

## Opera Australia Vocational Excursion Resource

### Verdi's *La Traviata*

The aim of this project is to introduce and unpack many of the “offstage” creative roles needed to create a piece of music theatre. The opera set you will visit is that of *La Traviata*, so this resource will:

- a) Outline the story
- b) Introduce the key characters
- c) Explain the range of offstage creative roles
- d) Pose a number of challenge questions associate with some of these roles to think about before or after your visit.



#### What is the story in *La Traviata*?

##### *Act I*

Violetta has been to a sanatorium to treat her tuberculosis. On her return to health, she throws a party to mark her re-emergence in society under the protection of Baron Duphol. Her guests have had a long lunch and the Baron is reading the last pages of a novel by Dumas to Violetta as Flora, a rival courtesan, enters with her protector the Marquis.

Alfredo is introduced to Violetta by the decadent Gaston. Alfredo has begged Gaston to introduce him to Violetta. He has long been enthralled by her and has enquired after

Violetta every day of her illness. Violetta insists that everyone sits together and drinks a toast to the occasion. Alfredo is prevailed upon to sing a drinking song from Provence.

As the guests leave to dance in the ballroom, Violetta feels faint and is momentarily left alone. Alfredo re-enters and confesses his love for her. She asks him to return the following day. After her guests leave and she is alone, Violetta begins to consider the conflicting feelings of love and hedonism that are pulling her in opposite directions.

*Act II*

Scene i

Violetta and Alfredo have been living together for three months in a house in the country. When Alfredo discovers that Violetta is selling her belongings to pay for their expenses, he is conscience-stricken and leaves to visit his father, to raise some money. His father however has decided to call on Violetta to persuade her to give up Alfredo. Alfredo’s sister hopes to be married soon, and his relationship with Violetta jeopardises the family’s honour. Violetta realises that as a ‘fallen woman’ she would destroy Alfredo’s family and consents to leave him. She decides to leave instantly and writes a message to Alfredo, breaking off their affair. When Alfredo receives the message, he is distraught and, despite his father’s attempts to console him, rushes off to wreak revenge on Violetta.

Scene ii

A gambling party is held in Flora’s house. Alfredo is there. When Violetta enters on the arm of the Baron she freezes with tension. Alfredo begins to insult the Baron and the two rivals meet over cards, and Alfredo, cannot lose a hand. The game is interrupted by dinner. Violetta begs Alfredo to leave before Duphol seeks revenge. Alfredo insists she comes with him but, she says she loves the Baron. Alfredo publicly humiliates Violetta and throws money at her as payment for her services. Alfredo’s father reproves him for such behaviour.

*Act III*

It is early morning and Violetta is sleeping. The doctor has given her only a few hours to live. Violetta rereads a letter from Alfredo’s father, telling her that the Baron was wounded in the duel with Alfredo and that Alfredo may have left the country. But Alfredo has been told by his father of Violetta’s sacrifice and he returns — only to be confronted by the dying Violetta. He humours her by telling her that they should plan a new life away from Paris. Alfredo’s father has followed him and enters, followed by the doctor. Violetta suddenly feels revived, ready to start a new life with Alfredo — but this is only the symptoms of the last moments of her disease and she falls dead.

**Introducing the Characters in *La Traviata***

There are three lead characters in this story: Violetta, Alfredo and Georgio, and a number of key secondary roles.

Character	Voice type	About this character
Violetta	Soprano	A flamboyant, extravagant courtesan who loves the good life amongst her fashionable friends. She is passionate, impulsive, pragmatic and aware of her incurable disease.

