

# La Traviata



## When Life Meets Art

A few people raised scornful eyebrows in 2011 when the Royal Opera House premièred *Anna Nicole*, based on the short, sensational life and death of Anna Nicole Smith, an actress, reality star, and *Playboy* centrefold who had died four years earlier of a drug overdose.

*How tawdry, they thought, to rip some raunchy scandal from the tabloids just to make it into an opera!*

Yet this is exactly what Giuseppe Verdi did for the 1853 première of *La traviata*, based on the short, sensational life and death of a high-class prostitute who had died of tuberculosis just six years earlier.

The parallels are even stronger when we read some of the (definitely mixed) reviews of *Anna Nicole*. The *New York Times*' Anthony Tommasini called it *musically rich, audacious and inexplicably poignant*, a description that could easily apply to *La traviata*, Verdi's compassionate and musically gorgeous portrait of a character who, in the minds of his contemporaries, did not deserve to be an opera heroine.

The attitude of the day was summed up by Felice Varesi, the baritone in the première cast, 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.*

**La traviata (The Fallen Woman)** was based on the true story of a semiliterate waif who reinvented herself as the courtesan Marie Duplessis, the toast of Paris until her death in 1847 at

the age of 23. Within six years, Marie's dazzling, sordid life spawned a best-selling novel, a hit play, and Verdi's opera.

**Rose Alphonsine Plessis**, raised in poverty by an abusive alcoholic, arrived in Paris at the age of 15 and worked in dead-end jobs until a restaurant owner set her up in an apartment as his mistress.

She changed her name to the more upscale Marie Duplessis and parlayed her beauty and intelligence into a brilliant career as a courtesan.

Marie was part 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* lived extravagantly on gifts and cash provided by their various lovers. Their life was a financial and social tightrope; there was no job security, and legitimizing a relationship through marriage was out of the question.

**Alexandre Dumas fils** (whose father wrote the swashbuckling thrillers *The Three Musketeers* and *The Man in the Iron Mask*) fell in love with Marie when they were both 20. Young Dumas was a struggling writer. Marie was already established as mistress to a dizzying succession of wealthy aristocrats. The couple broke up after a year, when Dumas realized he could neither afford her extravagance nor cope with her endless stream of lovers.

**When Marie died**, the sale of her estate presented an irresistible opportunity for respectable Parisian society to descend on her apartment and gape at the luxury she had amassed, now being sold to pay her debts – silver and jewels, furniture, paintings, chandeliers, gowns, furs, a horse, pony, and hunting dog, a parrot with blue and yellow feathers, some 200 books, and even a Pleyel piano that Franz Liszt, one of her lovers, had played.

Morally superior, morbidly curious, all of Paris flocked to the sale. *Beau monde, demi-monde, merchants, creditors, and all that Paris counted of curiosity, jostled there. Great ladies, titillated by the perfume of debauchery, quarrelled over the smallest comb, pins, shawls, jewels. [Novelist] Eugène Sue will boast of having acquired the missal of the sinner, Dumas his annotated copy of Manon Lescaut.* (Véronique Maurus, *Le Monde*)

Charles Dickens, who was in Paris at the time, wrote, *For several days all questions political, artistic, commercial have been abandoned by the papers. Everything is erased in the face of an incident which is far more important, the romantic death of one of the glories of the demi-monde, the beautiful, the famous Marie Duplessis.*

**With almost unseemly haste** following Marie's death, young Dumas dashed off a novel about their affair. Published in 1848, *La dame aux camélias* (*The Lady of the Camellias*) was a sensation.

Dumas renamed his doomed heroine Marguerite Gautier, cast himself as her lover Armand. His semi-autobiographical narrative added a virtuous haze to her character and a few fictional touches.

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**In Dumas' story, as in Verdi's opera,** the courtesan falls in love with a respectable young man and gives up her decadent life to live with him in the country ... until his father comes calling and tells her the scandalous liaison is ruining his family's reputation and the marriage prospects of his daughter. The courtesan-with-a-heart-of-gold agrees to abandon her lover; the latter, thinking she has taken up with another man, reacts bitterly.

The real Marie Duplessis would not have given up her luxurious lifestyle for a struggling writer, no matter how beloved; nor would she have sacrificed her love on the altar of bourgeois respectability. Indeed Marie was admirably frank about how expensive she was; she wrote one would-be lover, *I realize that mine is a sordid profession, but I must let you know that my favours cost a great deal of money ... My protector must be extremely rich to cover my household expenses ... and satisfy my caprices, which are numerous, varied, and whimsical.*

**Dumas subsequently adapted his novel** into a play, adding a new twist to the story: the lovers were reconciled, paving the way for a classic, three-hanky deathbed scene.



