

Sempre Libera: Making Spaces for the Repositioning of Marginalized Individuals and Social Groups

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Abstract

The paper aims to show how architecture can both reflect and challenge societal perceptions of gender and class on the example of intricate interplay between spatial organisation and set design in the function of portrayal of marginalized social groups in opera. By analysing the architecture of spaces created by scenic design in contemporary opera productions, study investigates the position of women, particularly those depicted as sex workers, with a specific focus on contrasting performances of Verdi's *La Traviata*. Violetta Valéry's character, fluctuating to the modern times since the 19th century, serves as a poignant example for both a loving woman who has gone astray or someone who is not willing to let go of her courtesan past and accept the fragility of being in love. Analysing this interpretational duality through the modalities of architectural response in bringing visionary opera staging (*Regieoper*) concepts to reality, this study seeks to elucidate how the architecture itself reflects societal attitudes. By highlighting various aspects of Violetta's character, productions selected for this case study have the potential to cast a fresh perspective on familiar plots and amplify messages that were maybe previously left unnoticed. Ultimately, this research aims to emphasize the potency of architectural atmospheres in visual storytelling and shaping our perceptions of marginalized individuals, all while underscoring the potential for theatrical productions to serve as platforms for social critique and catalysts for change.

Keywords: Performing Art, Scenic Architecture & Design, Marginalized Social Groups, Gender Representation, "La Traviata"

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Introduction

The original unity of time, place, and happening is gradually abandoned in favour of complex and articulated directorial approaches. However, when it comes to opera as a musical-theatrical form of spectacle, this approach has to overcome certain limitations. Given that opera as a genre particularly upholds tradition, the audience generally expects that if one aims to move away from the traditional framework and the consistency of classical interpretation of the original libretto, it should be done by applying a multitude of additional nuances to the basic set of meanings or reinterpreting the work in a new context, addressing contemporary issues. For this study, three contemporary productions of Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* will be analysed, in which this tendency towards shifting meanings was being used in order to offer new perspectives and views on the well-known plot. *La traviata* itself was chosen for this analysis due to its significant historical impact and provoking of strong public reactions for its secular content involving marginalized groups which was considered unsuitable for opera at the time when this piece aired its premiere. Not only were these topics included, but the main role of Violetta Valéry was portrayed as an ordinary courtesan with all its decadency, which was a previously unthinkable idea. Verdi's deliberate use of marginalized characters, such as Violetta, underscores the harsh realities of society. The productions here selected are primarily based on the diversity of interpretations of the main character, Violetta Valéry, in order to highlight specific messages of the libretto through her character and provide new readings of her as a representative of marginalized social strata.

The main focus of this paper will be on analysing different staging modalities in relation to the portrayal of marginalized social groups in opera. Firstly, it questions the position of women depicted as sex workers, through the portrayal of Violetta Valéry. Secondly, it examines how the staging modalities reflect the interpretation of the main character. By highlighting various aspects of Violetta's character and key events in the libretto, the productions selected for this case study have the potential to provide a new perspective on the well-known plot, enhance its message, and reveal nuances that might have previously gone unnoticed. Her character, relevant from the 19th century to today, exemplifies two distinct perspectives: one, where she is aware of her past constraints but continues to seek sincere love, and another, where she struggles to move on from her past and confront the inherent vulnerability of being in a committed romantic relationship.

Seguito del N° 2 Brindisi

Allegretto (♩ = 69)

Act I, Scene 2: Libiamo ne' lieti calici

Portrayal of Violetta's vulnerability.
The audience is expected to **show empathy**.

Realistic portrayal of Violetta's life.
The audience is expected to comment **at the end of the opera**.

Observation of Violetta's life.
The audience is expected to give **constant feedback**.

Figure 1: Productions selected for further analysis

Research Objectives

This research aims to deepen our understanding of how spatial organisation and architecture in theatrical set design emphasize the power of architectural atmosphere in visual storytelling and shape our character perception. Additionally, it highlights the potential of theatrical productions to serve as platforms for social critique and change.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis is that the audience, regardless of their prior knowledge, professional training or academic background, can clearly recognize directorial tendencies in the interpretation of female characters through the use of set design solutions. In other words, the idea can be effectively conveyed through stage design and atmosphere if the overall concept of the production and its spatial representation are sufficiently clear.

Methodology

The primary focus of this research is to analyse the portrayal of marginalized women through the character of Violetta Valéry using the triad of perception—comprising the director, set designer, and spectator. The methodology used was a multiple case study later supplemented by structured interview. The case study selection criteria explicitly excluded classical productions of *La Traviata*, as they rigidly adhere to the libretto without any deviations, thus lacking the variability of interpretation necessary for this study. Instead, the research concentrates on three contemporary productions, deliberately chosen for their potential to reveal diverse facets of Violetta's character. This selection of productions aims to provide fresh insights into a well-known narrative and challenge traditional interpretations.