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Alfredo Germont	Tenor	A shy boy from the country Alfredo is different to Violetta's fashionable city crowd, lacking their superficial polish and confidence. He is romantic, innocent, and quick tempered.
Georgio Germont	Baritone	Alfredo's father, an old-fashioned, conservative character, for whom morality and public perception are important. He disapproves of his son's life in Paris, wanting only the best for his family. He is manipulative and persuades Violetta to leave Alfredo, but later sees the error of his ways showing he is compassionate and warm hearted. He is a complex "villain" in this story
Flora	Soprano	A rich, fun loving party girl who also enjoys the high life. Close friend of Violetta. It is to Flora that Violetta runs when she agrees to leave Alfredo.
Gaston	Tenor	A mutual friend of both Alfredo and Violetta. He is handsome, outgoing, popular with the ladies and rich. He is as much of a party boy as Violetta is a party girl
Baron Duphol	Baritone	An aristocrat who is rich, jealous and possessive. He also fancies Violetta and is very protective of her.



## **Offstage Creative Roles**

The creative team lead all the off stage roles. In this production the creative team includes:

CONDUCTOR: Renato Palumbo

DIRECTOR: Elijah Moshinsky

CHOREOGRAPHER: Matthew Barclay

SET DESIGNER: Michael Yeargan

COSTUME DESIGNER: Peter Hall

LIGHTING DESIGNER: Nigel Levings

## **Conductor**

Make the musical decisions about the interpretation of the opera which influences the way the orchestra play and the characters sing their roles. They interpret the intentions of the composer and convey that in their choice of tempos (speed), dynamics (volume) and timbres (how they balance the sounds of the instruments and singers) through their gestures and rehearsals.

As there is little or no dialogue in a performance the conductor needs to keep the show moving from the orchestra pit. They need to allow the singers to musically depict the characters they are playing and ensure that the orchestra accompanied them. As the music of an opera is almost a character itself, the conductor has to consider the role of every section in telling the story.

## **Director**

As the primary visionary and unifying force behind a theatrical production, the director is responsible for shaping every aspect of the final performance—from the actors' performances to the setting and design choices. A director has the responsibility for the practical and creative interpretation of a dramatic script or musical score, so they need to create a vision of **how** they want to tell the story. This includes making decisions about:

- Where it will be set – a country and location e.g., a Scottish retreat, a Club Med
- Set the time period in which the story will be told
- Decide on the design theme and communicate this to the designer
- Direct the actors to develop the nature of their character and how they will react to the other characters in the story.

They have many additional administrative roles including casting, budget, planning schedules, running rehearsals etc

## **Set Designer**

The set designer is responsible for designing the scenery, the artificial environment—in which a performance takes place. This means that the role is a slightly unique combination of creativity and practicality, as you must conceptualise an idea, design it and then do your best to make it a reality with the team of people around you. The set has an essential role in telling the story, suggesting locations and changes of scene. However, it also must allow enough room for the cast, for the events in the story and needs to be able to transform for scene changes as desired in short periods of time.

Set designers need to consider the period and genre of a play, as well as the venue where the performance will take place. They also need to respond to the social, historic, and cultural context of the production. They also need to be practical, and problem solve the issues of moving large items of furniture and the size of the stage. For the Opera Australia performance in 2020 of this piece on Sydney Harbour, the set designer Brian Thomson brought the Paris cityscape to life through a silhouette of bright neon lighting, giving the set design a simple and modern feel, as not to obstruct the beauty of the natural surroundings. The extra-large tilted stage had stairs on every side which cleverly provided a hidden space underneath, from which large props like couches and tables could be stored and moved on and off the set.

## **Costume Designer (including jewellery and makeup)**

As the name suggests, the costume designer is responsible for the overall look of the clothes and costumes in theatre. This includes:

- Reading the libretto marking identifying areas that will affect costume choice, such as dance scenes or balls, action sequences,
- Researching the time period and setting of the play.
- Researching fashion in certain time periods and places that reflects the status of each character.
- Design the costume for each character

In assembling the costumes, the designer must ensure that each outfit effectively communicates the age, social status and dramatic function of each character, bearing in mind that this can change over the course of a storyline.