Poster by Alfons Mucha for *La dame aux camélias* with Sarah Bernhardt. 1896

Over the decades following its 1852 première, the play (also titled *La dame aux camélias*, and known in English as *Camille*) took on a life of its own on stage and film. Actresses clamoured to play Marguerite, among them Sarah Bernhardt, Lillian Gish, and Greta Garbo. It has been said that for a century *La dame aux camélias* was probably the world's single

most popular play. In recent decades it has gone out of fashion, but the legacy of Marie Duplessis and Marguerite Gautier has never been more assured, thanks to *La traviata*, its glorious music, and its lovable heroine, Violetta Valéry.

**In 1852 Verdi attended** one of the première performances of *La dame aux camélias*. He instantly recognized its potential as box office gold.

Verdi surely also found in the story an echo of his personal situation. Since 1849 he had been living with Giuseppina Streponi, the soprano whose influence had helped launch his career, and who had been the original Abigail in *Nabucco*. They would marry in 1859 and remain together until her death in 1897. Although the couple's relationship was accepted in Paris, it caused a scandal in rural Italy, where they lived. The good townfolk of Busseto ostracized Streponi, outraged by her reputation – she had given birth to an unknown number of illegitimate children – and by the fact that she and Verdi were living in sin.

Verdi knew he'd get pushback when he decided to do an opera featuring a contemporary heroine of questionable reputation. He wrote, *Perhaps someone else would not have done it because of the costumes, the period, and a thousand other awkward reservations. I am doing it with immense pleasure.*

**The composer was anxious to keep *La traviata* contemporary,** to hold it up as a mirror to his audience, *to portray the vices of ... a bourgeois order that engenders prostitution but at the same time scorns it (aligre-cappuccino.fr).*

Then (as now) audiences, critics, and censors were often leery of operas set in the present, preferring to relegate them to the safe and sumptuous past, where the fashions are glamorous and the moral issues long since resolved.

It's therefore not surprising that Verdi lost the battle to stage *La traviata* in contemporary clothing for its world première at Venice's Teatro La Fenice. Management, wary of the censors and of the audience response, insisted on moving the action back nearly 200 years to the reign of Louis XIV. In fact, it was

not until 1906 that *La traviata* was set in the mid-19th century as Verdi had hoped – by which time the setting had become so quaintly distant as to lose much of its edge.

**Verdi's compassionate portrayal** of an “immoral” woman startled and disturbed audiences and critics and triggered varying degrees of censorship.

Perhaps the most egregious example was an 1854 production in Rome. Censors bowdlerized the opera, changing its name to *Violetta* to eliminate any hint of her being a fallen woman. They made Violetta into a wealthy young orphan who simply liked to party; her sweetheart Alfredo never actually lived with her; the impediments to her marrying were her low birth and the fact that Alfredo had a pre-existing fiancée, who conveniently died shortly after their marriage. This indiscriminate tinkering enraged Verdi: *The censors have spoiled the sense of the drama. They made La traviata pure and innocent ... ruined all the situations, all the characters.*

**But despite moral outrage** and discomfort with the mirror Verdi held up against social hypocrisy, audiences were seduced by the opera, its romantic ardour, its vivacious waltz rhythms, and the vivid, reflective grace, beauty, and variability of the music.

***La traviata* has taken its place** as the most universally loved of all Verdi's works, and indeed as one of the frequently performed of all operas, often jostling for top place with *La Bohème* (another work with a consumptive heroine – Verdi was a pioneer with his on-stage depiction of death by TB, which, within 50 years, would become an operatic meme, featured in works by Leoncavallo, Offenbach, and Puccini).

**In *La traviata*, art becomes** strangely more real than life. The story began long ago with a real woman, whose character was novelized, polished, sugar-coated.

Then somehow, through his immense compassion, his rigorous dramatization of society's complicity in her tragedy, and the alchemy of his music, Verdi made her timeless.

Maureen Woodall

## Meet the Principal Cast

**A**s the camellias begin to bloom at the Baumann Centre, we welcome the cast and creative team for rehearsals of *La traviata*.

Our production is set in 1920s Paris. Verdi's drama of love and death against a backdrop of icy social hypocrisy translates brilliantly to this setting. The concept of a jazz diva, a star both admired and marginalized, may speak more directly to contemporary audiences than Verdi's 19th-century courtesan.

