

Overall Concept

We have taken as our inspiration for this concept from a line in Dumas' novel *La Dame aux Camélias*, the story upon which La Traviata is based. Talking to her lover Armand, the courtesan Maguerite says: *"It must seem strange to you that I am ready to take you at a moment's notice. Shall I tell you why? ... it is because I shall not live as long as others, and I have promised myself to live more quickly."*

The prelude that opens the opera is akin to the music which begins Act 3; Violetta's condition is getting the better of her and is taking its toll. Such an aching melody is quickly interrupted at the start of the opera, but by the third act there is nothing to stop Violetta's descent into death. Taking the quote above as our starting point, we looked to frame the action of the opera in such a way that it made clear both Violetta's illness and her refusal to accept her fate laying down.

Theme: 'Illness'

In the middle of the 19th century, with tuberculosis responsible for 1 in every 5 deaths in France, treatment wards known as sanatoria began to be opened, often in the re-appropriated ballrooms or hosting salons of large manor houses. Taking this as inspiration we have designed a space that, with a change of décor, serves as Violetta's hosting salon with a ballroom visible beyond; a sun room in the country house; and a drawing room in Flora's Paris apartment. It is also used as a tuberculosis ward both in the Act 1 prelude and in Act 3, complete with gentlemen doctors, nurses and other patients. As a major theme in our concept, we wanted to highlight the tragedy of Violetta's death in the context of the tuberculosis epidemic that was still responsible for 1 in 5 deaths in France at the time of Traviata's composition. For this reason, we wanted Violetta to be treated in a ward among other sufferers - one tragedy among many.

The Set

The scenery consists of a low-rise level that sits at an angle to the front of the stage. Upon this a vast panelled wall fills the expanse of the aperture of the theatre. Protruding from this, a balcony with a curved staircase that sweeps down to stage level. The panelling, although appearing to be a solid wall, is actually a series of doors, providing flexibility for entrances and the ability to change the appearance for different scenes. Each set of panelling is a double door, hinged to open US. Beyond the wall the low-rise level continues, ending at an angle to the back of the stage (to mirror DS), and a moveable set of treads can provide access from this level up through the wall to the balcony from either SR or SL. For Act I, a cyclorama lit with the golden hues of a ballroom is hung US of the wall, creating a light-world that gives context for this space during the Act 1 duet between Alfredo and Violetta. In Act II scene i, the cyclorama will be lit in a Romantic ideal of a large expanse of blue country sky.

The finish on the walls and floor will be mainly white. The wooden panelling is simply and elegantly decorated in reference to 19th Century design and washed with whites and greys. The finish will be slightly tired with evidence of fraying and decay to echo the disease that is consuming Violetta. Dust gathers in the crevices and carvings of the panels and the paint peels in places. The floor will likewise be tiled in greys and whites, perhaps with a faint coloured pattern running through – a nod to the life that once ran through this home.

Throughout the opera our scenery will transform through the use of our panelled doors, mirroring the journey of Violetta's imprisonment and freedom. Thus the hospital ward where we first discover Violetta is closed up and claustrophobic, whereas in the space she feels most free – the house in Act II sc I – the doors are fully open, turning the space into a bright and breezy space in the French countryside.

Alongside the doors and backdrops, scenes will also be distinguished by use of furniture and small set pieces. For example, chandeliers will be flown into the US space for Violetta's party in Act I and in the DS space for Flora's party in Act II sc ii. We are also keen to reflect Violetta's love of nature in Act II sc I by dressing the set with flowers, greenery and garden furniture.

Theme: 'Family'

We were also struck by the strong ideas of 'family' within the piece. In the novel, Marguerite is taken into society by a heartbroken duke who thinks she bears a strong resemblance to his deceased daughter; Marguerite talks fondly of her childhood in the country when she and Armand propose to go away together; and it is because Armand's father asks Marguerite to think of his innocent daughter that she gains the courage to leave Armand. As she later writes to her former lover, "*The paternal way in which M. Duval had spoken to me ... raised me in my own eyes with a sort of holy pride ... I seemed to become transformed*".

Child actors

We felt the most appropriate way to address this vital element of the story was through the introduction of an allegory within the dramatic action. With so much of the story revolving around future generations and familial relationships, we wanted to introduce a concrete example of this in the staging. Each act, therefore, will also make use of child actors to further explore this theme and provide a parallel to the actions of the adult protagonists. In Act I, a young boy and girl from different families and as dressed up as their parents are in attendance at Violetta's party. They are both noble and promised to each other when they grow up, but for now their innocent excitement is of that two young friends adventuring together in a world beyond their understanding. It is clear from their interactions that they quite close friends. The parallels, of course, are that Alfredo and Violetta, both alike in nobility of spirit and desire to love, are coming ever closer together in a society that won't allow their love.

In Act II sc i, a young boy – the son of Violetta’s servant, Giuseppe – is playing with his dog in the country house while Giuseppe and the other servants are carrying in boxes of objects that have been sent from Paris to decorate the country house. Giuseppe reacts angrily when he sees that the boy and dog have muddied the floor with their feet but Violetta allows him to run into the yard outside and play. Later in the act, Germont brings his daughter (named in the novel as Blanche) with him when he goes to confront Violetta. Unseen, she and the servant boy and his dog witness the violent encounter between Alfredo and Germont; symbolising that innate ability of children to know what’s going on even while being unaware of what causes it.

At Flora’s party (Act II sc ii), the same young children we saw at Violetta’s party in Act I have been invited to attend; they dance along with the gypsies and are incorporated into the dance of the matadors – they feel comfortable in this environment and can even use it to continue their innocent flirtations with one another. Their reaction to the very end of the act is to rush towards Violetta to help her, but they are pulled away from her and from each other by their respective chaperones, echoing the very real separation that has just taken place between Violetta and Alfredo.

In the final act, Giuseppe and his son with the dog enter the hospital to visit one of the other servants from Act II sc i, who is in one of the beds. They gather around the bed and talk to him. The little boy from Act I and III is dying in another bed, the little girl holding his hand, accompanied by the boy’s parents. The boy dies, his sheet is pulled over head and his bed is wheeled away, the little girl follows the bed off stage. At the end of the Act, as Violetta dies, we see the little girl again, this time ascending the staircase - an approximation of Violetta’s own self who, having had to grieve over the death of her love for Alfredo, is now ascending to a better place.

Costume

The costumes will be designed in the style of Second Empire elegance and will bring the main source of colour and vibrancy to the stage. Given the muted canvas that the set provides, the performers contribute to the setting of each scene by painting pictures with their clothing. The two party scenes give a clear example of this; in Act I the guests who fill the stage are dressed in fashions that are the epitome of Second Empire elegance (whites, warm golds, dusty blues and pinks, gracefully decorated with lace and embroidery), whereas the Act II party is ruled by the theme of the gypsies and matadors, and the costume element is heavier and more eclectic as a result - rich greens and blues, dark reds and blacks, bold prints and patterns, and lavish decoration.

Violetta’s costuming has a journey of its own that echoes the fraying of her physical health. Mirroring the set, she will always wear whites, greys and creams, and we will experiment with her shedding and gaining layers as she struggles through the waves of her illness that both imprison and free her.