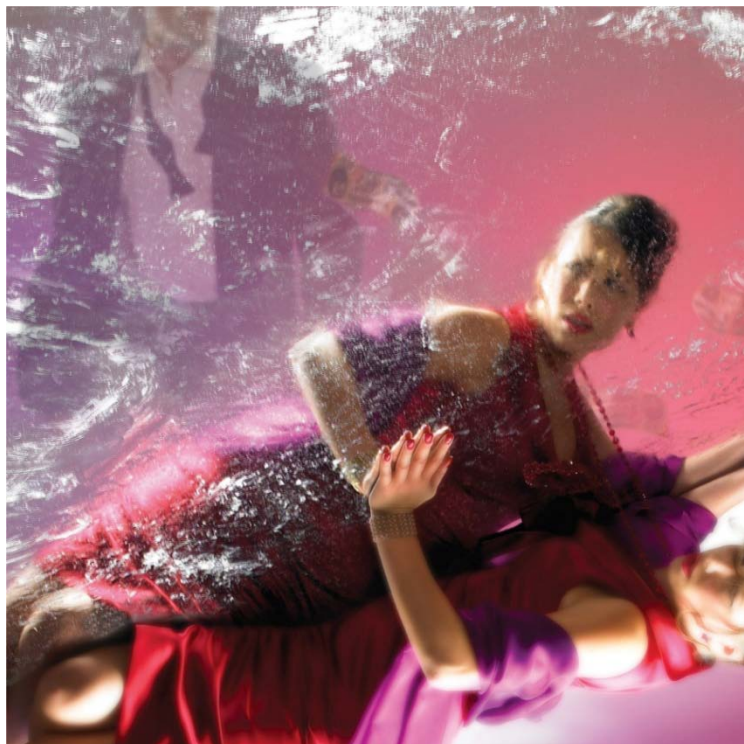


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PACIFIC
Opera
VICTORIA

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LA TRAVIATA



Music by Giuseppe Verdi
Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave

Study Guide for
Pacific Opera Victoria's Production
October, 2009



SEASON UNDERWRITER



EDUCATION UNDERWRITER



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Welcome to Pacific Opera Victoria!

This Study Guide has been created primarily to assist teachers in preparing students for their visit to the opera. It is our hope that teachers will be able to add this to the existing curriculum in order to expand students' understanding of opera, literature, history, and the fine arts.

Materials in the Study Guide may be copied and distributed to students. Some students may wish to go over the information at home if there is not enough time to discuss in class. The opera experience can be made more meaningful and enjoyable when students have the opportunity to learn about the opera before they attend the performance.

Please visit <http://www.pov.bc.ca> to download this study guide or to find more information about *La traviata*, including musical selections from POV's Best of YouTube and artist biographies. POV Study Guides for other operas are also available for download.

Teachers: Your comments and suggestions would be greatly appreciated. Please take a few minutes to fill out the questionnaire at the end of this study guide.

Please Note: The Dress Rehearsal is the last opportunity the singers will have on stage to work with the orchestra before Opening Night. Since vocal demands are so great on opera singers, some singers choose not to sing in full voice during the Dress Rehearsal in order to preserve their voice for opening night.

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La traviata

Music by Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave

First Performance March 6, 1853, Teatro La Fenice, Venice

Dress Rehearsal September 29, 2009, 7:30 pm
Performances October 1, 6, 8, 10, at 8 pm. October 3 at 3 pm
Royal Theatre, Victoria, BC

Sung in Italian with English surtitles

The performance is approximately 2 ½ hours, with one intermission.

CAST & CREATIVE TEAM

Cast in order of vocal appearance

Violetta Valéry, a courtesan	Sookhyung Park
Flora Bervoix, her friend	Heather Jewson
Marchese d'Obigny	Pierre-Étienne Bergeron
Gastone, Viscomte de Letorières	Cory Knight
Alfredo Germont	Vale Rideout
Baron Douphol	Andrew Greenwood
Annina, Violetta's maid	Betty Wayne Allison
Giorgio Germont, Alfredo's father	Bruce Kelly
Doctor Grenvil	Giles Tomkins
Conductor	Timothy Vernon
Director	Dennis Garnhum
Set & Costume Designer	David Boechler
Lighting Designer	Kevin Lamotte
Choreographer	Jacques Lemay
Resident Stage Manager	Jackie Adamthwaite
Assistant Stage Managers	Steve Barker
	Jennifer Braem
Principal Coach	Robert Holliston
Associate Conductor	Giuseppe Pietraroia

Chorus of ladies and gentlemen, friends of Violetta and Flora,
matadors, picadors, gypsies, servants, dancers

With the Victoria Symphony and the Pacific Opera Victoria Chorus,

Cast and programme are subject to change.

PRODUCTION SPONSORS

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Inside the Libretto

Synopsis

Act 1: The courtesan Violetta Valéry, recently recovered from a bout of sickness, hosts a lavish party where she meets Alfredo Germont, who has loved her from afar for over a year. At Violetta's request, Alfredo leads the guests in a toast to wine and love ("Libiamo ne' lieti calici – Let's drink from the joyous chalice"); Violetta counters that life is meaningless, love fleeting, and pleasure the only thing worth living for. As the guests begin to dance, Violetta becomes faint. Alfredo lingers protectively and ardently declares his love ("Un dì, felice, eterea – One happy, heavenly day"). Although Violetta is intrigued by the possibility of true love ("Ah, fors'è lui – Perhaps he is the one"), she declares that it's madness to expect such happiness and resolves to remain free and live only for pleasure ("Sempre libera – Always free"). Meanwhile Alfredo praises the mysterious power, the torment and the delight of love ("misterioso, altero, croce e delizia al cor").

Act 2, Scene 1: Three months later, Violetta and Alfredo are living an idyllic life in the countryside ("Di miei bollenti spiriti – My passionate spirit"). Dismayed on learning that Violetta has sold her possessions to meet their expenses, Alfredo leaves for Paris to arrange to pay her back. Meanwhile Alfredo's father Germont arrives to urge Violetta to leave Alfredo. Although he quickly realizes Violetta is not the mercenary courtesan he expected, Germont insists that their scandalous relationship jeopardizes his daughter's pending marriage ("Pura siccome un angelo – I have a daughter as pure as an angel"). When he then points out that Alfredo will soon tire of Violetta anyway, she acquiesces ("Dite alla giovine – Tell the young woman"), and begs Germont to one day tell Alfredo of her sacrifice.

As Violetta is writing a farewell letter to Alfredo, he returns. Overwhelmed with grief, she pleads with Alfredo to always love her as she loves him ("Amami, Alfredo"). She then departs for a party in Paris at her friend Flora's. Germont appears and attempts to comfort Alfredo, reminding him of his childhood home and the family who loves him ("Di Provenza il mar – The sea of Provence"). But Alfredo, certain that Violetta has returned to her former lover Baron Douphol, heads for Paris, followed by Germont.

Intermission

Act 2, Scene 2: At Flora's party Alfredo creates a scene, gambling recklessly, then hurling his winnings at Violetta to pay her for her services. The guests are shocked, and Baron Douphol challenges Alfredo to a duel.

Act 3: Deathly ill and nearly out of money, Violetta rereads a letter from Germont: Alfredo has gone abroad after wounding the baron; Germont has told Alfredo of Violetta's sacrifice, and both are on their way to her. When they arrive, the lovers dream of leaving Paris forever ("Parigi, o cara, noi lasceremo – Dearest, we'll leave Paris"). But Violetta knows it is too late ("Ah! Gran Dio! Morir si giovine! – Oh, dear God! To die so young!"). She gives Alfredo her picture, telling him to marry and give it to his wife as a remembrance of one who will be in heaven, praying for them both. Suddenly Violetta's pain subsides and she feels a surge of strength. But even as she cries out for joy, she dies.

Background of the Opera

La traviata was inspired by a play, *La Dame aux camélias*, adapted by Alexandre Dumas, fils, from his novel of the same name. Alexandre Dumas, fils, was the illegitimate son of the well-known writer Alexandre Dumas, père, author of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Three Musketeers*, and *The Man in the Iron Mask*.

