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OPERA REVIEW

BLO offers a comfortable 'La traviata'

By Jeffrey Gantz | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 13, 2014

When you're staging an opera as familiar and as popular as Verdi's "La traviata," you better have a novel concept or else exceptional acting and singing. Boston Lyric Opera, which has been known to go the novel-concept route, here opts for fundamentals. Set in the 19th century, close to the original time frame, this is an honest, intimate "Traviata," reasonably well sung but not acted with any great passion.

It is, of course, never a bad idea to go back to basics when your opera has good bones. Drawing on the 1848 Alexandre Dumas fils novel, "La dame aux camélias," "La traviata" tells the story of a Parisian courtesan who falls hard for a young gentleman and then has to renounce him to preserve his family's reputation. Violetta is dying of consumption, so the affair was doomed in any case, but by the end she seems to be consumed by her love for Alfredo, and though she dies, her love



ERIC ANTONIOU FOR BOSTON LYRIC OPERA

Michael Wade Lee and Anya Matanovic
in "La traviata" at Boston Lyric Opera.

does not. All this and Verdi's deathless music: The first act alone offers Alfredo's "brindisi" drinking song, his "Un dí, felice, eterea" declaration of love, and Violetta's "Sempre libera" declaration of freedom.

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Julia Noulin-Mérat's BLO set does a lot with a little. Violetta's Parisian salon in the first and last scenes is suggested by a floor-to-ceiling landscape painting in a heavy gilt frame and some simple wooden chairs. Scene 2, at Violetta and Alfredo's country house, takes place on a raked grassy sward with picnic rug under a modest spreading fruit tree. Scene 3, the party given by Violetta's friend Flora, is a debauch; stage director Chas Rader-Shieber's idea is that in Violetta's absence the suave Parisian world she knew has devolved into licentiousness, but the execution is heavy-handed. The black backdrop for Violetta's opening party doesn't exactly create a festive atmosphere; in the last scene, however, the disappearance of the painting from its frame (she's sold it to support the country house) is a nice touch.

Friday night the orchestra, led by Arthur Fagen, fizzed under the chorus's opening "Dell'invito trascorsa è già l'ora" but thereafter settled somewhere between stately and staid, affording the singers plenty of room. Unfortunately, Anya Matanovic's Violetta and Michael Wade Lee's Alfredo are not ideally matched; she's a bit arch (she really should be having more fun at her party) and he's rather boyish. Their voices don't quite blend either: He's sweet and she's steely, especially at the top. Weston Hurt as Alfredo's father, here a war veteran who's lost his right arm, is less overbearing than usual for this role, and he sings "Di Provenza il mar" so rapturously, it's a wonder Alfredo doesn't move back to the family home in Provence.

But this is a static "Traviata." The party guests just stand around (David Kravitz as Violetta's original patron hobbles on a cane), and Lee and Matanovic are limited in their first-scene interaction. I wish Rader-Shieber had given them a less sedate courtship; Matanovic is not a bad actress, but she reads small and needs to be more effusive. Her grande dame costumes do her no favors either. The best part of the production is the last scene, where Matanovic lets her hair down (literally) and she and Lee get to embrace and create some chemistry. If they could do that from the beginning, this "Traviata" would move — and be moving.

More coverage

VERDI: 'La traviata'

Citi Shubert Theatre, 866-348-9738.

Presenting organizations: Presented by
Boston Lyric Opera

Date of first performance: Oct. 15, 17, and
19

Ticket price: \$30-\$153

Company website: <http://www.blo.org>

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