

Cultural Daily

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The Money Did It

Ann Haskins · Thursday, April 18th, 2024

She was the most desirable courtesan in Paris, died at age 23, and became immortal.

In the mid-19th century, Marie Duplessis was considered the most beautiful, most fashionable, and most sought after courtesan of the French demi-monde. Her lovers and patrons included the composer/pianist Franz Liszt and the writer Alexandre Dumas, the younger, who took Duplessis' signature accessory, a camellia flower, for the title to his *La Dame aux Camélias* (*Lady of the Camillas*), recounting their 11-month romance. The success of that 1848 *roman a clef* was followed by Dumas' 1852 hit play. One night, Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi was in the audience. A year later, Verdi's opera *La Traviata* (*The Fallen Woman*) premiered in Italy.

In *La Traviata*, Marie Duplessis became a heart-rending Violetta Valéry, a blend of intoxicating gaiety, deep passion, self-sacrifice, and redemption. Verdi opened an international audience to her story in what has become one of the most beloved and popular operas of all times. It has also become vulnerable to that dreaded term "warhorse."



LA Opera's "La Traviata." Photo by Cory Weaver

Fear not! *La Traviata* again proves its vitality as the **LA Opera** brings a revived Violetta, her lover Alfred, all their complications, and all of those gorgeous arias and music in a new production directed by Shawna Lucey and choreographed by John Heginbotham.

After its San Francisco Opera premiere in November 2022, Michael Milenski sang its praises in *Opera Today*: “Wondrous things do still happen at San Francisco Opera. Like the *La Traviata* last night.” James Ambroff-Tahan in the *San Francisco Examiner* found the production successfully underscored “the intersectionality of money and sex in Duplessis’ life and Violetta’s story is what makes “*La Traviata*” so compelling.”

Reviews singled out the choreography in the celebrated third act, a vibrant, hedonistic party, as aiding in underscoring the director’s emphasis of the power disparity at the party where the courtesans are displaying their wares, in essence themselves, for potential ‘protectors’ among the rich, aristocrat men in the sexual and financial marketplace underpinning that party. Particularly eye-catching are the dancers, whose costume divides down the middle. Turning one way, the costume is a vibrant pink bodice and skirt and turning the other, that half is a black tuxedo and top hat.



LA Opera. Photo by Cory Weaver

Just before the opening at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion stage, the choreographer John Heginbotham took time from rehearsals to answer questions from *Cultural Daily* writer Ann Haskins.

CD: How did you become involved in the original production in San Francisco? What attracted you to the project?

Heginbotham: I became involved when the brilliant director of *La Traviata*, Shawna Lucey, invited me to join the team. Shawna and I met while working on Peter Sellars’ and John Adams’ production of *Girls of the Golden West* for San Francisco Opera. Shawna was an Assistant Director

and I was the choreographer for that beautiful opera. We became friends and recognized we had artistic synchronicity. I'm truly and forever grateful to Shawna for inviting me to be a part of her extraordinary *La Traviata*. Beyond our aesthetic connection, I was attracted to Shawna's strong, elegant concept for this production; the protagonist, Violetta, faced with immense challenges, approaches her fate with reason, power, and a degree of agency not always experienced in this opera.

CD: Does dance in this production play a different role than it traditionally does in *La Traviata*?

Heginbotham: Yes — “*Di Madride noi siam mattadori*” can sometimes appear as a divertissement in the opera, but in Shawna's vision, this dance is an opportunity to tell the real tale of the scene: we're at a party in which women are interacting with men for money. The dancers tell the truth of this transactional story. The choreographic purpose is to expose the party-goers actions through entertainment. It has glamour and levity, but there is some weight and darkness at the core.

CD: Reviews of the San Francisco production talk about the dual male/female costumes on the dancers. How did the male/female costumes affect your choreography for that section of the opera.

Heginbotham: The beautiful concept was realized through the collaboration of Shawna and the excellent costume and set designer Robert Innes Hopkins. The costumes allow us to subvert the scene. The dance takes place at a party in which men pay for intimacy with women. The blurring — or exposing — of these power roles is expressed during the party's floor show. This sets us up for an important moment later in which Violetta's love, Alfredo, baldly tears off the party's facade and reveals the intentions of the party attendees.



LA Opera. Photo by Cory Weaver

CD: Some of the reviews of the San Francisco production also refer to a “tutu and whipping dog number.” What is that?

Heginbotham: This is a wonderful moment in which two lovers, Flora and the Marquis D'Obigny, express their specific agreement. This may be a transactional relationship, but there is also benevolence here. They seem to be kind with each other throughout their fetishistic understanding.

CD: Your biography includes a range of projects from your own company to television to puppets and your freelance work. Do you approach choreography for an opera differently than your other projects?

Heginbotham: Thank you for this great question. I knew I wanted to choreograph at age 11 when I made a solo at my Anchorage, Alaska dance school recital, set to *Le Jazz Hot* from the film *Victor/Victoria*. Ever since, I've wanted to somehow be involved in a lot of dance designing situations- ballet, modern concert dance, theater, opera, film and tv. Lately I've been exploring virtual and augmented realities. The uniform approach in every situation is to try to make the best dance possible for its specific context. For opera, theater, and screen work, it is my job to try to make choreography which will support and lift the existing story in the script or libretto, and to collaborate with the director on their vision of what is intended to happen.



John Heginbotham. Photo by Janelle Jones

CD: Did your work for *La Traviata* also involve movement for the chorus and soloists?

Heginbotham: Thankfully yes – and in collaboration with Shawna – I really enjoyed working with both the SFO chorus and the LA Opera chorus – they are fabulous!

CD: How many dancers are involved. Where are the dancers from?

Heginbotham: We have five corps dancers Isabella Caso, Katherine Cowgirl, Courtney Goffney, Maxwell Simoes, and Nicholas Sipes, plus two swings Alec Lloyd and Liv Mal. They are all fantastic!

Los Angeles Opera — *La Traviata* Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave., downtown; Sat., April 14 & 21, Thurs., April 18, Wed., April 24, Sat., April 27, \$39-\$399. [LA Opera](#).

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