



Why Kit Hesketh-Harvey's raunchy little Traviata did for me what other, grander stagings never managed

By [Michael White Theatre](#) Last updated: February 10th, 2012

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Anna Jeruc-Kopec as Violetta in Kit Hesketh-Harvey's La Traviata

It's been along time since I walked into a theatre and had my ticket checked by a man in a tutu – I don't do those sort of venues any more: too staid, too old – but it happened last night at a production of La Traviata that was opening in a room above a pub in Highgate.

This was not, as you'll appreciate, an ordinary Traviata. It was, in the specialist sense of the word, a travesty job – done by Kit Hesketh-Harvey who is best-known as one half of the cabaret duo Kit and the Widow but also moonlights as a stage director and agent provocateur of lyric theatre: which is to say, he takes established opera classics and remodels them (provocatively) for small-scale touring productions.

Last year he took a radical revamp of Offenbach's ancient Greek romp Belle Helene around Britain, under the title Troy Boy. This year he's doing much the same with Traviata – keeping its original title but relocating the action from the grand salons of 19th-century Paris to the sleazy but chic burlesque club scene of latterday Hoxton. Or maybe it's Shoreditch – I'm not chic enough or (please God) sleazy enough to know.

Violetta transmutes from a courtesan to a cabaret star pursued by brash, young City banking types. Alfredo (or Al as he becomes) is one of their more sensitive kind. The 19th-century disease of consumption with which Violetta is smitten updates to a more contemporary brain tumour (although the doctor-friend I was with wasn't sure that brain-tumour deaths fit the requirements of Verdi's score). And the Germont family shame over Alfredo's unsuitable choice of partner – which wouldn't be convincing in 21st-century terms – is neatly dealt with by converting them all to Islam. The smartest idea in the whole show, I thought.

There are pros and cons to this kind of interventionist remodelling of a classic text; but I'm sympathetic to

Hesketh-Harvey's argument that when you're touring a little Traviata to venues like pub-theatres it's futile to try and recreate grand belle epoque Parisian salons. You're better off taking a different route. And the whole point of the Merry Opera Company (which is what his group calls itself) is to be different – in the process, pulling in a different, hopefully younger audience.

I enjoyed this Traviata hugely. It's a tidier piece of work that hangs together better than the previous Troy Boy. Hesketh Harvey's idea of staging some of the more obviously spotlight set-piece arias as spotlight cabaret turns was brilliant (I shall always now want Violetta to sing *Sempre Libera* astride a chair in fishnet tights like Sally Bowles). And beyond the fact that it was good fun, it was also surprisingly affecting.

Traviata may be one of the great repertory works but I have to admit (confession time) that it doesn't mean a lot to me, and never has. I don't normally care about Violetta's illness, desperation and death. And I care even less about Alfredo and the Germonts and their family reputation.

But for once – just once – I was engaged here, by a Polish soprano called Anna Jeruc-Kopec who has a quality of voice beyond the reasonable expectations of a little show like this, and a theatrical intensity to match. The timbre of the voice is pearly, almost Gheorghiu-like, with fierce attack and a generally secure coloratura. But above all, she's incredibly moving and dies so beautifully that for the first time ever (and I mean this) Violetta's last gasps drew a small tear from my tired old critic's seen-it-all-before eyes.

This, I thought, was class; and very much worth catching if you're near one of the many venues the show tours to between now and July (check the website: www.merryopera.com).


On the subject of class, I was subsequently told that the man in the tutu was a Wykehamist. So that's alright then.

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