Furthermore, the qualitative analysis involved spatial decomposition, decoding, and interpretation, along with the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. The data collected in this combined methodological manner allowed for an in-depth examination of recurring themes and patterns. They ensured that the study not only captured the subjective experiences of the participants but also systematically evaluated the differences and similarities among the selected productions.

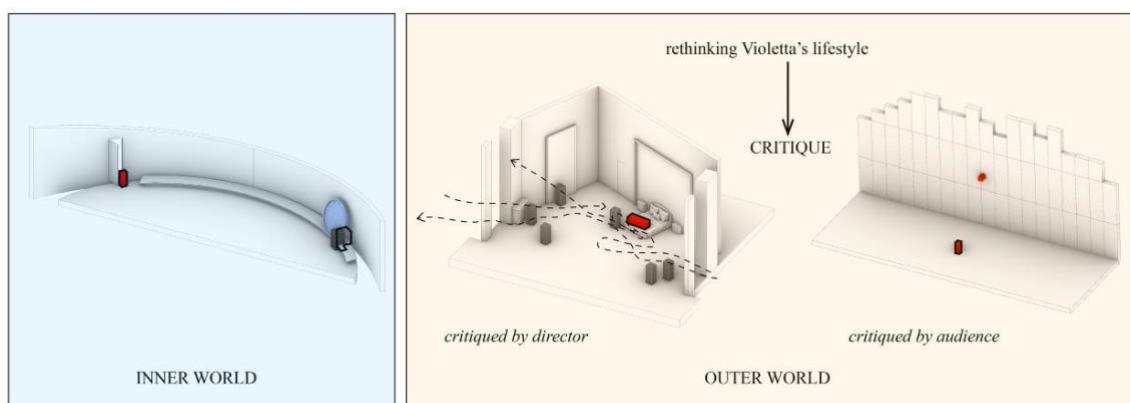


Figure 2: Different perspectives on Violetta's character development

Case Study

Thematic Framework

La Traviata is an opera in three acts composed by Giuseppe Verdi that premiered in 1853. It is a crucial work of verismo opera due to its emphasis on realistic portrayals of everyday life and social issues. Set in mid-19th century Paris, the libretto is based on Alexandre Dumas Fils' novel *La Dame aux Camélias* and explores themes of love, sacrifice, and societal judgment.

The plot of *Traviata* follows Violetta Valéry, a renowned French courtesan who, after meeting and falling in love with Alfredo Germont, attempts to escape her superficial lifestyle. Their happiness is disrupted when Alfredo's father, George Germont, persuades Violetta to leave Alfredo to protect the family's honour. She reluctantly agrees, falsely claiming to have returned to her former lover, Baron Douphol. Alfredo, misled by this deception, publicly humiliates Violetta, believing she has betrayed him. As Violetta's health deteriorates due to tuberculosis, Alfredo learns the truth and rushes to her side. They briefly reunite, but Violetta ultimately dies in Alfredo's arms, her sacrifice underscoring the depth of her love.

La Traviata was initially met with mixed reactions, as it challenged contemporary opera conventions by featuring a courtesan as the protagonist and addressing issues of morality, redemption, and social ostracism. The opera's realistic portrayal of a marginalized character's plight was seen as controversial, pushing the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable on the operatic stage. Despite this, *La Traviata* has since become one of the most beloved and frequently performed operas in the repertoire, celebrated for its emotional depth, memorable arias, and Verdi's masterful composition. In theatrical performances, two juxtaposed symbols frequently stand out: *the fleeting nature of life* and *the lightness of falling in love*.

Analysis

Director's Approach.

In the realm of contemporary opera production, diverse directorial interpretations offer a profound lens through which to analyse character dynamics and underlying societal themes. Exploring different productions of Verdi's *La Traviata* allows for a nuanced examination of Violetta Valéry's multifaceted character and the thematic elements surrounding her story. Each director brings a distinct vision that highlights various aspects of Violetta's persona, providing a richer understanding of her complexity. This comparative analysis delves into how Willy Decker, Robert Carsen, and Henning Brockhaus interpret Violetta's character, offering insights into her nobility, moral struggles, and capacity for transformation.