**Lucia Cesaroni and Colin Ainsworth** were a charming, vocally beautiful couple as Anne Trulove and Tom Rakewell in Pacific Opera's 2009 *The Rake's Progress*. We are thrilled to see them reunited on our stage as the star-crossed lovers in *La traviata*.

Following her role debut as Mimi in last season's *La Bohème*, **Lucia Cesaroni** returns as **Violetta**. Her previous Pacific Opera appearances include First Lady in 2009's *The Magic Flute* and the Rheinmaiden Woglinde in *Das Rheingold* (2014).



Among Lucia's recent and upcoming engagements are the title role in *The Merry Widow* with Vancouver Opera and Toronto Operetta Theatre, Musetta in *La Bohème* with Opéra de Montréal, and Adina in *L'Elisir d'amore* with Opera Chengdu, Szechwan, China,

**Colin Ainsworth** debuted with Pacific Opera in 2009 as Tamino in *The Magic Flute*, returned the same year as Tom Rakewell, and in 2013 as Fenlon in *Falstaff*. He is now making his role debut as **Alfredo**. Colin is recognized for his exceptional vocalism and his diverse repertoire, which embraces Baroque opera as well as contemporary works and world premières. His

opera engagements have included appearances with the Royal Opera House, Chicago Opera Theater, Glimmerglass Opera, Teatro Nacional de São Carlos, Seattle Opera, Greek National Opera, the Canadian Opera Company, and Vancouver Opera. He is this season's Artist in Residence for Opera Atelier.



**James Westman** is Alfredo's father **Germont**, the villain of the piece, who also happens to be a caring family man. James brings a ridiculous amount of experience and understanding to this, his signature role: he has performed this complex character some 200 times.

James made his Pacific Opera debut as the Gamekeeper in the 2005 production of *The Cunning Little Vixen*. He returned in 2010 for his role debut as the Count in Richard Strauss' *Capriccio*, and in 2015 he portrayed Enrico in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. James regularly sings the National Anthem at Toronto Maple Leafs games, making him possibly the coolest hockey dad ever.



We also welcome back a number of old friends, including **James McLennan** as Gastone, **Megan Latham** as Flora, **Giles Tomkins** as Dr. Grenvil, **Alexandre Sylvestre** as Baron Douphol, **Caitlin Wood** as Annina, and **Peter Monaghan** as Marchese d'Obigny.

**Timothy Vernon** will conduct the **Victoria Symphony** in this production, with the **Pacific Opera Chorus** directed by **Giuseppe Pietraroia**. **Choreography** is by **Jacques Lemay**.

## A Historic Canadian Production

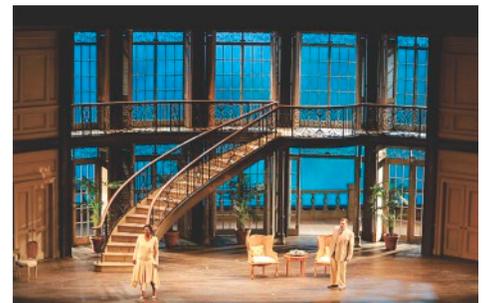
**T**his new production of *La traviata* is the largest co-production in Canadian history. Involving five opera companies, it is being staged in five cities over three years. It opened in Winnipeg last April, then moved to Edmonton in October. Following the staging in Victoria from February 14 to 24, it will progress to Vancouver in fall 2019, finishing its multi-season run in Montreal in 2020.

All five stagings are anchored by the same creative team: director **Alain**

**Gauthier**, production designer **Christina Poddubiuk**, lighting designer **Kevin Lamotte**. Each company provides its own conductor, cast, chorus, and orchestra.

**The stunning set** with its giant curving staircase and second-level balcony was built by Edmonton Opera, while Pacific Opera's production professionals created the props and gorgeous costumes, squeezing that job into last season's busy five-opera schedule.

**One innovative aspect of this national collaboration** is a financing strategy to support the three-season investment timeline. The co-production partners worked with Opera.ca, Canada's national association for opera companies, to devise a co-production loan program that has provided up-front funding so that the partners can invest in the production long before ticket revenues for *La traviata* begin to offset the expenses.



Scene from *La traviata*, performed at Manitoba Opera, April 2018, with Angel Blue as Violetta and James Westman as Germont. Photo: C. Corneau.

