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Fleming as Violetta and Villazon as Alfredo in LA Opera's "La Traviata."
Photo by Robert Millard.

Super soprano Renée Fleming makes her LA Opera production début. And what a début it was.

**GIUSEPPE VERDI
LA TRAVIATA
LOS ANGELES OPERA
SEPTEMBER 9, 2006**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

"La Traviata" on Sept. 9, 2006 in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion will go down in opera history as one of the most successful productions LA Opera has staged to date. Every element of the opening night performance of the 2006-07 season was stupendous.

Earlier this year people were wondering whether or not the show would go off without a hitch. At first, Dmitri Hvorostovsky, who was supposed to play the elder Germont, was replaced by Renato Bruson. Hvorostovsky had scheduling problems according to a LA

Opera press release. Then there was confusion about which production would be performed: Marta Domingo's most recent 2006 production which updated the action to the flapper era, or the production LA Opera staged in 1999 and 2001, a more traditional production, also directed by Domingo. Renée Fleming apparently only wanted to perform in the 1999/2001 production, for she was planning to make a DVD of it. Then LA Opera found that it was short of funding. The set needed refurbishing, and there wasn't enough money for the DVD. But the company raised what it needed. And Voilà! L.A. Opera has produced a winner, one which will be savored for years to come by audiences around the world. It will really put LA Opera on the map. The company is the fourth largest in the U.S. according to one of its press releases. Watch out No. 2 and 3 – LA Opera is on a roll.

There were many firsts with this performance, the foremost of which was James Conlon who raised his baton for "le premier temps" as LA Opera's new music director. He has been principal conductor of the Paris National Opera; general music director of the city of Cologne, Germany where he directed the Gürzenich Orchestra and Cologne Opera; and music director of the Rotterdam Philharmonic. He is also music director of the Ravinia and Cincinnati May Festivals. After 20 years in Europe, he has come back home to make his mark. His exuberance in the pit on Sept. 9 transferred to the orchestra and to the singers onstage. Under his direction, the orchestra sounded the freshest this reviewer has ever heard it. The tempos and rhythmical elements seemed secure and well-defined, and the sound of the instruments radiated through the hall with gleaming luster. Opera orchestras are often simply accompaniments. Not this one. Not on Sept. 9. LA Opera's orchestra was often the focal point of my auditory senses. And it all started with the melodic violins in the Prelude. The mood was set, set for super soprano Renée Fleming to make her LA Opera production début. And what a début it was.

Fleming's Act I "Ah, fors'è lui" was haunting. She varied the tempo and color in her voice so that that the beauty seemed almost obscure. By the time she concluded her "Sempre libera," those in the audience knew that she was a singular Violetta and that they were witnessing history.

Patterned after the real Marie Duplessis who became Marguerite Gautier in Alexandre Dumas' "La Dame aux Camélias" and Violetta Valéry in Verdi's opera, Violetta is the ultimate French courtesan with beauty and class. Alfredo Germont is smitten with her, but his father cannot fathom the idea that his son and a "demimondaine" could be in love. Explaining to Violetta that her scandalous affair with his son would affect his daughter's wedding plans, Alfredo's father urges Violetta to leave his son. At first unwilling, she finally consents even though she realizes that she can never tell Alfredo the true reason. He scorns her and she soon finds herself dying of consumption with only her maid and doctor by her side. Alfredo finally learns the truth, but by the time he reaches her, it is too late.

Fleming's Violetta dies after believing that she has miraculously been spared. She almost sailed around the stage as a living angel, then fell to her death in her lover's arms. In this "La Traviata," she seemed to never touch the ground but somehow remained suspended.

This scene, not unlike all of the other scenes of the evening, was beautifully choreographed to look almost like a pas de deux.

Fleming's "Addio del passato" was again hauntingly beautiful with a succession of high tones that pulled the heartstrings along with her duet with her Alfredo, Rolando Villazón.

What made Villazón so singularly special was his charisma and chemistry with Fleming, which proved what a fine actor he is -- the magic doesn't only exist with Anna Netrebko. Born in Mexico City, at the age of 11, Villazón studied music, acting, dance and ballet before embarking on an operatic career. That early training is evident in every move that he makes onstage. Sure, he has the face of a Greek god and could simply stand onstage and have all the women in the audience swooning. But there is much more to him than that. He has a secure, polished, ringing voice, and his added stage presence completes the package. He was as light as a feather as he glided across the stage taking large strides and swinging his arms. Such grace, ease and lack of self-consciousness contributed to his ability to act the lover as if he were a matinee idol. From the first moment he laid eyes on his Violetta and sang "Un di felice" which flowed into "Di quell' amor ch'è palpito," he and Fleming seemed to be living their roles. Their realization that finding true love was possible for them made every person in the audience either want to grab his or her companion by the hand or at the very least have hope that finding that special someone might just be around the corner. Villazón's energy and "joie de vivre" coupled with his sparkling voice make him a unique presence in today's opera world.

Even though the singing and production seemed almost flawless and even though Renato Bruson was an elegant, mature elder Germont with some lush, mellow, round tones, his voice and soul at times seemed tired. I wanted to see a little more sympathy for Violetta in his Act II confrontation sequence with her -- a kind touch here and there would have been welcome. At times there was too much vibrato in his voice and it sounded somewhat guttural, possibly a symptom of a maturing voice or a need to brush up on vocal technique.

The supporting cast was excellent: Suzanna Guzmán as Flora, Philip Kraus as Baron Douphol, Anna Alkhimova as Annina, and James Creswell as a sympathetic mellow-sounding Dr. Grenvil.

The sets and costumes were magnificent and tasteful: the Act I party scene with velvets, golds and beiges; the elegant wood paneling in Act II and the latticework background; the red flocked walls which defined the room filled with Flora's decadent guests; and the starkness of Violetta's room in Act III, with a bed upstage center draped on either side with fabric which drove the point home that Violetta was on her deathbed.

Director Marta Domingo definitely had a handle on this production. The blocking was creative and imaginative, and the singers were versed well in their acting and presentation.

The singularly most beautiful costume of the evening was Renée Fleming's black silk

and velvet sequined gown with appliquéd diamonds. Her visual beauty matched her musicality.

Kitty McNamee's choreography was ample. The dancing seemed a bit out-of-place along with the solo Matador, but then, this is an opera, not a ballet, and the dancers added spice and color.

Not much to criticize about this wonderful benefit production of which there are only three performances. I only wonder what the production would have been like had Dmitri Hvorostovsky's hectic schedule been different. Nonetheless, opening night was a magical evening that began with the audience standing and singing "The Star-Spangled Banner," and ended with the audience standing and shouting bravos.

Conductor, James Conlon

Director, Marta Domingo

Designer, Marta Domingo

Lighting Designer, Duane Schuler

Choreographer, Kitty McNamee

Concertmaster, Stuart Canin

Chorus Master, William Vendice

Co-production with Washington National Opera and Opéra Royal de Wallonie, Liège, Belgium

Costuming, LA Opera, Western Costume Co. and the Metropolitan Opera

Select costumes designed by John Pascoe

Decca DVD Director, Brian Large