastically detailed lighting design by **Kendall Smith**) and a pair of lovers whose fresh voices deliver fascinating if not quite show-stopping moments. With decisive musical direction by **Ward Holmquist**, polished playing by the Kansas City Symphony and direction by **David Gately**, the show contained lovely moments and fine singing but on Opening Night it fell short of a satisfying evening, chiefly because of some less-than-fully-realized characterizations.

The sets, which drew spontaneous applause throughout the evening, consisted of lush trappings for Violetta's Act I salon, highlighted by a pair of gigantic chandeliers, handsomely outfitted walls (including upstage rooms painted with an impressionistic blur) and a massive fireplace. On the latter stood an ornate mirror in which Violetta, already feeling ill, noticed how pallid she looked even in Act I. (This pallor would grow throughout the opera, until she looked borderline *Walking Dead* by Act III.)

The country-house garden of Act II was a delightful display of trellises entwined with leafy growth, against which Flora's outlandishly outfitted party scene—and subsequently, the shockingly spare bedroom of Act III—stood in notably stark contrast, as Heeley steered us through the opera's wide range of emotional temperatures. The handsomely subtle costumes worn by the principals were, in turn, set against the perhaps intentionally garish garb of the gypsy-and-toreador dancers/choristers of Act II.

Soprano **Joyce El-Khoury**, in her Lyric debut, sang with thrilling, full-bodied clarity in Act I. Blessed with an honest upper range and solid technique throughout, she negotiated her big scena ("Ah! for'se lui" ... "Sempre libera") with delicious aplomb despite some inflexibility in the midrange. The voice is indeed an ideal Verdian instrument, and the luminous pianissimo moments were underscored by the fascinating manner in which she was perched sideways on the divan stage left—with arms outstretched to clasp her knees in a pose of gradually wavering defiance.

Joyce's relative youth was revealed in the way in which the musical difficulties of this scene seemed to be approached more as vocal challenges than as inspirations growing naturally from Violetta's shifting emotional states.

**Anthony Michaels-Moore**, a veteran of the role of Germont père, chose to play the stern, unyielding patrician to the hilt, his wooden physical demeanor conveying fully the harsh, petty-bourgeois dad trying to protect his respectable family. His muscular,

not entirely unattractive voice was notably larger than that of the young lovers, willfully harsh as if he were “singing in character.” Yet with so little sympathy shown in Act II, the sudden apologetic shift in the final scene struck one as rather abrupt.

The delight of the evening, both vocally and dramatically, was newcomer **Scott Quinn** in the role of Alfredo. With a voice full of vibrancy and sunshine, and a stage presence that “popped” with charisma, he drew us in right away in Act I (“Un dì felice” ... “Di quell’ amor”), despite dragging the tempo a bit at the outset. That Alfredo could fall for someone as lovely as Violetta in 20 seconds is entirely plausible (hey, it happens to the best of us), but one did not feel an immediate chemistry between the two: This would not happen, really, until Act III (“Parigi, o cara”), where you felt at last they understood their love, alas too late for all involved. Vocally, though, the two were beautifully compatible from the outset, his light, clarion tenor meshing comfortably with the strong curves of her soprano.

Among the other singers I especially liked the arresting soprano of UMKC apprentice **Ashley Wheat** in the small role of Annina and of course the lush bass-baritone of **Robert McNichols Jr.**, always a welcome presence on the Lyric stage, as the excessively sulking Douphol. Also to be noted was the exuberant dancing of Kansas City Ballet members **Tempe Ostergren**, **Charles Martin** and **Joshua Boddin**, who emerged from the powerful chorus during Flora’s party scene, to dance the guests into a frenzy.