

FESTIVAL FOCUS

Arena di Verona

Review by Antonia Couling • Photography by FotoEnnevi

Grand designs

Francò Zeffirelli absolutely fulfilled the brief for staging an opera in the vast expanse of Verona's spectacular Roman amphitheatre. The set for *La Traviata* was one of the most amazing I've seen. The scale of the structures, the innovative way in which they move to reveal astonishing surprises (greeted by audible gasps from the audience) is nothing short of genius. It's a fitting tribute to a distinguished and extravagant designer-director, celebrated for his work in film and opera, who died earlier this year.

Before the overture starts, top-hatted mourners gather around a horse-drawn hearse and a priest gives his blessing. As the first instrumental strains sound, the stage is vacated, last of all by an anguished Alfredo. A fake proscenium with box sections either side and sumptuous red curtains painted onto flats split and turn aside to reveal a massive, two-storied cross-section of a mansion in the manner of an open doll's house. Violetta retreats upstairs when she feels unwell and for her *tête-à-tête* with Alfredo, while the party continues downstairs, emphasising the two façades of her life.



The astonishing detail of *Traviata's* set – a tribute to Franco Zeffirelli's genius

During the break before Act II, grand conservatory panels are painstakingly installed over the doll's house by the 20-plus stagehands. Scene ii of this Act was the absolute showstopper, with the country house breaking apart to reveal a palatial ballroom, to a round of applause. Everything was thrown at this scene: acrobats, giant jellies and cakes on platters, *commedia dell'arte* characters milling about in the crowd of party-goers, and glitter canons going off at the end of the gypsy dance. In Act IV, the doll's house returns, now bare of much of its furniture, with Violetta wandering through the drab rooms.

Lana Kos' Violetta was commanding, with smooth-toned coloratura that needed an injection of light and colour here and there. Her acting was short

on characterisation, resulting in a two-dimensional portrayal. Stephen Costello gave us a rather muffled Alfredo, lacking in *spinto* sparkle: competent, but no thrills.

The star of the evening was the Mongolian singer Amartuvshin Enkhbat as Germont *père*. He possesses a beautiful, lyrical baritone, perfectly tempered in its emotions and very touching. Despite his relative youth, he delivered the perfect combination of authority and quality of tone.

The orchestra was lacklustre at times, with a tendency to plod: there seemed to be a battle afoot between the singers and the podium over the pacing, with conductor Daniel Oren spending far too much of the opera with his head buried in the score.

★★★

Shades of grey

Oren was also conducting Hugo De Ana's production of *Carmen*, and the same tussle between stage and pit seemed to be present here. This time the culprit was De Ana's misjudged set design which was so open that even the rear arch of the arena was visible, with simple, low piles of cargo crates as the main feature. This meant that all sound evaporated upwards and backwards, instead of being bounced forward by any flats or structures.

The lack of musical impact wasn't the only thing that marred the experience: De Ana's weak direction gave us an almost completely static chorus throughout and half-hearted efforts on the part of the soloists. He seemed to be of the school of thought that this opera can 'direct itself', which just isn't good enough. His setting in Franco's Spain (as if *that's* never been done before) was more focused on the use of real horses and actual motorcars than on strong characterization and story-

telling. His costumes were a wash of greys, with Carmen barely distinguishable from the other women.

Mariangela Sicilia's Micaëla was quite strong, her arias delivered with sensitive dynamics though the tone was a little thin at times. Ksenia Dudnikova's Carmen was physically well characterised, and she had good volume with a rich lower register; but there was an element of breathlessness and the occasional broken phrase, particularly in the Habañera. Murat Karahan made Don José even wetter than usual. He rarely removed his thumb from under his belt, so unengaged was he in what was going on. If he took some acting lessons, there might be potential here, but his voice was often too covered, resulting in a lot of strangled bleating in the higher register. **ON**

★★

*Below: Party girl: Lana Kos as Violetta
Right: Ksenia Dudnikova as a well
characterised Carmen*