La Dame aux camélias was a shocking, semi-autobiographical best seller about Dumas' affair with a celebrated courtesan, Rose Alphonsine Plessis (who preferred the more upscale name Marie Duplessis). Young Dumas and Marie Duplessis had become lovers when they were both 20 and she was already established as a notorious Paris courtesan. He ended the affair less than a year later, deeply in debt, unable to support either her extravagant lifestyle or her numerous lovers.

Marie returned to her round of luxury and lovers (among them Franz Liszt). But her health deteriorated, and she died of consumption in 1847 at the age of 23. Dumas' novel appeared a year later; in it Marie was renamed Marguerite Gautier, her lover Armand Duval. The real Marie was quite different than either Dumas' idealized heroine or Verdi's Violetta. Marie Duplessis liked to say "Lying keeps my teeth white." If she resembles any operatic heroine, it is the luxury-loving Manon Lescaut rather than the self-sacrificing Violetta Valéry. (Indeed in Dumas' story, Duval gives Marguerite a copy of Prévost's novel *L'histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* – the story that later inspired the operas *Manon* by Jules Massenet and *Manon Lescaut* by Giacomo Puccini.)

In the preface to his translation of Dumas' novel, David Coward says,

La Dame aux Camélias has never been a novel for which persons of taste and discernment have been able to confess outright enthusiasm. When it appeared in 1848, stern judges declared its subject to be indelicate. Nowadays the blushes spring from a reluctance to admit openly that a four-hankie novel can claim to be literature or even have a serious call on our attention. By any standards, it is not a particularly good book: at most, it falls into G.K. Chesterton's category of 'good bad books'!... [Dumas fils] wrote better novels and more significant plays, but he wrote them with his head. La Dame aux Camélias is a young man's book, and it has all the faults and virtues of youth. It was a romantic indiscretion for which Dumas was never moved to apologize.

Dumas adapted *La Dame aux camélias* as a play in 1849; it premiered in Paris in 1852. When Giuseppe Verdi saw the play shortly after its premiere he was surely inspired to transform it into an opera, not just by the chance to *épater les bourgeois* with a depiction of unmarried love and a noble prostitute, but also by the fact that Violetta's plight mirrored Verdi's own life.

Verdi had recently become involved with Giuseppina Strepponi, the former singer whose influence had helped launch his career. They would marry in 1859 and remain together until Strepponi's death in 1897. But in 1852, as Verdi was casting about for a subject to fulfill his contract for a new opera with Venice's La Fenice Theatre, they had moved to the small town of Busseto in the Italian countryside, where their relationship caused a scandal. The townspeople ostracized Strepponi, appalled by her reputation – she had several illegitimate children from various fathers – and by the fact that she and Verdi were living in sin.

Verdi chose to ignore the insults of the townspeople, protesting directly only when Antonio Barezzi, his benefactor and the father of Verdi's beloved first wife, criticized his living arrangements.

Verdi wrote Barezzi from Paris on January 21, 1852

"... you live in a town where people have the bad habit of frequently prying into other people's affairs and disapproving of everything that doesn't conform to their own ideas. I am not accustomed to interfere in other people's business, unless I am asked to, because I demand that no one interfere in mine. Hence the gossip, the grumbling prattle, the disapproval..."

In my house there lives a free, independent lady who loves seclusion as I do, and possesses a fortune...Neither she nor I owe any accounts of our action to anyone...

Who knows whether she is or is not my wife? And if she is, who knows what the particular reasons are for not making it public? Who knows whether it is good or bad? Why might it not be a good thing? And even if it is bad, who has the right to condemn us? I will definitely say this much: in my house she is entitled to as much respect, or more, as I am myself, and no one is allowed to forget this for any reason whatsoever; she has every right to it, as much for her dignity as for her intelligence and her unfailing graciousness to others...

Barezzi did eventually accept Strepponi. But this letter and the complicated mix of love and disapproval in the relationship between Verdi and Barezzi seem to find an echo in *La traviata* in the complex character of Germont. He enters the opera as a conventional bourgeois father bent on splitting up the lovers to preserve his family honour. But he is soon surprised to find he can connect with and respect the woman who threatens his daughter's happiness and his son's position in society.

Verdi's sense of social justice infuses many of his operas. But *La traviata* is his most intimate work, imbued with a compassion and affection unequalled in any of his works, and some of that affection reaches even to Germont, the representative of the social conventions and double standards that destroy Violetta's happiness.

On being asked which was his favourite of his operas, Verdi is said to have replied: "Speaking as a professional, *Rigoletto*, as an amateur, *Traviata*."

Verdi's operatic adaptation has soared to the top of the repertoire and transcended its source. Opera America lists *La traviata* as the third most frequently performed opera in North America (*La Bohème*, that other great opera whose heroine dies of consumption, takes first place). Verdi had faith that Time would decide the fate of *La traviata* ... and so it has.

La Dame aux camélias in Theatre and Film



Poster of Sarah Bernhardt in *La Dame aux camélias*.
Alfons Mucha, Paris, 1896.

Dumas' play *La Dame aux camélias* was immensely successful at its 1852 premiere, and it became popular all over Europe and America. Over the decades the character of Marguerite Gautier was interpreted by such actresses as Lillian Gish, Tallulah Bankhead, and Sarah Bernhardt. In fact Marguerite became Bernhardt's signature role; she performed it in both the original French and in the English adaptation *Camille*. (In 1906 the *New York Times* reported that during a performance of *Camille*, Bernhardt had scolded a sparse Youngstown audience in French, calling them stupid and utterly lacking in appreciation. As most of the audience did not understand French, they applauded anyway.)

So impressed was Dumas by Bernhardt's performances of his play that in 1884 he gave her the original letter he had written to Marie Duplessis breaking off their affair. After Marie's death he had bought the letter back and quoted it in his novel.

"STUPID," SAYS BERNHARDT

In French to Youngstown Audience,
Which Cheers Wildly.
Special to The New York Times.

YOUNGSTOWN, Ohio, Feb. 14.—Angry because the Grand Opera House was not packed to-night when she appeared in "Camille," Sarah Bernhardt scolded the audience in French in the course of the performance. She said that Youngstown people were stupid and utterly lacking in appreciation.

Her criticism was interpolated in a touching love scene with Armand, and was greeted by wild applause, few in the audience understanding French.

The New York Times

Published: February 15, 1906
Copyright © The New York Times

Good-bye, my dear Marguerite. I am not rich enough to love you as I would nor poor enough to love you as you would. Let us then forget, you a name which must be indifferent enough to you, I a happiness which has become impossible.

La Dame aux camélias (or *Camille*, as it is called in English) has also had many film adaptations, including a 1911 French movie starring Sarah Bernhardt and a 1921 silent with Alla Nazimova and a nearly unknown Rudolph Valentino. Although the 1921 silent film today seems charmingly exotic, with a lavish, over-the-top Art Deco set, it was envisioned as a contemporary treatment of the story. The film opens with the lines *Why not a Camille of today? Living the same story in this generation?*

The elaborate sets were designed by Natacha Rambova, who would later become Valentino's second wife, and who was rumored to be Nazimova's lover.

Most celebrated is the first English talking version, the 1936 classic *Camille*, directed by George Cukor and starring Greta Garbo in a performance for which she received an Academy Award nomination and the New York Film Critics award for best actress. *Camille* is considered by many to be her finest screen performance.



Robert Taylor and Greta Garbo in the 1936 film *Camille*



Alla Nazimova as Marguerite Gautier in the 1921 film *Camille*

Garbo's first talkie film, *Anna Christie* (1931), had been advertised with the proclamation: "Garbo Talks!" Some wags suggested that *Camille* should be promoted with the line "Garbo Coughs!"

Robert Taylor played Armand Duval, and Lionel Barrymore his father. The film inspired Milton Benjamin to write a song called "I'll Love Like Robert Taylor (Be My Greta Garbo)."

Inside Verdi's Time

Censorship of *La traviata*

By putting a prostitute on stage and treating her sympathetically, Verdi and his librettist, Francesco Maria Piave, courted controversy, not only with the public, but from official censors. Before *la Traviata* could premiere at Venice's La Fenice, the libretto required approval from the theatre management, the mayor of the city, and the Austrian Department of Public Order. Verdi had a penchant for choosing subjects that the censors saw as seditious and immoral. To settle the inevitable disagreements, he would have to either negotiate changes to the libretto or shop around for a less restrictive venue.

