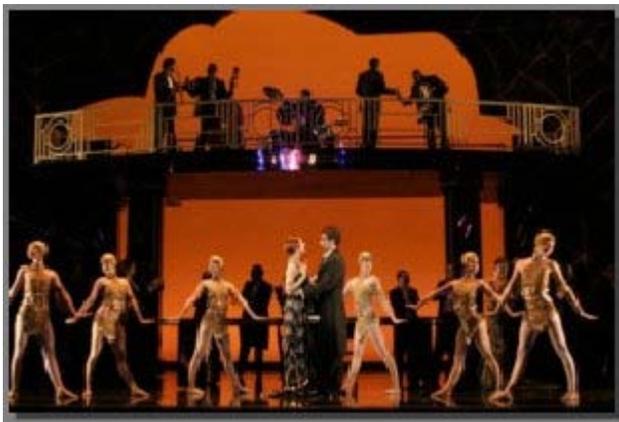




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Act II party scene Photo: Robert Millard

Marta Domingo's new 1920s 'La Traviata' makes for a chilly evening in LA.

**GIUSEPPE VERDI
LA TRAVIATA
LOS ANGELES OPERA
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By Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

Although Los Angeles Opera's new production of "La Traviata" boasts some pretty fancy chirping, "it just ain't got no soul" -- even though there is a jazz band on the stage of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in the Act II party sequence.

It's a young "Traviata." Violetta is no longer the Parisian courtesan Verdi patterned after Marie Duplessis, renamed Marguerite Gautier, in Alexandre Dumas' "La Dame aux Camélias," a memoristic novel, then play, which Dumas wrote based on his ill-fated love affair with Duplessis, who died of tuberculosis in 1847 at the age of 23. Because of the morés of the times, early productions of "Traviata" were set in the 1700s, since audiences

simply wouldn't tolerate an opera based on the life of a young man of class having a steady relationship with a fallen woman, even if she had indeed acquired the social graces of the *élite*. Of course later productions were modernized to the mid-1800s.

But Marta Domingo's new production is far more youthful. She has moved the action to the 1920s. And although the synopsis in the program places it in Paris, Domingo clearly assigns it to the flapper era in the United States, according to her program note. The production has a decidedly American flair to it, with art-deco disco touches, mirrored spinning balls hanging from the rafters, and Ziegfield Follies-type dancers flitting around the stage.

But let's face it: Violetta Valéry is dying of consumption from the beginning of "La Traviata" to the end. She meets Alfredo Germont, falls in love with him and decides to mend her ways, only to be confronted by his father, Giorgio, who implores her to abandon his son so that the scandalous affair won't affect his daughter's wedding plans. Deeply grief-stricken, Violetta reluctantly agrees to leave Alfredo and runs directly back into the arms of her former lover, Baron Douphol. The three meet at a *soirée* given by Violetta's friend, Flora, where Alfredo compensates Violetta for her services by throwing his gambling winnings to her feet. Time passes, and in the final act, Violetta is weak and on the verge of death. Giorgio tells his son the truth, and Alfredo returns to be with his beloved forever. But it is too late, and after a heartfelt duet, Violetta succumbs to her death.

Tragedy Supreme! The audience must hear and feel the pain of the characters whether or not the action takes place in the 1850s or 1920s. Even though the courtesan era is far in the past by the '20s, this production's updating doesn't seem to bother, probably because high-class fallen women have always existed and will remain part of our societal structure, possibly forever. But what does bother, however, is the lack of passion among the characters onstage. This is an icy "Traviata" which almost seems like a conservatory production that has been cast with young pearly-toned singers who show great promise but are in desperate need of more experience, coaching and acting lessons. We should be moved to tears at the end of this opera. Instead, we expect Violetta to pop up off the floor after her death scene and announce that it was all a farce.