Production:	Willy Decker	Robert Carsen	Henning Brockhaus
Key aspects:	inner world portrayal	outer world portrayal	outer world portrayal
	willing to change	not willing to change	not willing to change
	searching for love	not accepting love	accepting love
	fair, noble woman	greedy, promiscuous woman	both
	memento mori	/	/
	/	display of her reality	display of her reality
	/	critique of social class	critique of social class
	/	/	introspection
	/	moral corruption	/
	altering of psyche due to terminal illness	altering of psyche due to problematic lifestyle	/

Table 1: Comparison of different recognised aspects

Willy Decker's interpretation positions Violetta as a dignified and self-aware woman, transcending her troubled past. A dominant stage element, a large clock, serves as a visual metaphor for *memento mori*, symbolizing the relentless passage of time and the anticipation of Violetta's inevitable demise due to terminal illness. This is further accentuated by the continuous presence of a silent older figure, later revealed to be Dr. Grenvil in Act III, embodying the omnipresence of death.

On the contrary, Robert Carsen's production portrays Violetta through a lens of moral decay, depicting her as a greedy, promiscuous social climber. This version underscores a brutal critique of moral corruption, illustrating how a deviant lifestyle can fundamentally alter a woman's psyche, rendering her incapable of accepting genuine affection and ultimately reverting to prostitution which she cannot escape.

Henning Brockhaus offers a blend of these perspectives, portraying Violetta initially as a courtesan but evolving her character to embrace love and sacrifice. This production employs Brechtian techniques, promoting audience introspection, societal critique, and independent judgment. The immersive set design facilitates a reality-show-like scrutiny of Violetta's life, fostering a multiplicity of interpretations without prescriptive directorial influence.

Set Designer's Approach.

The analysis of the set design focuses on the sequence of locations—Paris, the countryside, and then Paris again—as well as the contrasting depiction of Violetta's salon before and after her illness. Each production will be evaluated through two key aspects: the geometry of the set design and the *mise-en-scène*. This approach aims to reveal how spatial configurations and visual composition contribute to the thematic and emotional impact of the production. The geometric analysis will consider the use of space, scale, and layout, while the *mise-en-scène* will explore how movement and the arrangement of props enhance the narrative and character development.

Geometry Analysis.

In the Willy Decker production, the stage design features a simple geometric structure with a rounded stage and a constant symbol of death, represented by a ticking clock. This symbol, a *memento mori*, underscores the theme of mortality throughout the performance. In the second act, the ticking clock is partially obscured by floral bedspreads and curtains, which symbolize

Violetta's inner state and the fullness of her love and happiness. However, as the romance fades and Violetta's reality begins to surface, the clock reemerges as a reminder of the approaching death. This symbol is also present at Flora's house and culminates in the final scene, where the clock ceases to tick as Violetta drops dead.

In the Robert Carsen production, the set design exhibits a strictly realistic geometry. The second act features a divided setting: the countryside estate, which evokes the protagonist's hedonistic past, is depicted with a forest constructed from piles of money. This design choice symbolically reflects the opulence and moral decay associated with the character's previous lifestyle.

In the Henning Brockhaus production, the set design features a mirrored plane that facilitates direct interaction with the audience. In the second act, the primary variation is the furniture on stage, transitioning from modest to luxurious, which corresponds to the different spatial settings within the narrative. By the third act, the setting remains the same, but the furniture depicted in the salon is now in a state of decay, mirroring Violetta's deteriorating emotional and physical condition.

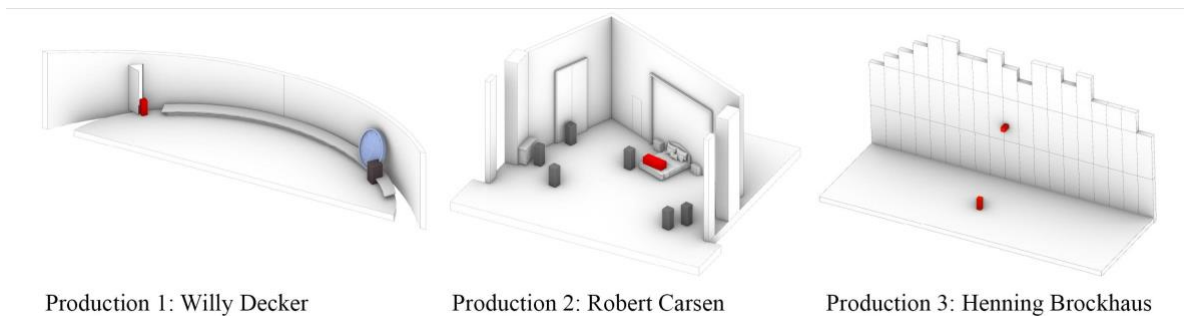


Figure 3: Geometry analysis

Mise-en-Scène Analysis: Willy Decker.