One of the problems came in Alfredo's Act 1 love song to Violetta, *Un dì, felice, eterea*. It was bad enough for the hero to be expressing ardent passion to a prostitute, but the aria ended with the incendiary phrase *Croce e delizia al cor* (*The torment and delight of my heart*). *Croce* could also mean *Cross* and in the context of a love song to a prostitute, evoking Christ's crucifixion seemed blasphemous. The censor urged Verdi to change *croce* to a synonym, *pena* (*pain*). Verdi refused.

Even when the libretto survived the Venetian premiere more or less intact, the battles were replayed in other cities. For a performance in Bologna, the censors required the Act 1 drinking song, *Libiamo*, to be rewritten and did change *Croce e delizia* to *pena e delizia*.

Verdi managed to get *La traviata* approved, but only after the setting was moved back 150 years to the Paris of Louis XIV and the title changed from *Amore e Morte – Love and Death* – to the more judgemental *La traviata* (*The Woman Who Strayed* or *The Fallen Woman*).

The moralistic attitude of the day was summed up by Felice Varesi, the first Germont, who sniffed, *The main character is a kept woman or rather a common whore of our own time who died in Paris not very long ago*. (Varesi was also miffed that his part in *La traviata* was neither as large nor as heroic as he wished – he had previously created the title roles in Verdi's operas *Rigoletto* and *Macbeth*.)

The Demi-Monde

Verdi's heroine was a member of the *demi-monde* (*half-world*), that luxurious, shadowy world where respectable men from polite society (*le monde*) were entertained by women who were definitely not considered respectable. The demi-mondaines – or courtesans – lived extravagantly on gifts and cash provided by their various lovers – for as long as their beauty lasted.

The term *demi-monde* was actually coined by Alexandre Dumas, fils, in his third play, an 1855 work called *Le Demi-Monde*, which is considered his finest dramatic work and a model of the 19th century comedy of manners. The play depicts the attempts of Suzanne D'Ange, a demimondaine, to achieve social rehabilitation – to re-establish herself in respectable society by marrying a young man who is unaware of her past. But Olivier de Jalin, one of her former lovers, knows her all too well and schemes to rescue the naive young man from the clutches of this adventuress. Suzanne is the flip side of Violetta: heartless, scheming, pragmatic, and self-interested. Intrigue, forgery, and a duel ensue. And a new word is born, amusingly defined by Olivier:

Enter a fruit store and ask the proprietor for his best peaches. He will show you a basket containing magnificent specimens, separated from each other by leaves, in order that they may not be injured from contact. Ask him the price, and he will tell you, we will suppose, thirty sous each. Look around and you will be sure to see another basket filled with peaches equally fine in appearance with the first, only lying closer together, and thus not visible on all sides. Ask him how much these are and he will tell you fifteen sous. You will naturally inquire why these peaches, apparently as large, fine, ripe, and tempting as the others, cost so much less? The vender will then take up one of them at

random; he will carefully turn it, and show you a little speck which causes its inferiority. Well, my dear friend, we are now in the basket of peaches at fifteen sous each. The women whom you see around you have all some fault in their past history, or some spot on their name. They crowd together, in order that they shall exhibit as little as possible of their true character.

Though they have the same origin, the same appearance and the same prejudices as women of society, they do not belong in it; they constitute what we call the Demi-Monde, which sails, like a floating island in the Parisian Sea, which calls to itself, welcomes, accepts, everything that falls from the mainland — not to mention those who have been shipwrecked or who come from God knows where.

The glamorous life of a demimondaine was a financial and social tightrope; there was no job security, and legitimizing a relationship through marriage was quite simply out of the question. Verdi's compassionate portrayal of such a woman startled and disturbed the people of his own time – and created a character whose courage and generosity continue to fascinate and inspire.

Consumption: The Romanticization of a Disease

I always look well when I'm near death.

Greta Garbo as Marguerite Gautier in the 1936 film *Camille*.

Operatic heroines tend to die: they are stabbed or they stab themselves; they take poison, throw themselves from ramparts or cliffs, or ride their horses into flames. Less violent, but still dramatic, is death by consumption – a fate shared by Violetta in *La traviata* (1853), Antonia in Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1881) and Mimi in Puccini's *La Bohème* (1896). In fact *La traviata* and *La Bohème* are two of the three most frequently performed operas in North America, making consumption a strikingly popular reason for a soprano's final aria.

The romanticization of consumption is one of the fascinating by-ways of 19th century art and literature.

Consumption is the old-fashioned name for the acute, active form of tuberculosis, a contagious bacterial disease that has plagued humans for millennia; the Greeks called it phthisis (pronounced THĪ-sis to rhyme with crisis).

In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder (AD 23 –79) recounted numerous treatments for tuberculosis:

The cure for phthisis is effected by taking a wolf's liver boiled in thin wine; the bacon of a sow that has been fed upon herbs; or the flesh of a she-ass, eaten with the broth ... They say too that the smoke of dried cow-dung ... is remarkably good for phthisis ... goat suet, many persons say ... melted fresh with honied wine ... is good for cough and phthisis, care being taken to stir the mixture with a sprig of rue... Some writers, too, have stated that ashes of burnt swine's dung are very useful, mixed with raisin wine.

Tuberculosis was called consumption because it seemed to consume people from within, with a bloody cough, fever, pallor, weight loss, and long relentless wasting. It was also known as the White Plague, and is believed responsible for 20% of the deaths in 17th-century London and 30% of those in 19th-century Paris.

The contagious nature of the disease was not recognized until 30 years after Verdi wrote *La traviata*. In 1882, Robert Koch discovered the bacterium that causes tuberculosis. Once it was realized that TB was caused by a germ and that getting close to infected people could be fatal, the romantic allure of the disease faded away ... but not before Puccini's *La Bohème* made explicit the connection between poverty

and ill health. Tuberculosis is associated with crowded, unhealthy living conditions, with prisons, and with homelessness, conditions which allow easy transmission of the bacteria from person to person.

However, in the early and mid 19th century, people thought the disease was hereditary or a divine punishment, or a sign of artistic genius, and there was a burst of romantic lore around consumption. The disease developed a certain cachet thanks to the prominence of some of its victims, its lingering nature, and the current ideals of beauty, which matched the ethereal, wasted appearance typical of someone with the disease.

In his memoirs, Alexandre Dumas, père, father of the author of *La Dame aux camélias*, wrote cynically, *In 1823 and 1824 it was all the fashion to suffer from chest complaint; everybody was consumptive, poets especially; it was good form to spit blood after each emotion that was at all inclined to be sensational, and to die before reaching the age of thirty.*

Among the many illustrious victims of consumption were the novelist Robert Louis Stevenson; Thomas Mann, author of *The Magic Mountain*, a literary classic that used a sanatorium as its background; the Brontë sisters; the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning; and the composer Frederic Chopin. Perhaps the most iconic victim of consumption was John Keats, the great romantic poet who died from TB at the age of 25. It was Keats who wrote "*Beauty is truth, truth beauty,*" - *that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.* His early death was an incalculable loss to literature and art.

Another Romantic poet, the supremely self-indulgent Lord Byron, is reported to have said, *How pale I look! -- I should like, I think, to die of consumption. .. Because then the women would all say, 'See that poor Byron – how interesting he looks in dying!'*

In his book *Verdi with a Vengeance* William Berger explains that consumption *was the most fashionable terminal illness one could get in those days, giving the victim a frail beauty and an aura of irresistible doom. It was the nineteenth century's verison of "heroin chic."*

Consumption was in many ways the AIDS of the 19th century – a wasting disease that ravaged promising young lives, including a generation of artists.

During the 20th century, improved living conditions and the development of antibiotics reduced mortality rates and made TB far less of a threat, particularly in the prosperous western world. However, the TB bacillus has continued to mutate and evolve, developing drug-resistant strains. The disease is still very much with us.

