

Reviews: Theatre

Trimmed Verdi will still break your heart

LA TRAVIATA
TRICYCLE THEATRE
★★★★☆

The Olivier award-winning company OperaUpClose has hit on a clever formula: streamlining the classics for intimate theatre spaces and fresh audiences. They now relocate Verdi's much-loved La Traviata to an unnamed US city in the 1920s.

Performed by just five singers and a piano trio [clarinet and cello], Robin Norton-Hale's production, with a score arranged by Harry Blake, makes some adjustments to the opera's original scheme. With an array of dazzling flapper costumes and a charming art deco set by Katie Bellman (wood panelling, a luxurious chaise longue, glass decanters) the opening party scene at Courtesan Violetta's home is promising. Norton-Hale plays up the flapper context to good effect, spotlighting the story's focus on moral hypocrisy. But while the microcosm of their privileged world is convincingly evoked, there is little sense of any broader context – neither of the city that spawns their rarefied lives nor the countryside that



picture: ANDREAS GRIEGER

Violetta and her lover Alfredo escape to. Time is compressed, characterization is quickly established but some emotional investment is sacrificed along the way.

Purists may miss the power of a full orchestra supporting Verdi's tremulous exchanges but no one could fault the talent of the two leads. The cast rotates to protect the singers' voices and on press night we were treated to the soaring talents of Louisa Tee and Robin Bailey. Tee's soprano reverberates, light and

rebellious, at times darkened with despair. Bailey's watchful performance captivates and his tenor voice glides between resolute adoration, fury and raw pain. With impressive support from baritone James Harrison as Alfredo's conniving, career-driven father Germont, Flora McIntosh as Flora, Violetta's loyal, flirtatious consort, and Dario Dugandzic as the wicked, love rival Baron, the production moves from an overly truncated first half towards a confidently paced, heartbreaking finale. **Caroline David**

Bold Chekhov for our times

THE SEAGULL
REGENT'S PARK OPEN AIR THEATRE
★★★★☆

Art imitates life in Chekhov's tale of parasitic creatives, and on opening night in Regent's Park, the reverse also came to pass when a resident moorhen waddled over to greet the dead seagull. It's a compliment to Matthew Dunster, who fully embeds the Russian tale in our north London park, while Torben Betts's sparky free adaptation gives the 120-year-old work an effortlessly contemporary feel.

Jon Bausor's striking design is dominated by a giant angled mirror, highlighting the prevailing narcissism. Fading diva Arkadina and her clan use love to inflate their egos, seeing the preferred version of themselves reflected in those who adore them.

Any threats to self-image must be extinguished, hence Arkadina callously crushing her aspiring playwright son Konstantin because his new type of theatre renders her irrelevant. Janie Dee delivers



■ Nina and Konstantin in the Seagull Picture: Johan Persson

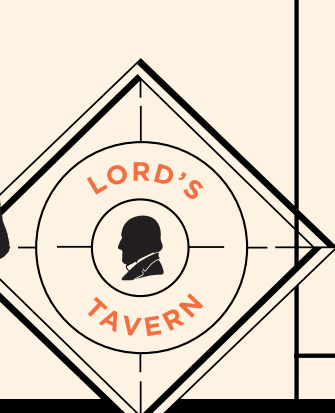
a memorably toxic creation, absurdly flexing her lithe limbs in a show of girliness, skilfully manipulating her lover and posing as rather than being a caring mother. She no longer recognises the distinction between reality and artifice.

Nor does Konstantin, preaching the theatre of truth but only able to produce tortured symbolic indulgence. In contrast, Dunster's production is overly broad at times, with explicit editorialising via eye-rolling servants, but it comes closer to following Hamlet's instruction to hold "the mirror up to nature" – figuratively as well

as literally. It's an effective interpretation of Chekhov's most overt homage to the Bard.

Matthew Tennyson's frail, oversensitive Konstantin impresses, as do Alex Robertson's egotistical writer, Ian Redford's florid uncle, Lisa Diveney's seething alcoholic, Sabrina Bartlett's impulsive actress, Colin Hoult's ignored teacher and Danny Webb's pensive doctor.

This is Chekhov with real 21st-century bite, attacking the hollowness and corrosiveness of celebrity. Another bold offering in a strong Open Air season. **Marianka Swain**



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