

**Cleveland Opera Theater:  
*La traviata* at the Maltz (April 28)**

by Daniel Hathaway



While opera often treats its audiences to spectacle on a grand scale, what really makes the art form take flight is the melding of distinguished singing with excellent acting and staging. Those elements came together beautifully in Cleveland Opera Theater's production of Verdi's *La traviata* on Sunday afternoon, April 28 at the Maltz Performing Arts Center. A strong cast and a fine chamber

orchestra joined director Scott Skiba and conductor Domenico Boyagian in bringing the story of Violetta Valéry to vibrant life on an engagingly human scale.

The dynamic duo of Skiba and Boyagian could probably turn a parking garage into a temporary opera house with just a few magical strokes. At the Maltz, swags of fabric draped over aluminum scaffolding, tables and chairs (often moved by cast members), and a couple of raised side platforms defined the performing space and focused attention on the center of the venue's wide stage. An ersatz pit at floor level brought the orchestra out into the open, but with their forces whittled down into a chamber orchestration, instrumentalists balanced well with singers all afternoon.



Social gatherings are important in *Traviata*, and Skiba knows how to give a good party. His handling of the crowd at the top of the show when Violetta first meets Alfredo, and his staging of the more boisterous gathering in Flora's home in the second act were spirited in different ways — Flora's spiked with cameo appearances by the outrageous Belia Sinn, Kimmy Katarja, and Lady Slay of Cleveland Burlesque. Skiba's eye for detail serves him well in managing multiple bodies.



Verdi gives Violetta the opportunity to introduce herself and her philosophy of love early on, and Angela Mortellaro made a big splash with her first-act show-stopper, “*Sempre libera.*” At the end of the opera, she was equally compelling in her final deathbed aria — if just a bit too robust for a dying woman.

Tenor Benjamin Werley established both his singing and acting creds at the same party, portraying Alfredo Germont as an earnest and ardent character. Speaking of introductions and first impressions, when we first met the outstanding baritone Grant Youngblood, it was clear that Alfredo's father was going to figure as a real, flesh-and-blood element in the plot rather than the usual cardboard character. Youngblood's voice was as alluring as his stage presence.

Skiba filled out the strong cast with young professionals, including Elizabeth Frey (as Flora Bervoix), James Eder (Dr. Grenvil), Brian Skoog (Gastone de Letorières), Bryant Bush (Marchese d'Obigny), Alexis Reed (who outdid herself in the final act as Annina), and Daewon Seo (a mellifluous Barone Douphol).



Boyagian paced the production with his customary sixth sense, drawing fine playing from the orchestra and excellent ensemble from the singers. His enthusiasm was matched by his entrances to the “pit” — he literally jogged the considerable distance between the side doors and the podium each time.



*Traviata* was easily Cleveland Opera Theater’s most impressive production to date. The creative team of Skiba and Boyagian, supported by set designer Matthew D. McCarren, lighting designer Steve Shack, costume, wardrobe, and props designer Vanessa Cook, and chorus master Dean Buck, have created the best professional opera production that Cleveland has seen in years. With, we hope, more to come.

*Photos by Noah Listgarten.*

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com May 14, 2019.*

*Click here for a printable copy of this article*

[Return to the Front Page.](#)