In its 2008 fact sheet on TB, the World Health Organization reports that more than 2 billion people, equal to one-third of the world's population, are infected with TB. There were over 9 million new active cases in 2006, and 1.7 million people died of the disease that year. About one in ten of those infected with the TB bacillus eventually develop the active disease, which, if left untreated, kills more than half of its victims. One out of four TB deaths is now HIV related, and tuberculosis is the world's greatest infectious killer of women of reproductive age and the leading cause of death among people with HIV/AIDS.

One way of trying to make sense of such tragedy is to transmute it into art. Making art of the ways we die, immortalizing the dead, is a way of imbuing senseless loss with meaning.

The Black Death that carried off millions in Europe during the 14th century is now known to us mostly through art and literature – such as Boccaccio's great story cycle *The Decameron* and, some say, the nursery chant *Ring around the Rosy*. TB took its place in that tradition, with the romanticization of consumption and the celebration in music and literature of the beautiful young lives it destroyed. And exactly 100 years after Puccini's heroine Mimi died of consumption, an adaptation of *La Bohème* called *Rent* brought the romantic tragedy of death by consumption into a 20th century context in which Mimi is dying of AIDS.

The Librettist: Francesco Maria Piave

Verdi first worked with the librettist Francesco Maria Piave in the 1844 opera *Ernani*, and together they collaborated on ten more operas over the next 18 years: *I due Foscari*, *Attila*, *Macbeth*, *Il corsaro*, *Stiffelio*, *Rigoletto*, *La traviata*, *Simon Boccanegra*, *Aroldo*, and *La forza del destino*.

Piave was not only a librettist, but a journalist and translator. He was resident poet and stage manager at La Fenice in Venice and later at La Scala in Milan. His expertise as a stage manager and tact as a negotiator served Verdi well over the years, although Verdi bullied him mercilessly. During the efforts to have *Rigoletto* approved by the censors, the brunt of which fell to Piave, Verdi wrote to him: *If I were the poet, I would give [this matter] a great deal of attention, all the more so in that you will be largely responsible if it happens (and let's hope to God it doesn't) that this drama is not permitted.*

Nevertheless they were friends as well as collaborators, and after Piave suffered a stroke in 1867, which left him paralyzed and unable to speak, Verdi helped to support his wife and daughter and paid for his funeral when he died nine years later.

The Composer: Giuseppe Verdi

1813 was a fine year for opera lovers as two giants of the operatic world were born: the German Richard Wagner and the Italian Giuseppe Verdi.

Giuseppe Verdi dominated Italian opera for half a century with 28 operas that include some of the best known in the repertoire, among them *Nabucco*, *Macbeth*, *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, *A Masked Ball (Un Ballo in Maschera)*, *Don Carlos*, *Aida*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*.

Verdi was not only a very popular and successful composer, but an astute businessman and producer, an active and committed farmer, a hero of the Italian nationalist movement, a member of the first Italian Parliament, and a generous philanthropist.

Verdi's operas remain as popular today as when they first appeared and form the core of today's standard repertoire. Many of the tunes from his operas are familiar even to people who know nothing of opera.

Youth

Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi was born in October 1813 in the small village of Roncole, about 65 miles southeast of Milan in the province of Parma in Italy. At the time, Italy was made up of several small states, most ruled by foreign powers. Parma was occupied by Napoleon's army, and Verdi's original birth certificate is French, with his name registered as Joseph Fortunin François.

The area around Roncole was farming country. Verdi's parents ran a tavern and a grocery store and leased land and houses which they sublet to tenant farmers.

Young Verdi showed an early interest in music and was encouraged by his father, who bought an old spinet piano and sent him to the church organist for lessons. Soon Giuseppe was substituting as organist at the town church.

He was also an altar boy. Once when he was about seven, his attention wandered during Mass, and the priest knocked him down. The child responded by cursing the priest, "May God strike you with lightning." Eight years later, the priest was killed when lightning struck a nearby church, killing four priests, two laymen, and two dogs. Verdi delighted in retelling this story. Perhaps it shaped his fascination with the power of Monterone's curse in *Rigoletto*, an opera that Verdi originally titled *La Maledizione (The Curse)*.

When Verdi was ten, his father sent him to the nearby city of Busseto for further musical training. He stayed in the home of Antonio Barezzi, a local merchant and music enthusiast and gave singing and piano lessons to Barezzi's daughter Margherita, whom he would later marry. He also studied composition with Ferdinando Provesi, the local organist, choirmaster, teacher at the music school, and leader of the amateur Philharmonic Society orchestra. Verdi became Provesi's protégé and assistant, playing organ, composing, arranging and copying music and conducting rehearsals.

At the age of 18, with financial support from Barezzi, Verdi went to Milan to apply to the Conservatory. Although Milan is now part of Italy, at the time, it was under Austrian occupation, and a passport was needed for travel between Busseto and Milan. Although he was rejected by the Conservatory, Verdi stayed in Milan to study counterpoint with Vincenzo Lavigna, an opera composer who had played for many years at La Scala, Milan's renowned opera house.

In 1836, having returned to Busseto, Verdi married Margherita Barezzi, accepted the position of maestro of the Busseto Philharmonic, and composed his first opera, *Rocester*, which he later renamed *Oberto, conte di San Bonifacio*.

The Verdis' daughter Virginia was born in 1837, but died the following year. In 1839 Giuseppe and Margherita moved back to Milan with their little son, Icilio Romano, who died shortly after.

Verdi had tried without success to have *Oberto* performed in either Parma or Milan, but in 1839, thanks to the recommendation of the soprano Giuseppina Strepponi, Bartolomeo Merelli, the impresario at La Scala, finally agreed to present *Oberto*. The opera was successful enough to persuade Merelli to offer Verdi a contract to write more operas.

While Verdi was working on his next opera, a comedy called *Un Giorno di Regno*, his wife died. The deaths of his entire young family within such a short time left him devastated. Although he completed *Un Giorno di Regno*, it was a failure, and Verdi resolved never to compose again.

Early operas

It took two years for Merelli to persuade Verdi to compose another opera. The biblical story of the Israelites' captivity in Babylon eventually captured Verdi's imagination, and in 1842 *Nabucco* made its triumphant premiere with Giuseppina Strepponi in the lead role of Abigaille. Verdi became a celebrity overnight, not least because the Italian audience identified with the Israelites, another people who were subjugated by foreign powers. The opera's Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves, "Va pensiero" was sung in the streets of Milan and became an unofficial Italian national anthem.

Verdi was suddenly an inspirational figure in the Risorgimento, the movement toward a free, united Italy.

He was also now in demand as an opera composer and began what he called his "years as a galley slave," cranking out opera after opera, feeding the insatiable operatic appetites of theatres and audiences throughout Italy and in Paris and London.

Between 1843 and 1850 he composed and often directed productions of 13 new operas, including *Ernani*, *Macbeth*, and *Luisa Miller*. By 1850, Verdi was the leading composer of opera in Italy and one of the most successful in all of Europe. His works, tuneful, highly dramatic, often with political overtones, captivated audiences. They also brought prosperity to Verdi, to his Italian publisher Giovanni Ricordi, (and to succeeding generations of the Ricordi family, including son Tito and grandson Giulio) and to numerous impresarios and agents.

During this time Verdi had kept in touch with Giuseppina Strepponi, the soprano who had recommended Verdi's first opera and starred in his second. By 1846, ill health had forced Strepponi to retire from singing. She and Verdi began working closely together in Paris in 1847, and Strepponi, with her inside knowledge of the theatrical and musical world, became Verdi's devoted and able collaborator. Over the

next 50 years, until her death in 1897, she helped him in business and musical matters and handled negotiations and disputes with agents, impresarios, censors, and colleagues.

She also became his mistress. This relationship caused a scandal among Verdi's family and friends, who were appalled by her reputation – she had several illegitimate children – and by the fact that she and Verdi lived openly together for several years before finally marrying in 1859.

The high point of Verdi's "galley years" came with his "big three" – "RigTrovTrav", the three operas that are his most popular. *Rigoletto* premiered in 1851 in Venice; *Il trovatore* was launched in Rome in 1853, followed six weeks later by *La traviata* in Venice. While both *Rigoletto* and *Il trovatore* were immediate hits, *La traviata* was at first less of a success.

