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La Traviata

Giuseppe Verdi
Merry Opera Company
Upstairs at the Gatehouse

From 08 February 2012 to 03 March 2012

Review by [Callie Swarbrick](#)

Last time I saw Verdi it was the most lavish production I have yet witnessed at the ROH with their *Aida*... and tonight is opera above a pub. And it's brilliant. Fun, feisty and full of energy. Merry Opera's aim, well on trend, is to make opera more accessible. Did they achieve it with their production of *La Traviata*? A resounding yes.

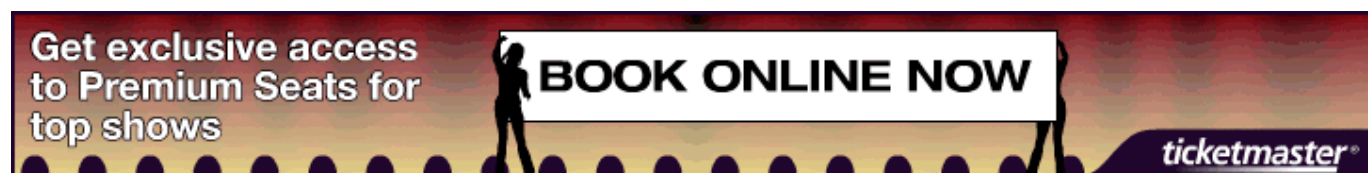
The band is lively: piano, violin, viola, cello and clarinet led by Stephen Hose. The addition of an unexpected accordion rounded off the accompaniment wonderfully. This version of Verdi's much loved opera is brought to the modern day; set in an east London burlesque club, Violetta is adored as the favourite performer. There are [lady boys](#), and gentle men surrounded by girls with plenty of skin on display.

Well known as a witty wordsmith, Kit Hesketh-Harvey does not disappoint. However this is only his second foray into the directing world, again with Merry Opera. The concept translates well in the intimate theatre. Violetta flirts with the audience, and if you sit in the front row you might even get a cheeky peck. It's not all froth and frolics though, returning from the interval sparks start to fly. Robin Bailey is passionate as Alfredo, once rejected by Violetta his rage bubbles, even pushing the girl to the floor. When he returns knowing the truth of Violetta's departure, his tenderness and desperation makes for a moving final act.

Claire Egan sparkles as Violetta, with a wonderful tone moving from the bright coloratura when she's fighting fit to the languished dramatic arias from her sick bed. Her frailty when overcome with disease (a tumour now, the modern day killer) is painful to watch. She drags herself across stage hitting the deck more than once. There is real chemistry between Egan and Bailey, and they melted into one another in act three as if having lived as a couple for years.

James Perkins's set design is utilised for the three acts: naked mannequins with lightup La Traviata sign heads surround the orchestra. The rest is bar / living room furniture; the real colour onstage comes from Fiona Russell's vibrant burlesque costumes. The flamenco dancing second act is a particular highlight. The entire cast throws themselves into this new adaptation, and it's nice to see so many familiar Merry Opera faces returning after their previous Offenbach production.

The night was fizzy, and that's not just because of the sign saying drink as much as you like on the theatre door. When a cast is having lots of fun onstage, and the men have tutus and fishnets on what can you do? It's a no brainer, join in the joke and be merry.



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