Gender in flux

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Knock! The Daniel Kharms Project and La Traviata

Gender bending is all the rage at the Boston Center for the Arts and the Shubert Theatre. Make no mistake, this is no gimmick but rather a striking element that enhances strong productions at both venues-namely Imaginary Beasts' sublimely dark staging of "Knock! The Daniel Kharms Project" at the BCA's Black Box Theatre and Boston Lyric Opera's wonderfully heartfelt revival of the Verdi romantic classic "La Traviata." Imaginary Beasts, arguably the most original and innovative company in the Hub, once again explores new territory with exquisite results in "Knock!" while the BLO gives social butterfly Flora's lively Paris party in "La Traviata" a kinky ambience that contrasts sharply with heroine Violetta's purposeful rejection of the promiscuous life in requiting the passion of love-struck hero Alfredo.

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"La Traviata" may be Verdi's romantic opera and Violetta his most heartbreaking heroine.BLO stage director Chas Rader Shieber has strikingly captured her transformation with a vocally strong and theatrically affecting performance by Anya Matanovic. Michael Wade Lee brings a lustrous lyric tenor delivery to the role of Alfredo Germont , though his acting in the early going could be more expressive. Their duets, however, are inspired and heartfelt. Weston Hurt is a revelation and a standout as early judgmental but later understanding father Giorgio Germont.

Mike Inwood's sublime lighting reaches a Caravaggio-suggesting intensity and radiance during Flora's party. Here Shieber has conveyed the decadence of this party-centered society-with the help of Jacob A. Climer's costumes- with intimations of menage -a -trois ,a man in top hat and underwear , women on all fours a la La Dolce Vita, and a distinctive mannishly -dressed reveler. Violetta's renunciation of this jet set adds significantly to the power of her sad fortunes.

La Traviata, Boston Lyric Opera, Shubert Theatre, through October 19. Blo.org