Verdi called the premiere of *La traviata* a fiasco; it wasn't actually an abject failure – it did well enough at the box office, and Verdi had to take several bows during Act 1. But he was disappointed that censors had insisted on unceremoniously forcing his cutting-edge contemporary work to time-travel a century and a half into the past. He was also none too pleased with the singers. The soprano, Fanny Salvini-Donatelli, sang well, but was plump enough to elicit laughter as she portrayed a frail consumptive in Act 3. The tenor, Lodovico Graziani, went hoarse in the second act, and the baritone, Felice Varesi, put little heart into his performance, grumpily complaining about both the subject matter (*the main character is a kept woman or rather a common whore*) and the smallness of his own role (as the first Rigoletto and Macbeth, he felt that Germont was a step down).

Dealing with Censorship

Despite Verdi's popularity and the rapidity with which he churned out hit after hit, writing and producing the operas was anything but a smooth process. In particular, Verdi had constant battles with censors.

Each opera was commissioned for a particular opera house, and each libretto had to be approved by the appropriate authorities, who, given Italy's fractured state, varied from city to city, and could include church authorities as well as Austrian and French officials. Opera was a popular and prominent entertainment, and censors were at pains to make sure that operas were morally and politically inoffensive. What would satisfy the censors in one jurisdiction would not pass in another.

Both *Rigoletto* and *La traviata* premiered at the Teatro La Fenice, which was in Austrian-controlled Venice. (Austria ruled much of northern Italy during the mid-19th century).

A libretto in Venice required approval from the theatre management, the mayor of the city, and the Austrian Department of Public Order.

The opening of *Rigoletto* had to be delayed while Verdi and his librettist, Francesco Maria Piave, battled with the Venetian censors. The play on which *Rigoletto* had been based, *Le roi s'amuse* (*The King Amuses Himself*) by Victor Hugo, had opened in Paris two decades previously, in 1832, played for one night, and been promptly banned as obscene and politically subversive. The play was based on the life of the French King Francis I, who had been safely dead since 1547. However, Hugo's King Francis was a little too much like the current King, Louis-Phillipe, who had survived an assassination attempt just before the play opened. The censors were not amused and shut the play down. Despite a lawsuit by the furious playwright, the ban on performances remained in place for fifty years, even though the printed version of the play was available. It was not until November 22, 1882, that *Le roi s'amuse* could finally be seen again in Paris – a quarter century after Verdi's *Rigoletto* first played Paris.

Rigoletto was finally staged once Verdi and his librettist Francesco Maria Piave moved the action from France to Mantua and changed the title from to *La Maledizione* (*The Curse*) to *Rigoletto* (these changes were much more minor than some that had been proposed, including getting rid of Rigoletto's hump and the sack in which Gilda's body was placed).

La traviata too had to be altered to please the censors. Fresh from the epic battle with the Venetian censors over *Rigoletto*, Verdi and Piave could not have been surprised that their sympathetic portrayal of a prostitute would again raise hackles. Verdi managed to get *La traviata* approved, but only after the setting was moved back 150 years to the Paris of Louis XIV, thus avoiding the uncomfortable realities of Verdi's contemporary setting. The censors wanted it safely dated in the past. They also insisted that Verdi change his title from *Amore e Morte – Love and Death* – to the more judgemental *La traviata*, meaning *The Woman Who Strayed* or *The Fallen Woman*.

In the case of Verdi's 1859 opera *Un ballo in maschera* (*A Masked Ball*), no compromise could be reached with the censors in Naples. The opera's plot was based on the 1789 assassination of the Swedish King Gustavus III in Stockholm. In the face of the censors' adamant refusal to allow the assassination of a king to be shown on stage, Verdi withdrew the opera and offered it to Rome. The papal censor was satisfied once Verdi had changed the setting to 17th-century Boston and transformed the King of Sweden into the Count of Warwick.

Italian Politics

Given the times and Italy's political situation, the inflexibility of the Austrian censors in Naples was understandable. There had been an attempt on the life of Napoleon III in Paris in 1858, and an opera on the assassination of a ruler might give the populace ideas. Revolt was in the air. The Risorgimento, the movement to unite Italy, was in full swing, and war between the nationalists and Austria was imminent.

Verdi himself was a popular figure among the nationalists. Not only did his operas appeal to patriots, but his very name was an acronym for the revolution. The slogan "Viva VERDI" became code for "Vittorio Emanuele, Re D'Italia" (Victor Emmanuel, King of Italy).

Victor Emmanuel was the king of Piedmont and a prime candidate to be leader of a united Italy. Piedmont, which had remained independent of Austria during the 19th century, allied with France and went to war against Austria in 1859, conquering some, but not all the provinces of Italy. Over the next decade, in a series of campaigns, bits and pieces were added on to Italy, but as early as 1861, unification was sufficiently underway that the first Italian parliament was established. Verdi himself was elected to this parliament, and Victor Emmanuel was proclaimed King of Italy. In 1866, when Italian government forces allied with Prussia against Austria to conquer the last remaining territories under Austrian control, Verdi contributed money and guns for the troops. In 1874, King Victor Emmanuel decreed him a lifetime Senator. Truth be told, Verdi was not a particularly active statesman. He showed up at the Senate to take his oath and worked on getting government subsidies for the theatre.

The Later Operas

During these intensely political times, Verdi was also intensely creative; between 1851 and 1871 he wrote some of his greatest operas, beginning with the "RigTroVTrav" big three, along with *Simon Boccanegra* (1857), *Un ballo in maschera* (1859), *La forza del destino* (1862), and *Don Carlos* (1867), and culminating with the spectacular *Aida* (1871), the grandest of grand operas, notorious for being the Opera With Elephants.

As part of the celebrations surrounding the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the Khedive (a Turkish Viceroy who ruled Egypt) Ismail Pasha built a new opera house in Cairo. The inaugural performance in the opera house was Verdi's *Rigoletto*. The Khedive also commissioned Verdi to write an opera with an Egyptian theme specifically for the new Cairo Opera House. This was to be *Aida*, which premiered spectacularly in 1871 and has dazzled the world ever since.

At the premiere, there were 300 people on stage, and the audience of dignitaries and Egyptophiles included the khedive and his harem. The conductor was Giovanni Bottesini, also a composer and a double bass virtuoso. In his enthusiasm for the opera, Bottesini went beyond the call of duty and financed a

menagerie of animals for the Triumphal March in the second act, including 12 elephants, 15 camels, and assorted zebras, giraffes, lions, ostriches, jackals, baboons, and rodents. Only the elephants and camels were trained well enough to perform; the other animals died of neglect, apparently because Bottesini forgot about them.

After the success of *Aida*, Verdi decided to retire from writing operas. He was already well off, and his fee and royalties for *Aida* made him quite wealthy. At the age of 58, he was happy to devote himself to his farm in Sant'Agata while occasionally composing or revising and producing some of his earlier works.

Verdi had bought the farm at Sant'Agata in 1848 and moved there with Strepponi in 1851. Over the years it had been a sanctuary and a workplace, not only for composing, but for farming. He remodeled the house and expanded the farm, participating actively in the farm work along with his tenant farmers.

Although Verdi is best known as an opera composer, he did write other music, most notably the monumental *Requiem* of 1874. After the death of the eminent opera composer Gioacchino Rossini in 1868, Verdi had proposed that Italian composers each contribute a section to a Requiem Mass in Rossini's honour. This was done, but the complete mass was not performed during Verdi's lifetime. Several years later, in 1873, Alessandro Manzoni, an Italian novelist and poet, died, and Verdi decided to use his "Libera me" as the starting point for a Requiem Mass honouring Manzoni. Verdi's complete *Requiem* was performed at the cathedral in Milan, on the first anniversary of Manzoni's death.

Some critics charged that the *Requiem* was too operatic and not sacred enough. The German conductor and composer Hans von Bülow called it "Verdi's latest opera, though in ecclesiastical robes." But composer Johannes Brahms called it a work of genius. Certainly it is a stunningly dramatic, profoundly emotional work; in particular the section called Dies Irae (Day of Wrath) captures the horror and terror of Judgement Day.

