Traviata Trivia

by Theodore Dalrymple (October 2015)

A few nights ago I went to the opera, or rather to the local cinema in which the opera was relayed live. It was *La Traviata* from the English National Opera company.

For some reason, which is, perhaps, not difficult to fathom, directors of operas these days feel the need to make their mark by innovative productions, for example by setting *Così fan tutte* on the Moon, or *The Flying Dutchman* on Lake Titicaca, or *The Barber of Seville* in Nazi Germany. But of course they particularly like settings in the present, preferably in rather down-at-heel or dispiriting environs, to remind us that the opera, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, is of the deepest (which means radical) contemporary political significance, and was intended as such. And their view of the present, to judge by the scenery and costumes, is a somewhat dismal one, for elegance or refinement of appearance or behaviour is rigorously excluded. In Victorian times, one was supposed not to frighten the horses; these days one mustn't frighten the proles.

Now this *Traviata* was sung in English which, notwithstanding the linguistic patriot that I am, is a language ill-suited to Verdi, though in many, perhaps even in most, other respects it is a marvellously flexible tongue. There was no point in singing it in English either, because subtitles or supertitles were still deemed necessary. Thus was achieved the worst of all worlds.

But that was the least of it. I don't mind a simple stage set, but I could not make out why Violetta and Alfredo kept trying to draw curtains across the stage and then draw them back again. This, I suppose, was the director's idea of *Symbolism*, but unfortunately it was difficult to work out what was symbolised, and you can't really have symbols without something being symbolised, otherwise it is like roast beef without the beef. Perhaps all those curtains symbolised the difference between appearance and reality, but again perhaps not. It is not true that every mystery is interesting.

But this, again, is a minor cavil. Poor Alfredo, whose singing was adequate, was about as far removed from a romantic hero as it is possible to imagine. He was

short and by no means slender, and had something nerdy about him. None of this was his fault, of course, but it did not help to dress him up in a thick fawn-coloured cardigan and brown corduroy trousers and also allow, or require, him to wear thick-rimmed glasses (I expected carpet slippers to make their appearance, but they didn't). He looked more like a junior librarian in a small municipal library than a poet entering the fervidly luxurious demi-monde.

Violetta, Elizabeth Zharoff, was splendid if somewhat lacking in subtlety, but in a way it was unfortunate that she was so beautiful, for these days opera audiences demand proper acting with some semblance of plausibility. I remember the days when opera singers would make only perfunctory gestures in the direction of acting, and generally remained more or less rooted to the spot in costumes and sets of varying degrees of absurdity. They usually moved if they moved at all—or perhaps I should say sailed across choppy waters—like Dreadnoughts before the First World War. This had the great advantage of stimulating the audience's willing suspension of disbelief, because it was very necessary to suspend it, but nowadays, alas, audiences are more literal-minded and, in a sense, discriminating. And it was not remotely plausible that Violetta would fall in love with such an Alfredo: it brought to mind David Hume's preposterous attempts at courtship.

With imagination, no doubt, the director could have avoided the absurdity; but directors seem often more concerned these days with the conceptions in their minds than with the effects of their conceptions on the stage and on the audience.

There were other farcical elements in the production. Alfredo had, for some reason, brought a book to the party at the beginning of the opera, which he flung unmercifully about the stage (and picked up, so that he could fling it again).I am afraid that I was outraged at this treatment of a book, which was hardbound rather than a mere airport paperback, all the more so because he appeared subsequently to sing from its contents. And then, in another scene, he sat, singing passionately, on a great pile of books. I checked subsequently with members of the audience and they had all been distracted by the worry that the pile might collapse under Alfredo, making him look even more ridiculous than he already did as he sprawled among the volumes, an image that was so powerful in our minds that it was stronger than what we actually saw. It was made all the worse when Alfredo, standing up from the pile to our initial relief, having

survived the ordeal, kicked the books and scattered them. Do poets kick books? I cannot say for certain that no poet ever kicked a book, but by scattering the books after he rose from sitting on them he made the audience wonder (again, I checked on this afterwards, that I was not alone in so wondering) whether there had been a mechanism by which the books were kept in a solid pile while he sat on them which then released them when it was time for them to be scattered by his kick. It is a very poor production that distracts an audience so.

No man is responsible for his own height, but the director was responsible for the titters that could be heard from the audience when Alfredo embraced his father, Germont. The man who sang Germont was about a foot taller than Alfredo, so that the son appeared to be embracing the father's waist or stomach, more like a little child than a grown man. Did the director not notice it, or was he living in some virtual world of his own abstract conception that, like a totalitarian dictator in charge of a country, he was determined to impose upon the little world that is a stage (all the stage's a world).