The *mise-en-scène* analysis reveals that the Preludio marks Violetta's initial confrontation with Death, setting up a juxtaposition between her reckless lifestyle and Alfredo's genuine affection. At Alfredo's declaration of love, Violetta, overwhelmed and unable to accept her terminal illness, experiences a profound emotional shift. Despite her desire to remain with Alfredo, Death continues to loom over them. The focal point of this analysis is Violetta's iconic aria, "È strano... ah forse lui... sempre libera." This aria highlights Violetta's yearning for true love, undeterred by her terminal condition. In this scene, she struggles against the passage of time by attempting to manipulate a clock, symbolizing her attempt to defy the inexorable advance of Death.

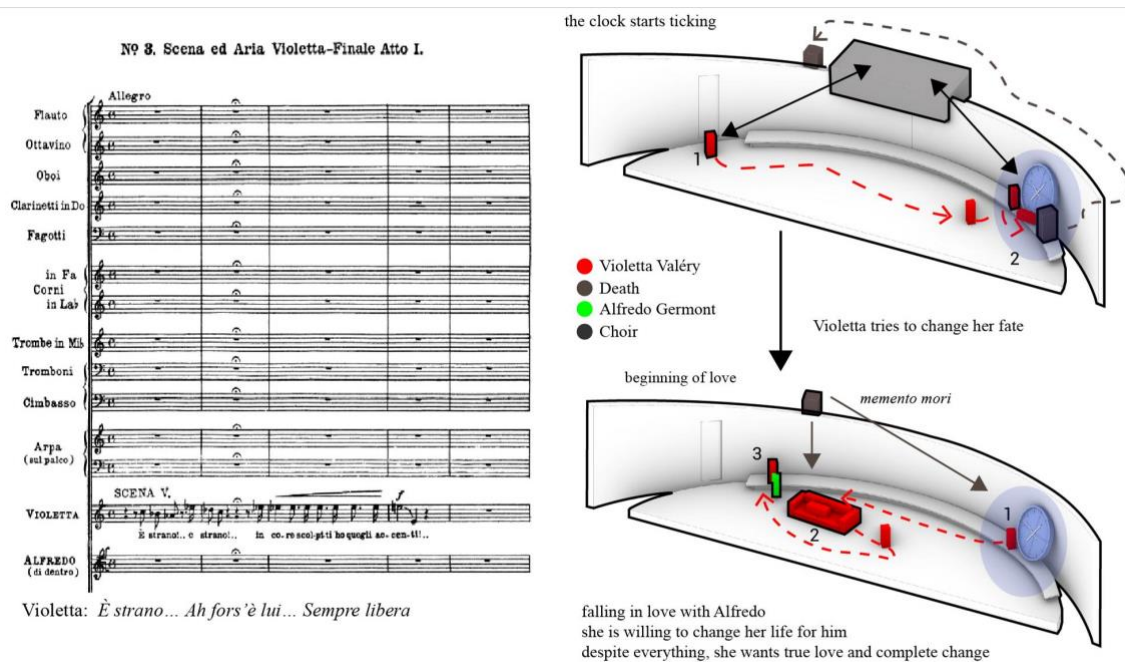


Figure 4: Violetta's aria "Sempre libera" scene

The second act introduces a significant shift in the colour palette, reflecting a transformation in emotional tone. Alfredo's aria *Lunge da lei per me non va diletto* is set against a backdrop of genuine romantic joy, characterized by floral wallpapers and bedspreads, depicting a period of happiness between Violetta and Alfredo. This idyllic scene is abruptly disrupted when Alfredo's father George Germont confronts Violetta and demands she ends her relationship with Alfredo to preserve his family's reputation. He argues that Violetta's relationship with Alfredo jeopardizes his sister's marital prospects and insists on their separation. Initially, Violetta resists but ultimately consents, demonstrating her willingness to sacrifice her personal happiness for the greater good of Alfredo's family. This moment reveals Violetta's capacity for nobility and selflessness.

The subsequent dialogues between Germont and Violetta are pivotal, as Germont expresses his gratitude for her sacrifice, comparing her to an angel and recognizing the magnitude of her contribution to his family's honour. The stage, which initially featured floral decor, now shifts to a more rigid white setting like the one from Act I, metaphorically representing Violetta's internal decline. Violetta's relinquishment of her cherished lifestyle and return to her past is visually reflected in the changing stage design by removing the floral patterns one by one. Her plea, "I will die but please don't let him curse my memory," underscores her noble sacrifice and the empathy she feels despite her own suffering.