Verdi's Final Years

Sixteen years after his "retirement", the 74-year-old Verdi premiered his next opera, *Otello*, based on Shakespeare's play. Verdi had a profound admiration for Shakespeare, and his publisher Giulio Ricordi and composer-poet Arrigo Boito, with Giuseppina Strepponi's support, were able to persuade Verdi to take on this project. It was followed by another opera inspired by Shakespeare, the comedy *Falstaff* (1893). Both were acclaimed, and many consider them Verdi's finest operas.

Verdi also worked during his so-called retirement on philanthropic projects, founding a hospital and establishing the Casa di Riposo, a home for retired musicians in Milan. Verdi purchased land for the Casa di Riposo in 1889 and began construction of the house in 1896. He saw the Casa di Riposo as a way to provide for musicians less fortunate than himself. In his will, Verdi left the building and grounds and all the royalties from his compositions to the Casa di Riposo, which still exists, serving as a home for singers, dancers, and other musicians, as well as visiting music students.

Giuseppina died in 1897. Verdi then lived at the Grand Hotel in Milan, finding companionship with retired soprano Teresa Stolz, whom he had known for some 30 years. Rumours were that they had long been lovers; Stolz had also performed much of Verdi's music and sang *Aida* in the 1872 Milan premiere.

Verdi suffered a stroke on January 21, 1901 and died six days later. He was buried in Milan at the Casa di Riposo. His funeral was a national event, and thousands lined the streets, singing "Va, pensiero," the famous chorus from *Nabucco*. Among the mourners were such great composers as Rossini, Donizetti, and Puccini.

Inside the Production

The contemporary nature of *La traviata*

For Venice I am doing La Dame aux Camelias which will perhaps be given the title Traviata. It is a contemporary subject. Another person might not have done it because of the morals or because of the period or a thousand other silly scruples...I am doing it with great pleasure.

With *La traviata*, Verdi initiated a new realism into the opera house. Modeled on the autobiographical novel of Alexandre Dumas fils, *La traviata* marked a turning point in the composer's writing, where he moved away from historical topics or iconic literary subjects, and insisted that his audience regard – directly – the social constructs surrounding love that had torn his heart in a very personal way.

It was a courageous move for Verdi. For some five years, Verdi had been involved with Giuseppina Strepponi, a retired soprano who had performed in several of his early operas. Strepponi's notorious personal life had included affairs with singers and producers – and illegitimate children. Verdi and Strepponi did not marry until much later, causing untold problems within his family and unspoken judgment in established social circles.

In 1850, contemporary subjects were rare on the operatic stage. This is not to say that Verdi's previous works had not been relevant. The symbolism was clear: the enslaved Hebrews of *Nabucco* represented the persecuted Italians under the Austro-Hungarian empire, the court of the Duke of Mantua was a model for contemporary corruption. But *La traviata* brought the fledgling French literary style of realism to the stage.

Verdi had not previously used such recently written source material. He likely encountered *La Dame aux camélias* in 1852 in Paris, where his operas had recently received their French premières. While creating the libretto with Francesco Piave, Verdi insisted on keeping the pace vital and the characters real, eliminating any *longueurs that would put the public to sleep, especially towards the end, which has to move rapidly.*

The first performance was a legendary disaster. The lead soprano – Fanny Salvini-Donatelli – was not the singer Verdi wanted — he strongly preferred someone *with an elegant figure, who is young and sings passionately.* While most of the blame has been romanticized to rest on the large shoulders of Mme. Salvini-Donatelli, it is possible that the censor-imposed revisions had so changed Verdi's vision that the realism was lost. Verdi was distraught, but did not lose faith in his most personal of works: *La traviata has failed: whose fault is it? Mine or the singers? I don't know. Time will decide.*

With this brief history in mind, POV asks you to consider – What is an 'authentic' production of *La Traviata*? Verdi had wanted a contemporary setting, which for him was 1853. Which setting follows his wishes more closely – the glamour of 1850's Paris, or today's modern dress? There is, of course, no single answer, but *La traviata* has sparked numerous directorial approaches with their own specific merits.

The traditional approach of the 1994 Covent Garden production, directed by theatre director Richard Eyre, is captured on DVD. Expertly cast and beautifully conducted by Sir Georg Solti, the production is comfortable in the elegance of the original time period, romanticizing the character of Violetta as a tragic victim. She appears an angel, clad in white, and dazzlingly innocent as a courtesan. We see her true nature, rather than the trappings of her profession. It is a beautiful production, a dramatic storybook come to life, with Angela Gheorgiu as a fairy tale Violetta.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9CzZjIK6iA>

The 2004 production that re-opened Teatro La Fenice (the theatre of its premiere) is re-envisioned by Canadian director Robert Carsen (who directed POV's 1986 *Il Trovatore* and 1988 *Fidelio*). Set in the 1970's, the story becomes a scathing critique of the modern hedonism of our recent past, and is focused on the corrupting power of money, that literally showers Violetta during her Act I aria, *Sempre libera*. In the performance of Patrizia Ciofi, Violetta is a hardened, aging, party girl pursued by a kind hearted paparazzo.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RB-Y_bBCg

The Salzburg Festival 2005 starring Anna Netrebko in a Willy Decker production goes beyond realism to show a woman being consumed by the men around her. The entire chorus, both men and women, are dressed in identical tuxedos, as a faceless phalanx of male dominance, while a ticking clock counts out the minutes left prior to her consumptive end.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRvNL-A9gGs>



Above: Scene from Marta Domingo's jazz-age-flavoured production of *La traviata*

Far right: David Lomeli and Elizabeth Futral in the same production

In 2006, Los Angeles Opera presented a striking production by Marta Domingo, which was remounted by San Francisco Opera in summer 2009.

The Jazz age setting translated the opera to a time where the world was fast and loose, and young men and women were succumbing to the temptations of a world filled with unimagined wealth, evoking the emptiness captured in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Suitably glamorous, the



characters are surprised by their demise as they live their lives in hapless oblivion.

POV has chosen to honour Verdi's desire to keep *La traviata* contemporary by setting it in 1949 Paris – an era that retains the glamour of Violetta's world, but is close enough to the present to convey the immediacy of the composer's vision. The production is directed by Dennis Garnhum and designed by David Boechler.

In Garnhum's words, *The heart that beats through this piece is the necessity of love....Half a century of hell is over and bright things appear to begin to come to life...What begins bright and hopeful becomes fragmented and disconnected. The 50's optimism cannot ultimately keep Violetta alive.*

Post-war Paris was home to a complicated society, where the desire for a new normalcy mixed with a return to glamour. Dior's 1947 line began to move away from wartime austerity, as couture exaggerated the conformity demanded by the burgeoning conservative morality. Placing the opera in a neo-conservative time lets the relationships among Violetta, Alfredo and Germont ring true to the original, but evokes an immediate understanding from a time well etched in our own memory.



POV's *La traviata*: Preliminary set model for Act 1 party. Designer: David Boechler

Inside the Music

The Overture to *La traviata* is a beautifully expressive, nostalgic snapshot of Violetta's life, in reverse order, beginning with a tender depiction of her dying moments in act 3, followed by her ardent love song to Alfredo ("Amami, Alfredo") a theme that becomes intertwined with the sparkling rhythms of the frivolous Parisian demimonde in which we first meet her.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0ojZCaYeLI>

Orchestra & Chorus of The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Sir Georg Solti.

Libiamo ne' lieti calici is probably the most recognizable tune in *La traviata*, among a plethora of hummable lyrics. It is a Brindisi – a toast – a song which invites everyone to drink, and this one is simply irresistible.

It begins with Alfredo toasting wine and love:

Let's drink from the joyous chalice...

Let's drink To love's sweet tremors - To those eyes That pierce the heart.

Let's drink to love - to wine That warms our kisses

Violetta, a little less naïve, and a lot more cynical, chimes in:

Let us enjoy life, For the pleasures of love are swift and fleeting

As a flower that lives and dies and can be enjoyed no more.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPTi-6mOOEE>

Placido Domingo & Lucia Popp, 1986

Duet: *Un dì, felice, eterea – One Happy Day*). During her Act 1 party, Violetta suddenly feels faint and remains behind as the guests begin to dance. Alfredo takes the opportunity to express his concern for her – and his love.

Un dì, felice, eterea, Mi balenaste innante,

E da quel dì tremante Vissi d'ignoto amor.