This collaborative financing strategy subsequently inspired Opera America to launch a similar program for US companies and is one of many ways in which North American opera companies are working together.

Discover more!

[www.pov.bc.ca/traviata.html](http://www.pov.bc.ca/traviata.html)



Scene from *La traviata*, performed at Edmonton Opera, in October 2018. Photo: Nanc Price

# Events

THE Co|OPERA|tive

## Inspiring events

for youth, artists, and community

[www.pov.bc.ca/calendar.html](http://www.pov.bc.ca/calendar.html)

RSVP to 250.382.1641 / [community@pov.bc.ca](mailto:community@pov.bc.ca)

Everyone welcome: donations gratefully accepted

## Opera FYI

**Saturday, January 19, 3 pm, Baumann Centre**

*Make a Scene:* A workshop with Jessica Hickman. Learn how to be staged into a scene. Try out your chorus acting chops, and peek behind the doors of the rehearsal hall.

## Inside Opera at the Union Club

**Friday, February 1, 11:45 am, Union Club, 805 Gordon**

With Robert Holliston and guests. \$35 includes lunch. *Reserve with payment by January 28:* 250.382.1641

## Inside Opera at UVic

**Sunday, February 3, 10 am or noon, Phillip T. Young Recital Hall, University of Victoria.** With Robert Holliston and guests.

## Opera Goes to the Movies

**Thursday, February 7, 7 pm, Baumann Centre**

The classic 1936 film *Camille*, with Greta Garbo, Robert Taylor, Lionel Barrymore. Host: Robert Holliston.

## Opera Motifs

**Tuesday, February 12, 12:30 pm, Baumann Centre**

Robert Holliston discusses Marie Duplessis, the French mistress who inspired the story of *La traviata*,

## Master Class

**Monday, February 18, 7 pm, Baumann Centre**

Tenor James McLennan (Gastone in *La traviata*) coaches Victoria-based singers.

## Lunchbox Opera

**Tuesday, February 19, 12:30 pm, Baumann Centre**

Love and the Lower Voice with mezzo soprano Megan Latham (Flora in *La traviata*), baritone Alexandre Sylvestre (Baron Douphol), and bass baritone Giles Tomkins (Dr. Grenvil).

*Donations are gratefully accepted (\$15 suggested).*

# La Traviata

February 14, 16, 22, at 8 pm  
Wednesday, February 20, 7 pm  
Sunday, February 24, 2:30 pm

Royal Theatre

Pre-performance lobby lecture  
1 hour before curtain

## Sense of Occasion

**Thursday, February 14, 6:30 pm, East Lobby, Royal Theatre**

Pre-performance reception to celebrate the opening night of *La traviata*. Gourmet finger foods and wine. Space is limited. Dress is festive. \$35 per person. *Reserve with payment by February 8:* 250.382.1641.

## DINNER AT FLORA'S NIGHTCLUB

**Sunday, February 17, 6 pm. On stage at the Royal Theatre**

A festive catered dinner, entertainment, and an exclusive live auction – all on the spectacular set of *La traviata*.

\$200 per person

\$1000 for an Exclusive Patron Package for two, with tax receipt.

**Only 80 seats available.**

**Book now. 250.382.1641**

*Proceeds support Pacific Opera Victoria.*



Set of *La traviata*. Photo: C. Corneau.

## DONOR SALON SERIES

### Gold Circle Soirée

**Saturday, January 26, 7 pm. Art Gallery of Greater Victoria**

An intimate wine and hors d'oeuvres reception with a private concert by the principal artists of *La traviata*. *By Invitation to Impresario Circle and President's Circle members at the Gold Circle (\$1500) level and above.*

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## YOUTH PROGRAMMING

### Teen Master Class

**Monday, March 11, 7 pm. Baumann Centre**

For classical singers preparing for the Greater Victoria Performing Arts Festival. Free. *Reserve at 250.382.1641 or [rspv@pov.bc.ca](mailto:rspv@pov.bc.ca)*

### Spring Break Camp

**March 18 to 22, 9 am to 3:30 pm. Baumann Centre**

Kids 8 to 13 will create and stage their own opera with guidance from singer Eve-Lyn de la Haye and a real live composer. This creative and fun-filled week culminates in a performance of their very own opera for family and friends. \$225 per child.

*To register or learn more about available bursaries, please contact Rebecca Hass at [rhass@pov.bc.ca](mailto:rhass@pov.bc.ca) or call 250.382.1641 ext. 204.*



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