## **Lighting Designer**

You may be surprised to know that the lighting places an essential role in the storytelling in a theatre, so someone's main job is to design the lighting for every moment of the show. There is a lot to think about. Stage lighting can help you capture the audience's attention and enhance a stage production in several ways. The right stage lighting can:

- Illuminate the stage:** The most basic objective for stage lighting is to illuminate the performers, sets and props so the audience can clearly see everything they're meant to see. Bad lighting decisions can ruin a show. E.g., dim light makes it harder for facial expressions to be seen — even to people seated close to the stage. Illumination is also important for the people onstage, so they can see too!
- Highlight different areas:** Stage lighting can direct audience members' eyes to a focal point. In the most dramatic instances, much of a stage may be dark with just one spotlight shining on a focal point. In many other instances, the lighting engineer can start with a wash, which covers a wide area and acts as a base layer of light..
- Set the scene:** Lighting can create visual effects in a scene. Sometimes though optical illusions with lights. A moving light suggests the sun is rising, or make the stage go dark when an actor flips a prop light switch in a room. A backlit scrim will create the illusion of a starry night, a sunny day or even a fire.



- d. **Control the mood:** Lighting has a major effect on mood. The idea is to match the lighting to the content of the show to encourage the right emotions in the audience. A soft, warm glow makes a happy scene. Dim, cool hues suggest sadness. Certain colours are associated with different moods. Blue is often associated with sadness, and red is associated with intense feelings, like love or aggression.

## Challenge Questions

These challenge questions are the sort of questions the creative team have made decisions about in shaping this production of *La Traviata*.

Look at the images below from 3 different productions of *La Traviata* by Opera Australia. Discuss the differences in terms of set, director's concept, costumes and lighting.



Now choose one of the areas below and complete the challenge.

### Director challenge

You are an up and coming director who has been tasked with telling the story of *La Traviata* in a more contemporary way.

Outline your thoughts on where it will be set, the location, time or eras, and any themes that you will include. The director has a huge influence in helping an actor create their role. Choose one of the characters and make notes on how you would tell the opera singer to

behave as that person and the notes you would give them in terms of how they bring the character to life, how they move, speak and use their face and other body language.

## **Lighting Challenge**

How can lighting be used to reflect the mood of a scene?

How might you light the following scenes? This is about the angles and direction of light, the colours, the intensity and any movement of lights.

- a) The ballroom, party scene
- b) Violetta's bedroom in early morning
- c) Violetta's home when Georgio Germont comes to visit

## **Costume Challenge**

Consider the characters of:

- a) Violetta and Flora
- b) Gaston and Alfredo.

There is a similarity in each of these pairs but also a difference. What general subtle differences might a costume show between Gaston and Alfredo? How could you make the ball gowns of Violetta and Flora reflect their characters but also show which one is the central character in the story?

Assuming the *La Traviata* is to be set in the 1920's in New York, design costumes for one of those two pairs. Consider not just the clothes but the accessories and jewellery that might be worn.

## **Set Design Challenge**

Opera Australia is touring *La Traviata* to a few small venues in regional Victoria and you have been asked to design a set that is portable, will show the different scenes of the story, and quickly change between them. So, it might be less about a construction and more about cunning use of props. Or you might create a set that spins around or folds out to change between scenes. Or it might be a combination of both, but remember it is for a tour, so it needs to be quickly built (assembled) and struck (packed up).

The maximum number of people on stage would be 10 and you are confined to a stage measuring 5 metres wide and 4 metres deep. Once you have drawn your plans build a scale model of your idea.

## **Conductor Challenge**

Search for Prelude *La Traviata* Verdi on YouTube and find 3 examples of an orchestra playing it. Try to find versions where you can see the conductor.

This is the overture to the whole opera and contains clues to the story line. Watch the three versions and:

- a) Identify any musical differences in terms of speed, interpretation of the music
- b) Identify the different types of gestures composers use to convey their interpretation to the players
- c) What do you think would be the challenges for a conductor conducting this piece
- d) Which interpretation did you like best and why
- e) Now try conducting along with the piece and see how challenging it is. Once you have done this discuss the challenges with your peers.