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BARGAIN THEATRE

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February 15, 2012

LA TRAVIATA



Kit Hesketh-Harvey's new adaptation of *La Traviata* (*The Fallen One*), set in 2012 Shoreditch, receives its world premiere in Highgate before touring Southern England and returning for a season at The Scoop on the South Bank in June. This updated version, sung in English, is produced by The Merry Opera Company. The dynamic young cast appear according to a rota system, the six lead roles shared by twelve principals. Credits below refer to performers on the night I visited.

With the fourth wall immediately broken by host Gaston's welcome speech (Glenn Tweedie), I began by thinking "this doesn't bode well", fearing a stand-up routine or heaven forbid, audience participation. This is opera, after all. I needn't have worried for within moments we were into the 'Drinking Song', not in the usual Paris salon but a seedy East London burlesque club La Traviata with a buzzingly upbeat,

resplendent full ensemble having great fun as show-folk with balloons, hoops and wine aplenty. We meet Violetta, played by Claire Egan. She is the main attraction, dressed in basque, stockings, suspenders and black heels in this venue where everyone is available for sex after the show. City-type Al (Joe Morgan), on a drunken and karaoke-heavy night out, falls instantly for her and it's not long before she too is deeply smitten. The pair share a beautifully sung lovers' duet before their first lingering kiss; graceful acting and crystal clear vocals prevail. After a bizarre moment during which a transvestite bride in a white wedding gown is stabbed, presumably to remind us that the club is a gangster haunt, we're treated to Violetta's stunning solo. She is confused, truly in love for the first time, reluctant to commit because she is dying of an incurable brain tumour, but this may be her only chance to find happiness. Legs astride the back of a bentwood chair, still in stockings and suspenders, she sings delightfully before spreading her joy around the auditorium, provocatively rubbing the pates of some of the lucky males in the front row as she passes by.

Al is in love and in heaven, Violetta has left La Traviata and moved in with him; he is living an ecstatic dream, this is their destiny, what could go wrong? Alfredo's father Jerman (Stephen John Svanholm), looking particularly dapper with pink shirt and walking cane but a little youthful, does not approve and offers her money to leave. Pale-faced and red-haired, Claire Egan is perfect in the role as she agrees to sacrifice her love and reveals her terminal fate to Jerman.

An extremely touching parting duet and a Dear John letter later, she returns to her life as a working girl at La Traviata, where we enjoy tambourines, flamenco, gypsies and matadors in a rousing ensemble post-interval opener. It's refreshing that no mics are required by this company, I was sat at the back and sound levels were ideally balanced throughout. Al revisits the club but is not pleased to see Violetta, he is jealous and strikes her. Things deteriorate, friends Gaston and Flora (Gemma Morsley) nurse as her health fades, superbly singing their lamentful tribute. The end itself is harrowing, a solo clarinet adding an eerie, haunting aroma to the unblemished acting and vocal performances of the beautifully lit dying swan scene.

The Merry Opera Company state that their adaptations are intended for people who love music and singing but who may feel intimidated or bored by high culture. Hesky-Harvey's English translation and direction, the venue's warm welcome and intimate nature, together with the modern adaptation of this production all combine to provide a very accessible and certainly enjoyably entertaining experience.

REVIEWED: 14/02/2012

By Gareth Richardson @BargainTheatre

8th February - 3rd March 2012

Upstairs at the Gatehouse, London, N6.

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