Yes, the worst culprit is soprano Elizabeth Futral. Greta Garbo, she isn't. What she is, though, is an all-American party girl who sings Violetta without any depth. At the performance on Tuesday night, Nov. 13, her voluminous voice was well-supported with strong technique, her coloratura passages never faltering. Yet she exhibited only a marginal amount of charm, lacked class and dignity, and was never fragile or in despair. When she sang her "Ah, fors'è lui" which flowered into "Di quell'amor," she looked like she was singing with feeling, but there just wasn't any inner soul in her delivery. Her actions and gestures, especially when singing the "Sempre libera" aria, seemed to have been laid out for her by director Domingo, because she was never able to make the movements her own.

There was nothing about her Violetta in Act II that was endearing enough to entice

Alfredo's father to change his mind about her. When she asked him to embrace her like a daughter, she seemed angry, so how could he, or the audience, be touched? There was absolutely no onstage chemistry between her and Alfredo, and when she was in the process of dying, she was just going through the motions.

Much like Futral, Maltese tenor Joseph Calleja needed coaching as well. He seemed like a good-natured lug on the stage, moving from place-to-place with a heavysset gait. Some of his higher notes lacked a certain ping or crying quality. But with more experience, he has the potential to develop into a great tenor. This was quite evident when he began singing his "De' miei bollenti spiriti" at the beginning of Act II, and particularly during his interpretation of "O mio rimorso," which was sung downstage left, just a few feet from my seat. The sheer beauty of Calleja's phrasing and his pureness of tone made me think of Jussi Björling. Björling's tear wasn't there, nor the power, but Calleja's focused almost virginal tones and lyrical legato line made me sit frozen in my seat attempting to hear every nuance. Calleja may indeed need a shot of charisma right now, but he is a diamond in the rough with potential for greatness.

As for the remainder of the cast, Dwayne Croft was a mellow elder Germont who displayed the secure stage presence and experience the others lacked. His Act II duet with Violetta was sung with authority, and his "Di Provenza il mar" garnered him a well-deserved applause.

Suzanna Guzmán's Flora was quick-witted, well-acted and well-sung. Peter Nathan Foltz was a wide-eyed, engaging Gastone. Jessica Swink's Annina needed more empathy and maturity, but Jinyoung Jang's Dr. Grenvil was sympathetic and strong. And in the case of Philip Kraus' Baron Douphol, a little less would have been more – acting-wise, that is.

The orchestra was aptly directed by Maestro John Fiore, who is chief conductor of the Deutsche Oper-am-Rhein. The pace was quick and at times seemed metronomically induced. The achingly melodic quality of the score was not fully realized.

THE PRODUCTION

Yes, Marta Domingo's 1920s production does in fact work. But did we need to see those two gentlemen picking up the streetwalkers on the apron of the stage during the prelude? We weren't able to pay attention to the ethereal quality of the strings. And that antique Duesenberg, or whatever it was – was that absolutely necessary?

The first act set was indeed pleasant to the eye with its golden-colored drapery, plushly upholstered sofa, antique white piano, and gigantic crystal chandelier. But the country house in Act II – were the characters supposed to be inside the house or outside of it? With no evidence of a wall or window, the backdrop was bathed in autumn leaves. Was Violetta supposed to be sitting on garden furniture? Giorgio Germont couldn't have been visiting her in the garden. Or could he?

And the same thing happened in Act III. Violetta was definitely dying on a large round flowery bed inside her bedroom. Again, there was no suggestion of a window, but the

stars were twinkling, it was snowing, and there was a big orange-colored paisley moon pasted to the sky in the background. Then where did those angels come from? They were definitely an intrusion.

The costumes were bright, colorful and glittery -- fit for a Las Vegas extravaganza; but the dancers lacked polish, the matador seemed out-of-place, and the choreography didn't please.

Not much to admire, one might think. But all-in-all, it was still an entertaining evening, albeit a little chilly.

Renée Fleming and Rolando Villazón are set to open LA Opera's 2006-07 season in possibly the same production. Maybe this was just a trial run.

Conductor, John Fiore
Designer, Marta Domingo
Director, Marta Domingo
Lighting Designer, Trevor Stirlin Burk
Choreographer, Kitty McNamee