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Violetta's party scene. Amanda Kingston as Violetta (in white gown, seated center), Pene Pati as Alfredo (standing right, toasting)

As Larry Hancock, General Director of Opera San José, notes, its financial vitality depends largely on presenting two of the ten most popular operas each year. So the math suggests that we can expect to see each of those war horses once every five years. Fortunately, there are good reasons that some operas are so appealing and can be enjoyed so often.

One of those top ten most popular works in all of opera, *La Traviata*, is a study in contrast. Acclaimed for its glorious party scenes, it is otherwise an intimate chamber opera about love, loss, and regret that tugs at the heartstrings. It also contrasts social class, and despite whatever moral issues that some might have, evokes sympathy for a consumptive, but loving and generous courtesan. Opera San José offers a handsome realization this Verdi masterpiece.



Amanda Kingston as Violetta, Malcolm MacKenzie as Giorgio.

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The courtesan, Violetta, is one of the most challenging soprano roles in the repertory, and Amanda Kingston rises to the occasion. The lower part of her range seems somewhat underpowered, but her handling of the more important coloratura passages is brilliant, with great precision over rapid runs and trills. Throughout, she is charged with alternating from optimistically cheerful to sickly and worried, and she conveys Violetta's moods and vulnerabilities with great aplomb.

The opera resounds with familiar music, soaring from the opening moments. Kingston and Pene Pati, as her lover Alfredo, excel in the uplifting brindisi, or toasting song, "Libiamo, ne' lieti calici" as well as in the haunting duet "Un di felice." Pati's slightly lilting tenor possesses fine color and clarity and is delivered with seeming ease. He also offers a beaming visage and a compelling stage presence.



Masquerade Ball.

The configuration of the principal parts in *La Traviata* is unusual. Three roles totally dominate the action. In addition to the two lovers, the third is the father of the male lover. Giorgio Germont, Alfredo's father, is a recurring presence who intercedes to terminate the relationship. Malcolm MacKenzie's

penetrating baritone fits the glower and indignation of his role. However, his highlight is the lovely reminiscence "Di Provenza il mar." In hopes of easing Alfredo away from the high life of Paris and the opprobrium that marrying Violetta would bring to the family name, he waxes nostalgic to his son about heritage and the family home in Provence,

At first blush, it seems easy to dislike Giorgio for interfering with the romance of two adults, but we can certainly understand the stain associated with a kept woman marrying into a respectable family, with all its consequences. Over time, Giorgio reveals complexity of character and keen observation of Violetta. MacKenzie's noteworthy ambivalence soon appears, so that we sympathize with Giorgio's conflictedness and appreciate his ultimate contrition.

A single set depicts the various venues of the action, with minor adjustments for scene changes. This execution works well, as the core staging is strong. The overall look of the second act masquerade ball particularly appeals, especially with its formal costuming. The scene is arresting when the men's chorus in tuxedos stand erect on a raked section of the stage while the women in beautifully coordinated gold and red toned gowns are huddled on the lower section.

*La Traviata* represents the culmination of Verdi's vaunted middle period, with its composition period overlapping that of its oft considered



Pene Pati as Alfredo, Amanda Kingston as Violetta.

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artistic mate, *Il Trovatore*. They share Verdi's increasing abandonment of the artistically stifling strictures of past operatic form, such as opening an opera with a chorus and following an aria by a cabaletta. Highly melodic music abounds in both operas. For the greater part, each has its distinct sound, yet the Spanish-tinged gypsy chorus *divertissement* in *La Traviata's* masquerade ball matches better with *Il Trovatore's* musical vernacular.

In any case, *La Traviata* contains the right formula of beautiful music, stirring drama, and grand settings to make it a beloved opera. This production exhibits qualities that fulfill the opera's promise with sparkling gaiety in group scenes and tender emotions in intimate ones to produce a pleasing whole.

*La Traviata*, composed by Giuseppe Verdi with libretto by Francesco Maria Piave is produced by Opera San José and plays at The California Theatre, 345 South First St., San Jose, CA through April 29, 2018.



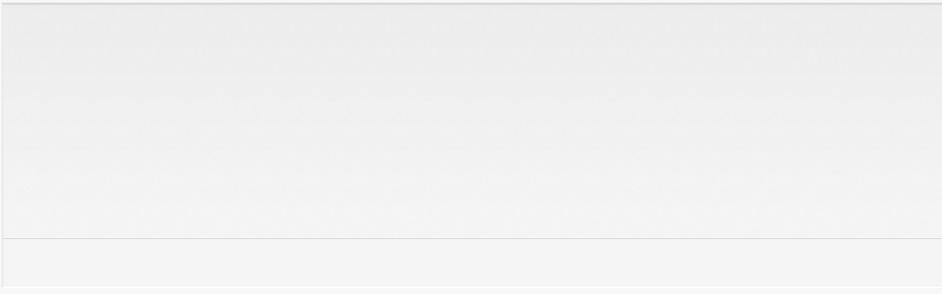
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Victor Cordell publishes theater and opera reviews on [www.forallevents.com](http://www.forallevents.com) and [www.berkshirefinearts.com](http://www.berkshirefinearts.com). Having lived in New York, London, Hongkong, Sydney, Washington DC, Houston, Monterey, and elsewhere, he has enjoyed performing arts of many ilks world wide. His service involvement has been on the boards of directors of three small opera companies (Monterey, San Francisco Lyric, and Island City) and a theater company (Cutting Ball). He is a member of San Francisco Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle and American Theatre Critics Association as well as being a Theatre Bay Area adjudicator. His career was divided between international banking and academe, most recently as a professor at the Monterey Institute of International Studies and an administrator at San Francisco State University. Victor holds a Ph.D. in marketing from the University of Houston.

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