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Upstairs at the Gatehouse: A Very New *Traviata*

Wednesday
8-Feb-12
19:30

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La Traviata (Verdi) (a new translation by Kit Hesketh-Harvey) [Buy CD](#)

Merry Opera Company

Joe Morgan, Tenor: Alfredo Germont

Anna Jeruc-Kopeć, Soprano: Violetta

Valéry

Oliver Brignall, Tenor: Gaston

Marcin Gesla, Bass: Baron Douphol

Gemma Morsley, Mezzo-soprano: Flora Bervoix

Stephen Svanholm, Baritone: Giorgio Germont

Stephen Hose, Conductor

Kit Hesketh-Harvey, Director

Nicholas Allen, Cello

Neil McTaggart, Violin

Mark Chivers, Viola

Niall Webb, Clarinet

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They say that Violetta in *La Traviata* is one of opera's hardest soprano parts. Violetta changes character completely over the opera's three acts – all the way from voracious party girl to delicate, dying consumptive – and the singer must be in complete control of the role to make this work. The [musical part](#), of course, is hardly easy either. But add to this the proviso that Violetta perform the whole of Act I in a corset, dancing around a chair and flirting with the audience, and the feat really starts to seem impressive.



The Merry Opera Company's new *La Traviata* at the Gatehouse pub theatre in North London transposes this most canonical of operas straight into the twenty-first century, pulling no punches. The libretto is radically but sensitively adapted by director Kit Hesketh-Harvey, moving the action into a seedy London club, 'La Traviata', where the raunchy singer Violetta is the star attraction. Alfredo, or 'Al', becomes a posh city type who lounges about in Jack Wills-style tracky-b's, and his family background is given a [religious twist](#) meant to account for the social traditions which underlie the opera's plot. Also, there are drug dealers and transvestites and things like that.

But despite all the updating, the production takes care to preserve the sincerely grand-operatic core to the piece. The three leads, Violetta, Al, and Al's father 'Jerman' (respectively Anna Jeruc-Kopeć, Joe Morgan, and Stephen John Svanholm on the night I went) all absolutely go for it, with heaps of vibrato and a real sense of the epic. If this seemed a little out of kilter with its intimate setting in a pub theatre, and with the sometimes louche chamber arrangement of the score, then this only mirrored the incongruity of a heart-wrenching, life-or-death love story emerging from a [burlesque club](#) dressing room.

The final scene, at Violetta's deathbed, was mostly done straight, and proved very affecting.

Jerman's sudden flush of guilt – a difficult moment to pull off in any production, given the thorough unlikeability of the character generally – was well managed, his rigidity pushed to breaking point. And that odd section where a carnival passes by Violetta's window – usually a moment which sticks out strangely – was able in this production to be given a proper po-mo workout. In fact, the reappearance of the burlesque troupe at this point encapsulated the opposing elements of the opera very effectively. This was not just a [gimmicky production](#), but also one which engaged thoughtfully with the original text.

Anna Jeruć-Kopeć was hugely successful as Violetta, stretching over the dramatic range the part demands as elegantly as she stretched over that chair in Act I. There was a great sense of dynamism between her and Joe Morgan as Al, whose full-blooded, passionate performance made me care about his fate, despite his being dressed like a posh git.

The musical arrangement was also an impressive job, done by cellist Nick Allen. Scored for string trio, clarinet and sax, and keyboard/accordion, the band captured the requisite seediness needed for the production while allowing the melodies to sing out as well. I felt the absence of larger forces only in Violetta and Jerman's duet in Act II: Jerman's 'Weep, weep' moment needs the weight of an orchestra behind it for [full effect](#). Coordination between singers and the band was generally good, and will improve over the course of the show's pleasantly long run.

It makes perfect sense to do something new with opera these days to make it more relevant. Adding burlesque is by no means obligatory, but there's no reason not to try it out. Doing so, the Merry Opera Company have created a genuinely fun version of this tired classic, whose burlesque bits are given serious interpretative significance. If this isn't worth a trip to the pub, I don't know what is.

Submitted by **Paul Kilbey** on 9th February 2012

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Image credit: Anna Jeruc-Kopec as Violetta © Polly Hancock

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