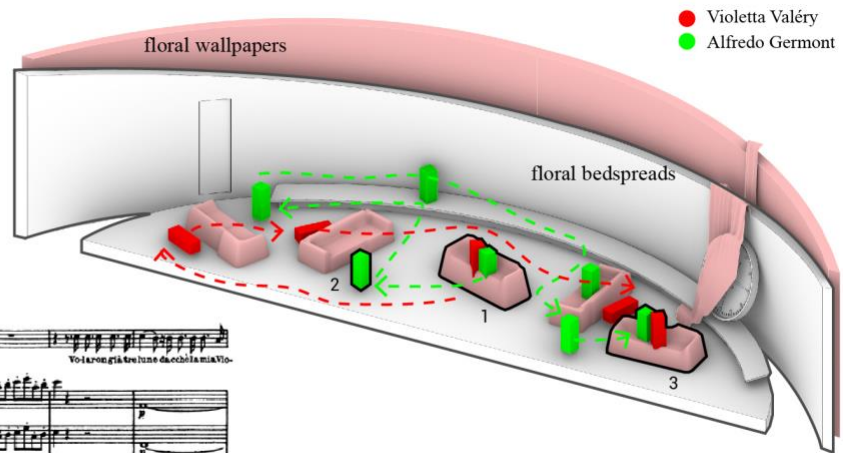
ATTO SECONDO
Scene 1

Country estate

happy moments of love
sincere happiness of two young people
contrasting setting to the first act

Alfredo
Recit. (depono il fucile)
Lunge da lei... per me non v'ha di letto... Voi a non gliate, l'uno da occhio mia Vio-
a tempo
Recit. a tempo

Alfredo: *Lunge da lei... De miei bollenti spiriti*



George Germont comes to tell Violetta that she must leave Alfredo because their relationship tarnishes the family's reputation. Due to this affair, Alfredo's sister cannot marry happily. Since Violetta's love with Alfredo has no future, his father begs her to leave him.

the perfect world where Violetta finds sincere happiness slowly fades away...

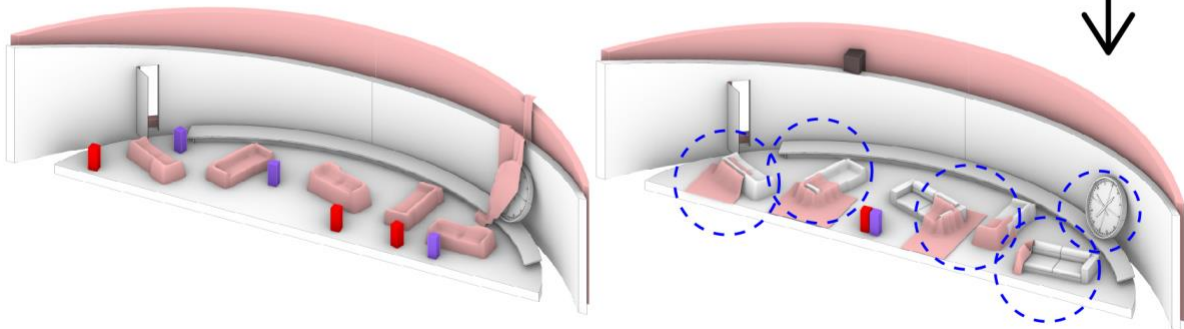


Figure 5: Spatial transformations during Act II

In Flora's ball sequence, Violetta's social circle engages in gossip and mockery, demonstrating their superficial and callous nature. Alfredo's discovery of Violetta with the Baron, and her subsequent pretence of affection, leads to his public humiliation of her through payment with gambling winnings. Even in this moment of degradation, Violetta's enduring love for Alfredo remains apparent, emphasizing her strength and resilience.

The final scenes of the second act present Violetta's deathbed with Dr. Grenvil symbolizing the finality of Death. As Violetta reflects on her life, she lies down on a clock, recalling past events. Her final aria, *Teneste la promessa... È tardi... Addio del passato* encapsulates her emotional state and despair that disappears the very moment Alfredo arrives. Their brief reunion includes expressions of love and plans to escape Paris for her recovery, but ultimately, Violetta collapses and dies. This ending encapsulates the tragic arc of their relationship, marked by both genuine love and inevitable loss.

