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OPERA SAN JOSE'S "LA TRAVIATA" MAY ONLY BE DESCRIBED AS OUTSTANDING

By Iride Aparicio



Jouvanca Jean-/Baptiste as Violetta Photo by: Chris Ayers

SAN JOSÉ, California – Once in a while there are faultless Opera performances where everything works correctly. When this happens, the work receives a standing ovation on the part of the

audience and the critics have nothing but praise for what was presented to them on the stage. That “once in a while” was Saturday, February 11, at the opening night of O.S.J. and Opera Santa Barbara co-production of “LA TRAVIATA,” sung by the first of two singing casts, at the California Theatre.

The success of LA TRAVIATA that night, was a combination of many talents: a knowledgeable Stage Director, a great Orchestra Conductor, good musicians, a wonderful Choreographer and masterly singers with beautiful voices. Together, they gave the audience an unforgettable performance.

The “night’s magic” began when the first notes of the Overture were heard, which Conductor David Rohrbaugh, Opera San José’s founding music director, played *pianissimo* on the strings, giving the melody a mournful sound with a lot of feeling.

On his part, famous Stage Director José María Condemi, managed to put drama into the story by raising the curtain on a semi-dark scene representing the inside of a ball room in a Parisian mansion of the year 1887. The room is empty, but the spot light allows the audience to see a life-size portrait of Violetta, hanging from the stage right wall. Then, in a master stroke of genius on the part of the director, the spot light shifts slowly from the portrait to illuminate Violetta (Jouvanka Jean-Baptiste) who wearing a beige ball gown, stands alone, at the center of the with her back against the audience, When the light illuminates the whole stage, Violetta turns around, and start greeting the elegant guests entering the stage through the side doors.

At the end of Act IV, as we look at dying Violetta, inside of her room we see her portrait again, but this time instead of hanging on the wall, the portrait is crooked, standing on the floor, leaning against it. Violetta is laying in bed, wearing a nightgown and the beige ball gown she was wearing at the beginning of the opera, stands on a mannequin nearby. Using the portrait and the Ball gown as “props”, Stage Director Condemi, show us visually the physical deterioration of Violetta at the end. He also managed to instruct the singers to act in the different scenes, as a result, all acted with realism.

In spite of not acting flirtatious, in the opening scene, Jean-Baptiste was convincing. Over all her “chemistry” with Alfredo (Alexander Boyer) was a little weak, but Jouvanka managed to involve the audience if not with her acting, with her singing that on that night was flawlessly. The soprano's voice is full, and her timbre is rich in colors. Her breathing control allows her voice to fill the theatre when loud, and sound like a whisper when soft, and she has the technique to increase or decrease its voice's volume without losing the magnificent quality of its tone. All her arias sounded beautifully and were sang with feeling specially her “Addio, del passato” in which she says goodbye to all her dreams. Her “A Gran Dio! Morir si giovine” in which she realizes that she is going to die brought tears to our eyes. Dramatically, her best scenes were the two most dramatic scenes in the work. Her meeting with Giorgio Germont (Torlef Borsting) and her dying scene.

As Alfredo, tenor Boyer, who has an excellent mellow tone of voice and vocalize his Italian perfectly, gave us that night a true to life overall performance. His two best arias were “un di, felice, eterea” when he reveals to Violetta that he had loved her since the first moment he saw her, that he sung with a lot of feeling and His “De’miei bollenti spirity” in which he reveals the happiness he feels living with Violetta.



Torlef Borsting as Giorgio Germont and Jouvanca Jean-Baptiste as Violetta Photo by P. Kirk

Another excellent performance was given by baritone Borsting (pictured above with Jouvanca Jean-Baptiste) as Giorgio Germont, Alfredo's father. In the ópera, he was asking Violetta to leave her son, yet he was able, in his acting, to show us his compassion for the girl. His rendition of "Pura siccome un angelo" in which he tells Violetta that he has a daughter as pure as an angel whose fiancé won't marry her because of her affair with Alfredo, had all the correct pauses.

The chorus sounded beautiful and choreographer Lise la Cour managed to organized the singers properly making the groups come alive and their scenes visual.

The Gypsies in the ballet, needed better synchronization as a group and more vitality in their Spanish dance, but their dance with the Toreadores, looked nice.

As an opera, LA TRAVIATA was moving. It made us laugh, it made us cry and at the end as we were standing on our feet applauding, it made us want to have glasses of champagne to raise and sing "Libiamo" to toast to the excellence of that nights cast.



Violetta's Soiree

Photo by R. Shomler

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LA TRAVIATA

The courtesan that Verdi's called Violetta Valery in his opera LA TRAVIATA really existed. She was a beautiful Parisian called Marie Duplessis who died at the age of 23 from tuberculosis in the year 1847. During her life, she became the lover of Alexandre Dumas, the son of Alexandre Dumas, the famous Parisian writer, who in his work called her Marguerite Gautier.

The real Marie had arrived in Paris at the age of 15 and worked as a Milliner's assistant, but her beauty raised her, in no time to the level of courtesan and he was kept in luxury after that by her rich aristocratic lovers. In Dumas' novel, however, it was Armando Duval (the lover who Verdi called Alfredo) who decided to end their affair in a letter which reads:

Dear Marguerite:

"I am not rich enough to love you as I would wish, but nor am I poor enough to let myself be loved as your envisage"

Because Marguerite's trademark was to carry a bouquet of camellias or a single camellia over her breast, Dumas called his novel "La Dame aux Camellias" (the lady of the Camellias)

When Verdi wrote his Opera, based on the Duma's work, he changed the name of Marguerite to Violetta and the name of Armando Duval to Alfredo Germont. He also changed the name of the nove from "La Dame aux Camellias" to LA TRAVIATA which in Italian means somebody who lost site of the correct way of life, in other words, a lost woman. LA TRAVIATA premiered in Venice, Italy on March 6, 1853.

THE REASON OF THE OPERA'S POPULARITY

One of the reasons that LA TRAVIATA is so popular is that the prevalent style of its music are Waltzes, but not Viennese-style waltzes but French-style waltzes which give the opera it's color. (All Verdi's Operas have a "color")

The function of the dance music is actually to provide a musical background to the conversational-style of the singing. One example may be the scene at the end of act II where the conversations of the guests, conducted in abrupt phrases, are heard over the the orchestral recurrent theme. Another example of the style, is the duet sung by Germont and Violetta over a melodic background which in rhythm and melody resembles a funeral march.

If one listens carefully to the music, of LA TRAVIATA, one will notice that the greatest part of Act I "The Soiree" is constructed on a series of dance tunes: The polka, The Gallop and the Waltz. The act ends with Violetta's great Aria "Ah fors' e lui" (Could he be the One?) that also has the rhythm of a Waltz, which in this case, suggest to the listener the frenzy of Violetta's past and now her trying to leave it behind.

The Dance Music and the Dances of the ballet and chorus, also serve the purpose to describe the character of Violetta. At the beginning of the act, the Spanish dance and the gypsies and Toreadors dancing and playing tambourines convey a happy Spanish atmosphere, (the way that Violetta was) Yet, in the second part of the scene, there is a transfiguration in the music of the dance tunes. In the closing ensemble of the act, there is a slow transition of one melody into another waltz melody which forces the listener to focus their attention to Violetta, who from carefree and happy has now been converted into fallen tragic woman.

Highlights of Opera San Jose's La Traviata may be seen at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzMgJsc2Vsw>

