

La Traviata
By Giuseppe Verdi
Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave.
Original Director Elijah Moshinsky
Revival Director Julie Edwardson
Opera Queensland
Lyric Theatre
Queensland Performing Arts centre
South Bank
Brisbane

WHAT a glorious, sumptuous and moving production this was. It's never easy to turn melodrama into pure, exciting drama, but the opera Queensland's version was just that.

Thanks to some excellent acting from some magnificent singers Verdi's tale of ill-fated love and tragedy passed all boundaries of theatrical disbelief to woo the audience into the world of 19th century Paris; the life of a wilting Violetta and the sacrifices she made for her love of Alfredo.

It was a superb example of grand opera.

Violetta is a courtesan under the protection of Baron Douphol (**John Bolton Wood**) who has just returned to Paris after seemingly successful treatment for tuberculosis. At her welcome home party she meets Alfredo, a young man who is instantly infatuated with her. She falls in love herself and the couple move in together. Alfredo's father, Giorgio tries to persuade a distraught Violetta to give up his son for the sake of his family. Finally she does which leaves both lovers desperately unhappy. Finally, Alfredo and the dying Violetta are reunited and everyone has fits of remorse.

Verdi's score of course is filled with familiar arias; some that remain in the mind long after the show had ended, particularly the *Drinking Song* which was beautiful and rousingly sung by Alfredo, Violetta and the magnificent Opera Queensland Chorus, which was in fine voice all night. It was good to see some new young faces in the chorus, One noticeable talent was the willowy **Elizabeth Lewis**.

The company also created great entertainment in the second scene of Act 2 at Flora's (**Roxane Hislop**) party. She calls for the entertainers to perform for the guests *We're gypsies gay* and *We are bullfighters from Madrid* and Gastone (**Virgillo Marino**) and his friends join the matadors and sing *Twas Piquillo, so young and so daring*. This brought more great work from the chorus.

But the first big applause of the night – apart from welcoming the Queensland Orchestra and conductor **Peter Robinson** – was when the curtain rose to reveal the courtesan Violetta's home.

There was a touch of Versailles to the set, sumptuous hardly fits – grandeur is a better word. And after seeing the rest of the sets designed by **Michael Yeargan** and **Peter J Hall's** costume designs, I reckon the cost of those alone would run a complete production of a play at a state theatre company!

The lighting from **Nigel Levings** ranged from brilliant to sombre, setting the moods perfectly.

But all these impressive dressings are worth nothing without the opera stars and once again Opera Queensland has come up with the goods.

In the taxing lead role of Violetta is the wonderful Russian soprano **Elvira Fatykhova**. I remember when I first saw in *Lucia de Lammermoor* it was my opinion that: "her voice is simply magic. It is as pure as mountain air and zings like crystal".

Nothing has changed since then, especially after seeing her as Rosina in the light and frothy *Barber of Seville* last year.

She is just stupendous to watch and hear. She showed all of Violetta's contrasting moods as she brought first laughter then tears from the audience. She hit soaring, powerful notes that rocked the roof and then sang pianissimo with such perfect pitch and clarity that the notes zoomed over the orchestra. She is truly amazing.

She was beautifully capricious with her Act One solos *Perhaps he is the one* and *Always free* and so powerfully dramatic and moving with her finale *So closes my sad story*. Against a voice like that any tenor is going to have to have his work cut out to compete, but Melbourne-born **Adrian Dwyer**, who sang Alfredo did so. His is the strongest tenor voice I've heard in a long time and he worked so well with Elvira. Their duets were just wonderful to hear, particularly the poignant *Dearest, we'll leave Paris* and *O, God! to die so young*.

They were so well matched in their roles and voices.

But some of the most moving moments came with the duet between Violetta and Alfredo's father, Giorgio, who was sung with immense power and passion by baritone **Douglas McNichol**. In the first scene of act two it was *Say to this child of thine* and in the second scene he joined with Alfredo and Violetta in the moving *Worthy of contempt is the man*.

There is no doubting the stature of Opera Queensland today.

The production continues until May 30. Bookings on QTI 136 246.

ERIC SCOTT May 22, 2009