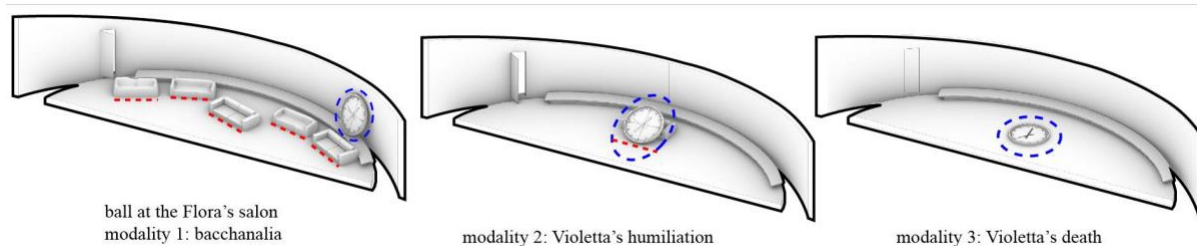


Figure 6: Scene sequence from Act II to Act III Finale

Mise-en-Scène Analysis: Robert Carsen.

The mise-en-scène of the entire production is a stark portrayal of Violetta's daily existence as a courtesan, characterized by a constant stream of men entering and exiting her salon. In the introduction, the only element illuminated on stage is solely the bed, highlighting the details in transactional moments of Violetta's services as men exchange money for her company. The second scene juxtaposes the recklessness of Violetta's life with Alfredo's genuine affection, while also depicting Alfredo's never-ending sympathy towards Violetta who is flirting at the time with an unknown man. In the third scene, Alfredo continues to express his love to Violetta and she gives him an opportunity to impress her, but their moments of intimacy are disrupted by the abrupt entrance of Violetta's potential clients. The scene of *Sempre libera* is especially significant. Despite her growing affection for Alfredo, she perceives her emotions as madness and resolves to return to her former life, prioritizing financial security and pleasure over love.

Scene 5

Violetta: *È strano... Ah fors'è lui... Sempre libera*

Violetta is alone, questioning her feelings towards Alfredo. For the first time, she feels genuine love and doesn't know what to do. She describes it as "madness" and decides to return to her former life.

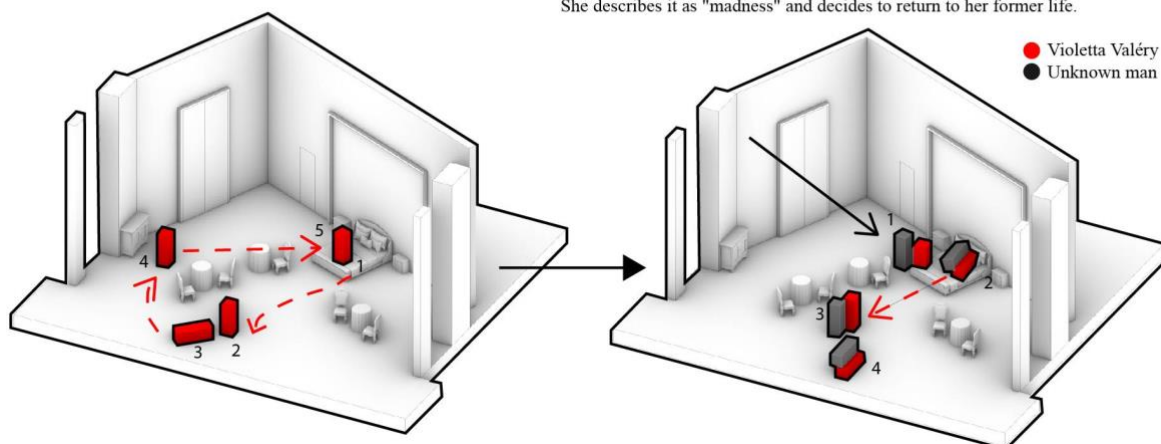


Figure 7: Violetta's aria „Sempre libera” scene

In the second act at the countryside, flowers in the forest are replaced with banknotes as a symbol of materialistic gratification of Violetta's existence in every given moment. In the Finale, as Violetta reads George Germont's letter, she is engulfed by vivid flashbacks that encapsulate her tumultuous past. These flashbacks contrast scenes of extravagant bacchanalia and the allure of wealth with stark imagery of poverty and social marginalization. This disparity highlights the shift from her former life of opulent parties to her current state of destitution. The dramatic climax unfolds as she collapses and dies, while opportunistic intruders invade the apartment to seize her possessions, underscoring the ephemeral and superficial nature of her social status and the relentless cycle of commodification she faced.