Di quell'amor ch'è palpito Dell'universo intero,

Misterioso, altero, Croce e delizia al cor.

One happy day You flashed lightly into my life;

And since that day I've lived In tremulous possession

Of that unspoken love, The pulse of the whole world,

Mysterious, unattainable, The torment and delight of my heart.

We will hear Alfredo's haunting *Di quell'amor* again as Violetta rejects the thought of love later in Act 1 and in the final act as she is dying. But for now, Alfredo's idealistic ardour is countered by Violetta's wordly cynicism as she tells him with little coloratura frills that if he wants love he won't find it with her.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5QHoksdErk>

Placido Domingo as Alfredo and Teresa Stratas as Violetta.

1983 Motion picture directed by Franco Zeffirelli. Conductor: James Levine

Sempre libera degg'io: Violetta has been pondering Alfredo's declaration of love and wonders if he could actually be the man she could love (*Ah, fors'è lui*). But she decides it is folly to even hope such a thing:

What madness! This dream is hopeless!

Poor woman, alone and abandoned in this populous desert

They call Paris! What can I hope? What should I do?

Enjoy myself! Plunge into the whirlpool Of pleasure and drown there! Enjoy myself!

Then she launches into a brilliant coloratura aria, her manifesto in favour of freedom and pleasure.

*Sempre libera degg'io Folleggiar di gioia in gioia,
Always free, I flutter from pleasure to pleasure*

She mightily resists the temptation of love, even as she hears Alfredo in the distance singing of love.
Mysterious, unattainable, The torment and delight of my heart.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-AcsT9LRH>

Beverly Sills, soprano, Henry Price, tenor.
1976 Wolf Trap Festival, Julius Rudel, conductor

Amami, Alfredo: As the heartbroken Violetta is writing her farewell note to Alfredo, he enters suddenly, surprising her. We now hear again a theme from the overture, as Violetta begs Alfredo to love her as much as she loves him.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDu_Q69KdW4

Renée Fleming as Violetta and Ramón Vargas as Alfredo
2008. Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James Levine

Di Provenza il mar – The Sea of Provence: After reading Violetta's letter, Alfredo is in despair. Germont tries to console his son with reminders of family life back home in Provence. Germont's old-fashioned, hymnlike aria evokes the happy childhood home, the family values, and the sense of honour that he represents.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ud63UyeNT54>

Sesto Bruscantini as Germont and Franco Bonisolti as Alfredo. Chorus of the Berlin State Opera
1973 Staatskapelle Berlin, Lamberto Gardelli conductor

Links

La traviata

Libretto & translation, with audio selections:

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/music/reserves/traviata.html>

Vocal score: <http://www.dlib.indiana.edu/variations/scores/bhr7293/>

La Dame aux camélias by Alexandre Dumas, fils

The novel:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext00/8dame10h.htm> [French]

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1608/1608-h/1608-h.htm> [English]

The play:

<http://www.archive.org/details/thatrecompletde29dumagoog> [French, with a preface by the author; play begins on p.48]

http://books.google.ca/books?id=Kc4aAAAAYAAJ&dq=dame+aux+camélias+dumas+bernhardt&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=ZbEy8f0u48&sig=LkoXh8L2zpiBOHLMGmFzRZOmnOk&hl=en&ei=yIWRSrqEAY3atgPd9IUN&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=6#v=onepage&q=&f=false

[French/English Sarah Bernhardt version]

Le demi-monde by Alexandre Dumas, fils

<http://www.archive.org/details/ledemimonde00dumaiala> [French]

<http://www.archive.org/details/demimondesatireo00dumaiala> [English]

Films

Camille: 1921 Silent film with Alla Nazimova and Rudolph Valentino

<http://theeveningclass.blogspot.com/2007/07/2007-sfsfrobert-osborne-introduction.html>
discussion and video of the 1921 film

Camille: 1936 film with Greta Garbo and Robert Taylor

<http://www.filmsite.org/cami.html> detailed description of the 1936 film, including extensive dialogue selections.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2u5uojR5Chc> Theatrical trailer

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQZ-yF0b8z8>

Opening scenes of the film. Additional excerpts from the 1936 film can be accessed from here. The film is also widely available in libraries and video stores.

Tuberculosis and Art

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/EID/vol8no11/02-0549.htm>

Directions for Further Learning

Activities for Elementary Students

Party Planning: Violetta asks you to organize her next party! Make a party invitation outlining all the party details: the time, the place, the theme and how your guests can RSVP! You might also want to design and attach a menu for the party! Consider creating a seating plan for all of the main characters at the party (Gastone, Alfredo, The Baron, Violetta, Germont, Flora, Annina, Dr Grenvil and Marchese d'Obigny).

Write: PARTY TIME! Pretend you are one of the party goers at one of the parties that you saw in *La Traviata*! Write a diary entry about what you wore to the party, the sorts of friends you were meeting there, what the party was for and don't forget to talk about the food! Did anything interesting happen at the party? Were you able to see your good friends Alfredo and Violetta there?

Letters: There is a lot of letter writing that happens in this opera! Flora writes Violetta inviting her to her house party in Paris. Violetta writes to Alfredo about leaving him to go back to Paris. Germont writes to Violetta telling her that Alfredo will soon be returning. Take one of these letters and rewrite the content in your own words. Remember to think about how the characters would be feeling and their point of view.

Card Games: With a partner, create a game for the Act III party in *La Traviata*! Play the game with your partner! Once you are an expert, trade partners with another team and either learn their game or teach them yours!

Movement: Think about how different people move. Create moves for each character. Movement can include walking, jumping, balancing, dancing, etc. Think about how each character would move and show the class.

Think: Which character would you like to play in *La Traviata*? Would you like to be one of the people at the party? Alfredo? Violetta? One of the servants? One of the entertainers? Draw a picture of what you'd like to wear while you act and sing on the stage!

Dance: At Flora's party the guests provide the entertainment and the crowds go wild! The ladies sing a Gypsy song while the men tell a story about bull fighting. Create your own choreography to the Matador song! Find the music at this link! <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s65RQxaQmkk>

E-mail: Do you have a question for Violetta or Alfredo? Write to them at their countryside home in France! I'll bet they'll write back.... violetta_alfredo@hotmail.com. Feel free to ask them anything...even about singing! Tell them what you liked about their costumes, their parties, your favourite part of the opera and what you thought of their voice! I'm sure they'd also like to hear what you thought of your entire opera experience!

Activities for Middle and High School Students



*Use *La traviata* to get your students thinking! Below you will find a range of ways to promote thinking about this opera in your classroom and are useful activities for debriefing.

Recall: Students recollect facts, figures and concepts from *La Traviata*.

ACTIVITY: Split your students into six groups. Give each group a large piece of paper and a marker. Assign each group to write in big, bold letters, one of the following titles: **Characters/Voice, Setting/Time Period, Set and Costume Design, Opera Atmosphere, Costumes, and Plot.** Have the students recall every detail that they can brainstorm for two minutes on their given topic. After two minutes, the students switch clockwise to the next sheet of paper. They must be careful to only add to each list. Hang the sheets up and use them to spring board a discussion about their opera experience. Encourage the students to remember facts, (there were three set changes) and opinions/feelings (I liked Violetta's high notes).

Similarities: Research and focus on similarities between POV's production of *La Traviata* and the very first original production of *La Traviata* in 1853. Was Pacific Opera Victoria's version on par with what you think Verdi had in mind?

Differences: Find differences between POV's production of *La Traviata* and other North American productions of *La Traviata* produced this year.

Check out San Francisco Opera (<http://sfopera.com/o/275.asp>) and Seattle Opera (<http://www.seattleopera.org/tickets/production.aspx?productionID=75>) as starting points.

Cause/Effect: Examine the causal relationship between events in the opera. *What causes Violetta to tragically die? What causes Violetta to love Alfredo? What causes Germont to confront Violetta and ask her to leave his son? What causes Violetta to not want to commit to a relationship in Act 1?* Respond in a journal.