When Germont sings his famous aria requesting Violetta to forego the love of Alfredo for his daughter's sake, who will not be able to marry the man she loves if Alfredo continues to live with a woman of such ill-repute as Violetta, the daughter is actually made to appear on the stage, unceremoniously and unlovingly pushed to the fore by her father, dressed in a beret and grey gabardine mackintosh, and also wearing thick glasses. She looks about twelve, an awkward pubertal age, and more likely to grow up a bluestocking than a sensualist; even the most ferocious Moslems of ISIS would hardly have considered her old enough to marry. She was more Violet-Elizabeth in Just William, whose greatest utterance was *I'll thcream and thcream until I'm thick!*, than a future Cleopatra. Again the audience tittered, trying hard to suppress its mirth. What blindness struck the director that he could not see the effect the completely unnecessary appearance of this creature on the audience? It is characteristic of all the would-be or pseudo- great artists of our day that the effect on others of their work hardly concerns them.

The director also had the original, but not good, idea of introducing both Alfredo and his father into the auditorium. I haven't seen this done in an opera before, but it was reduced once more to absurdity as Alfredo struggled to get past the front row of the stalls like an embarrassed latecomer trying to gain his seat, on his way back on to the stage. A less romantic passage to anywhere

could hardly be imagined and again the audience was reduced to subdued laughter. If bad production were a criminal offence, the German director, Peter Konwitschny, would be serving several life sentences for this production alone.

Of course there was an orgy scene, as there seems to be in so many opera productions these days, as if to justify our current propensity to exhibitionism by backdating it to an earlier epoch: for despite a setting in the modern world, no one could really believe that Traviata was truly contemporary, if for no other reason than that Violetta died of tuberculosis, as she would not have done today. Even the implicit protest that Traviata contains against the conventional social judgments of its day, its plea that love should be allowed to overcome or conquer social prejudice, is by now somewhat attenuated. In summary, this production of *Traviata* might more properly have been called *La Travestía* (not an Italian word, nor even Spanish, but a neologism appropriately neither English nor Italian).

I once saw a production of *Macbeth* in which the thane of Cawdor appeared on a balcony in pyjamas. At that point, I am afraid, I had to leave; there are some things too funny to be endured. But I didn't leave *Traviata*, and despite its abominations was able to enjoy it.

Now it so happened that I had told a friend of mine that I was going to see *Traviata*, and he was most disapproving. He was one of those art puritans who thinks that nothing but the very highest artistic achievement is worthy of our notice or enjoyment. Thus no painting is worth anything unless it be, say, Piero della Francesca or Velásquez (he had sneered at my fondness for Bronzino, for example, whom he regarded as vulgar). So it is with Verdi. In his opinion Joseph Green, as he insists on calling him as if he were the first to think of it, was little more than a turner-out of tunes for the hurdy-gurdy, fit to sell ice-creams by. He derisively hummed one of the melodies, or tunes as he would have called them, from the opera—which he calls *Triviata*.

In the first place, though, I do not agree that the only art that has a call on our attention is that of the very highest order. Our walls would be bare and our bookcases empty if we truly believed that. And it is partly, or even largely, by seeing or reading the inferior that we learn to recognise the superior. When the English critic, Cyril Connolly, wrote that *The more books we read, the clearer it becomes than the true function of a writer is to produce a masterpiece and*

that no other task is of any consequence, he was guilty of mistaking rhetoric for good sense. The writer should always write as well as he is able, of course, but the term masterpiece is inherently a comparative one. In any case, a diet of masterpieces would leave us pretty constipated, and ignorant of many things into the bargain. And who would say that Edward Lear should not have written *The Owl and the Pussycat* merely because it did not aspire to be a Shakespeare sonnet?

Then, of course, there is the question of Verdi's status. I suspect that Verdi's immense popularity wherever western opera is performed, and that *Traviata* is probably the most frequently performed opera in the entire repertoire, affected his judgment. He is probably guilty of what might be called the snob's syllogism:

> What is popular is bad.
>
> *Traviata* is popular.
>
> Therefore *Traviata* is bad.

I would not go so far as to say that I have never myself been guilty of using a similar syllogism, and I cannot swear absolutely that I shall never do so again; it is probably rather less bad than the opposite:

> What is popular is good.
>
> *Traviata* is popular.
>
> Therefore *Traviata* is good.

But popularity of a century and a half is not quite the same as the popularity of the latest best-seller. Doctor Johnson was no admirer of the poet Thomas Gray, but he had this to say of the *Elegy*:

> In the character of his *Elegy* I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours. The *Church-yard* abounds with images which find a mirrour in every mind, and with sentiments to

which every bosom returns an echo.

May we not say something similar of *La Traviata*? It is not a knock-down argument, perhaps, but it as near to such as the subject in question can afford. But the director thought that he could go one better, as directors do these days.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is *here*.

To help New English Review continue to publish original and thought provoking essays like this one, please click here.

If you have enjoyed this article and want to read more by Theodore Dalrymple, please click here.

Theodore Dalymple is also a regular contributor to our community blog, *The Iconoclast*. Please click here to see all his contributions on which comments are welcome.