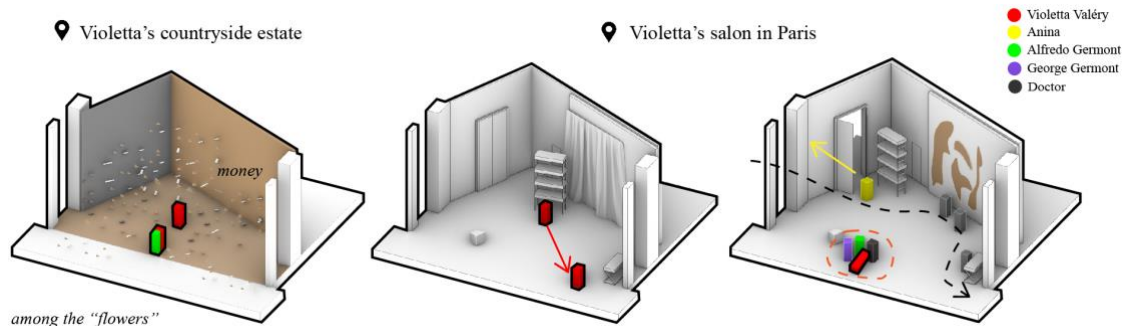


Figure 8: Scene sequence from Act II to Act III Finale

Mise-en-Scène Analysis: Henning Brockhaus.

The mise-en-scène analysis of this production is distinctive due to its use of Alfredo Germont's perspective. The story unfolds through his observations of Violetta Valéry, leading to his romantic attachment. This viewpoint shapes how the characters and their relationships are portrayed throughout the story. In the second scene, the emphasis shifts to the realistic portrayal of Violetta's life. This scene offers the audience a deeper understanding of her private existence and provides insight into her emotional response to Alfredo. The mise-en-scène here facilitates an examination of her feelings and personal turmoil.

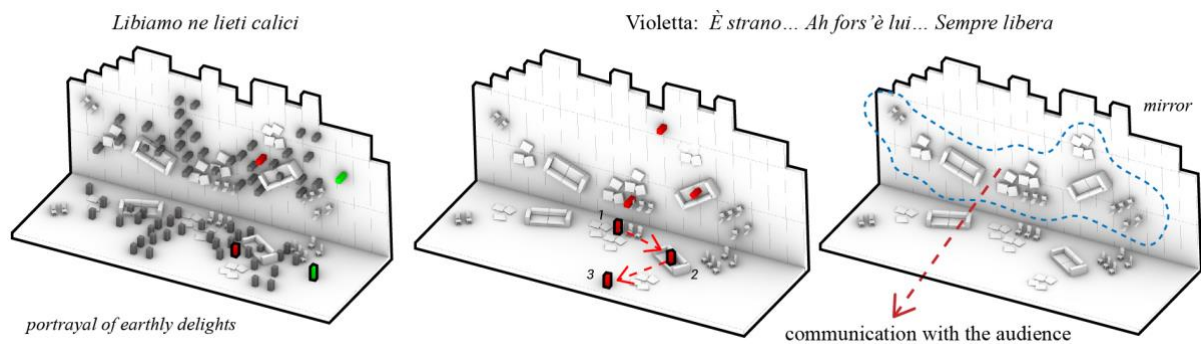


Figure 9: Brindisi and Violetta's aria „Sempre libera” scene

Further, the audience is presented with Alfredo's daydreams, which depict an idealized vision of their future life together at a countryside estate. This portrayal not only reflects Alfredo's aspirations but also serves as a contrast to the harsh realities faced by the characters. In the final scene, the mise-en-scène incorporates a tilted mirror positioned towards the audience, thereby allowing viewers to see their own reflections. This choice of staging emphasizes the audience's engagement with Violetta's demise, making them complicit in her life and death. The mirror serves as a symbolic device, reflecting both the characters' and the audience's reactions to the unfolding tragedy and underscoring the thematic exploration of voyeurism and empathy in the narrative.

Spectator's Approach.

To understand spectator perceptions, participants who were not professionally involved in architecture, stage design, or performing arts were interviewed. These participants spanned different age groups and were asked structured questions about interpreting stage characteristics and atmospheres in both contemporary and classical productions. The findings indicate that spatial elements can influence audience opinions in various ways. Even when stage architecture does not directly shape the perspective, a well-defined directorial intent allows audience members, regardless of their expertise or background, to clearly interpret the

artistic space. Thus, a clear concept results in a clear perception. Detailed analyses of the key elements identified will be presented through diagrams and qualitative evaluation.

Comparison and Results

The collected data from interviews revealed nuanced audience reactions to the portrayal of Violetta's character and the recognized thematic elements of fear and judgment. Through the constant presence of symbols or strong gestures on stage, the audience is invited to actively or passively participate in forming opinions on the female character. Depending on the message conveyed, the audience is prompted to think about Violetta through the prisms of empathy or judgment. Violetta's fear of death (*Willy Decker*) or public criticism (*Henning Brockhaus*) is a recurring symbol across the productions, serving as a focal point for the audience's engagement and critical thinking. The stage architecture (the angled mirror towards the audience in the Henning Brockhaus' production) or singular elements (the ticking clock in Willy Decker's production) are being used to underscore the mentioned crucial points for guiding the audience indirectly through theatrical directions. In the Willy Decker production, the clarity of observing all aspects of Violetta's life through the mirror leads the audience to become strict analysts and critics of her every move. The respondents stated how the brutality of Violetta's decadent lifestyle depicted in these performances, especially in Robert Carsen's production, sharpened the audience's observational skills and provoked a deeper reflection on societal norms being presented.