Evaluate: Weigh and decide among alternatives, and defend your conclusions. *Was it right how Alfredo acted at the party? Why or why not? Was it right what Giorgio Germont asked Violetta and Alfredo to give up for the sake of family? Why or why not?*

Free Think: Think and respond to the following: *Think about your own life in relation to the characters in La Traviata. Were you able to identify with any of the characters? Are their situations any different to our own? Why or why not? Would you give up love for the sake of your family? Why or why not?*

Translate: What does "La Traviata" actually mean? Is this an appropriate title? Why or why not? If you were asked to rename the opera in English, what would you name it? Prepare to present your title to the class.

Point of View: *Imagine yourself as a guest at the party in Act 1. You are one of the people at the party in Paris on New Year's Eve in 1949. How do you feel on this special night? What do you think of the party? The decorations? The food? The festivities? The other guests? Respond as a diary entry.*

Free See: Visualize this situation or solution any way you wish. *Make a picture in your mind of the final scene when Violetta dies. What does it look like in your mind? If you could change something about POV's vision of the final scene, what would that change be? What would you add to the final scene if you could add something?*

Mindhop/Time: Students “hop around” from place to place within the context of the opera and describe exactly what’s happening in each scene: *New Year’s Eve, Flora’s Party, The Finale, The Entertainment at Flora’s party, The countryside, Paris.*

Think/Write: Write an essay on one of these specific themes in *La Traviata*: Love, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, illness, condemnation or censorship.

Creative writing: Reinterpret the story by creating a new version using your own characters, time period and setting.

PAIR and SHARE

Debate: Have students write a debate between two characters in the opera in contemporary English. Act it out for the class. Use one of the suggested conflict scenes as a starting point. Suggestions include the conflict between Germont and Violetta (about Germont asking Violetta to leave Alfredo), Alfredo and Violetta (about Violetta’s seemingly rejection of Alfredo in public) or between the Baron and Alfredo (fighting over Violetta). Use the following lines to get started:

Scene I	Scene II	Scene III
VIOLETTA You want me to leave him For ever?	VIOLETTA Please go, do at once!	ALFREDO (to the Baron) If you’d like to go on?
GERMONT It’s necessary.	ALFREDO I’ll go if you will swear That wherever I go, You will follow me...	BARON We can’t now; I’ll have my revenge later.
VIOLETTA Oh, no! Never! No, never! You cannot know the kind of passion, Living, overwhelming – That burns in my heart!	VIOLETTA No, never!	ALFREDO At any game you like.
	ALFREDO No, never!	BARON Let’s follow our friends... later...
	VIOLETTA Go, you are wicked!	ALFREDO I’ll be at your service. (moving upstage) Let’s go.
		BARON Let’s go.

Interview: Have one of the students role play as a character from the opera while the other partner interviews them. Questions can be related to the opera or they may not be. For instance, the interviewer might ask Violetta what her favourite party food is. The answer must be answered as though the character were answering the question.

Mime: In groups of 6 to 8 people, create group tableaux of the following events: *New Year's Eve, Flora's Party, The Finale, The Entertainment at Flora's party, The countryside or another suggestion the group could come up with.*

Create: Translate the Matador song into contemporary English and rewrite the story in a new way. Present your work using poetry, a short story or a comic strip.

<p>GASTONE E MATTADORI: E' Piquillo un bel gagliardo Biscaglino mattador: Forte il braccio, fiero il guardo, Delle giostre egli e' signor. D'andalusa giovinetta Follemente innamorato'; Ma la bella ritrosetta Così' al giovane parlo': Cinque tori in un sol giorno Vo' vederti ad atterrar; E, se vinci, al tuo ritorno Mano e cor ti vo' donar. Sì', gli disse, e il mattadore, Alle giostre mosse il piè'; Cinque tori, vincitore Sull'arena egli stende'.</p> <p>GLI ALTRI: Bravo, bravo il mattadore, Ben gagliardo si mostro' Se alla giovane l'amore In tal guisa egli provo'.</p> <p>GASTONE E MATTADORI: Poi, tra plausi, ritornato Alla bella del suo cor, Colse il premio desiato Tra le braccia dell'amor.</p> <p>GLI ALTRI: Con tai prove i mattadori San le belle conquistar!</p> <p>GASTONE E MATTADORI: Ma qui son piu' miti i cori; A noi basta folleggiar</p> <p>TUTTI: Sì', sì', allegri Or pria tentiamo Della sorte il vario umor; La palestra dischiudiamo Agli audaci giuocator.</p>	<p>GASTON AND THE BULLFIGHTER: There's a matador of Biscay, The bold handsome Piquillo; Strong arm and proud of aspect, He's the lord of the arena. With an Andalusian maiden He fell violently in love But the saucy little beauty Challenged her admiring swain; "Let me see you bring to earth Five bulls in a single day, And if you return in triumph You shall have my heart and hand." "I accept!" said the bullfighter And he hurried to the fight; All five bulls the conquering hero Stretched lifeless upon the sand.</p> <p>CHORUS LADIES: Bravo, bravo, brave bullfighter, You have shown yourself a hero, And have proved to the maiden The kind of love yours is.</p> <p>GASTON AND THE BULLFIGHTER: Midst the cheering he went back To the girl of his heart, And eagerly embraced his prize In the strong arms of love.</p> <p>CHORUS LADIES: With feats like this, bullfighters Know how to win the fair.</p> <p>GASTON AND THE BULLFIGHTER: But here our hearts are gentler, We make do with fun and games!</p> <p>ALL: Yes, lively friends, first let us try The temper of fickle fortune; Let us open the lists To the bold gamester.</p>
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Perform: Create a toast of your own in response to Alfredo's. Research the history of toasting. Read your toast for the class! Even better is to make sure everyone has their water bottles with them!

<p>ALFREDO Libiam ne' lieti calici Che la bellezza infiora, E la fuggevol ora S'inebri a volutta'. Libiam ne' dolci fremiti Che suscita l'amore, Poiche' quell'occhio al core (indicando Violetta) Onnipotente va. Libiamo, amor fra i calici Piu' caldi baci avra'.</p>	<p>ALFREDO Let's drink from the joyous chalice Where beauty flowers... Let the fleeting hour To pleasure's intoxication yield. Let's drink To love's sweet tremors – To those eyes That pierce the heart. Let's drink to love – to wine That warms our kisses.</p>
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Speech: Write a speech for Violetta's memorial. How would you like people to remember her? What would you have as her epitaph? Share your writing with a small group or read to the class.

Create a character sketch:

Consider the following questions:

- What motivates this character?
- How does the character's motivation affect his or her actions?
- What is the character's relationship with the other characters?
- Why does the character make the choices he or she does?
- How is the character's personality expressed through the music of the opera?
- Include evidence from the opera to support your claims.

Include information about the following:

- Character's name and family background
- Physical Characteristics (style and physical attributes)
- Psychological Characteristics (mental aspects of character, how does he/she think?)
- Emotional Characteristics (is he/she generally cheerful, sad, gentle, angry?)
- How the events in the opera have affected the character
- Anything else you think is important about the character

After seeing the opera, look at your character sketch again. Does any aspect of the performance or the music change your view of the character? Why? Do the emotions conveyed through the music fit the character sketch?

Teacher's Comments

Your comments and suggestions are greatly appreciated. Please take a few minutes to fill out this questionnaire and return it to the address below. Thank you for your comments and suggestions.

Name: _____ School: _____

Address: _____

Phone Number: _____ Fax: _____ Grade(s) you teach: _____

Email: _____ Subjects: _____

Have you attended other arts events with your students in the past year? Yes No

If yes, what were they? _____

Were you able to use the Teacher's Study Guide in your classroom activities before attending the opera?
 Yes No

If not, please elaborate: _____

If so, which sections of the Study Guide did you find most useful?

How appropriate was the information provided in the Study Guide? _____

What would you add/delete?

Did you spend classroom time discussing the performance after your students attended the opera?
 Yes No

Do you have any comments about the performance itself?

Would you like to receive information on our future Student Dress Rehearsals? Yes No

How would you like to receive information? Fax Email Letters Other _____

Further comments and suggestions _____

Please return this form to:

Pacific Opera, 1815 Blanshard Street, Suite 500, Victoria, BC V8T 5A4 Fax: 250.382.4944

Or scan and email to mwoodall@pov.bc.ca