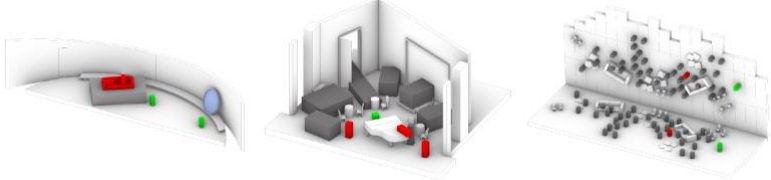
<i>productions:</i>	Willy Decker	Robert Carsen	Henning Brockhaus
			
<i>aspects:</i>			
Critique of Violetta's character			
rethinking Violetta's lifestyle		x	x
critique (audience)			x
critique (director)		x	
sympathy (audience)	x		x
sympathy (director)	x		
Audience participation			
empathy	x		
judgement		x	x
Audience interaction			
comments expected at the end	x	x	
comments expected constantly			x
reaction awaiting		x	x
empathy awaiting	x		
Audience compassion			
pity from the start	x		
pity from one moment		x	x
Comment anticipation <i>Sempre libera</i> scene			
she understands she loves Alfredo	x		x
she understands she loves herself and wealth more		x	

Table 2: Collected interview data analysis

The audience's need for constant feedback is driven by the reflective nature of the performance, with the mirror guiding them patiently through the narrative and shocking them at the end with the tilt, prompting a strong urge to comment. This expectation of interaction contrasts with the other productions, where the audience is awaited to give a firm opinion at the very end. In Willy Decker's production, empathy for Violetta dominates, with viewers deeply resonating with her tumultuous journey. As she is portrayed as a woman battling inevitable death due to terminal illness, constant empathy is visible in the audience. Nevertheless, in the other two productions where pity and empathy are not visible from the start, the scene where hurt Alfredo takes money to pay Violetta for her services is the moment where the audience adopts a defensive stance and supports Violetta, even if they did not approve of her lifestyle from the beginning. That shocking turnover is most visible in Robert Carsen's production where Violetta's character doesn't have almost any positive aspects so much it coquettes with being an antagonistic character. Yet, the audience in all cases feels discomfort, pity, surprise, fear, unease, and concern for her.

The pivotal aria *Sempre Libera* stands out as the decisive moment for audience members to form their opinions on Violetta, as it encapsulates the director's vision and the evolution course of her character. This aria, with its declaration of freedom and hedonism, marks the critical point where Violetta's internal conflict is laid bare. Many in the audience have noted that this is the crucial moment where their perceptions of Violetta begin to take shape. After this scene, her character evolves and sets the stage for the potential further courses of character development. Ultimately, the final scene integrates and completes Violetta's character. In the end, we learn about the true relationships between the characters, including Violetta's genuine relationship with Alfredo. The portrayal of her relationship with death in the final scene serves to complete and humanize Violetta's character, reinforcing the emotional impact on the audience. This allows the audience to reaffirm or reconsider their previously formed opinions.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that contemporary opera productions, particularly Verdi's *La Traviata*, can profoundly alter and expand audience perceptions through innovative directorial and set design approaches. By focusing on the portrayal of marginalized women, specifically through the character of Violetta Valéry, it becomes evident that these modern interpretations bring to light new dimensions and complexities within the opera's narrative. The case studies of Willy Decker, Robert Carsen, and Henning Brockhaus each highlight different aspects of Violetta's character, utilizing unique staging and set design to underscore themes of mortality, moral struggle, and societal critique.

The research confirms the hypothesis that clear and deliberate stage design solutions can effectively communicate directorial intentions to the audience, regardless of their background. Spatial organization and architectural elements play crucial roles in shaping the audience's understanding and emotional engagement with the performance. The varied responses from spectators, influenced by symbols illustrate how powerful visual storytelling can be in evoking empathy, judgment, and critical reflection. The integration of modern staging techniques and thematic exploration ensures that Violetta's character remains a poignant and relatable figure, bridging the gap between historical context and present-day societal norms. This study emphasizes opera's role as a medium for social critique and transformation, showcasing how inventive artistic interpretations profoundly affect and reshape audience perspectives.

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