

Life is Serious; **ART SERENE**

Biography

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OPERA THROUGH ATMOSPHERIC NARRATIVES

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Abstract

By analyzing the relationship between character portrayal in contemporary opera productions and the creation of architectural atmosphere, this study interprets how theatrical staging can serve as a clear platform for critiquing societal norms, focusing on the position of women, particularly those depicted as sex workers, through a comparative analysis of various productions of Verdi's *La Traviata*.

The study examines directorial approaches to portraying diverse facets of Violetta Valéry, a prominent marginalized female character. Through a comparative analysis of three distinct stagings that underscore different dimensions of her complex personality, the research investigates the interplay between character portrayal and spatial representation of pivotal moments in libretto. This interpretive analysis, framed by the architectural responses in realizing visionary opera staging concepts (*Regieoper*), sheds light on how architectural choices reflect societal attitudes. By emphasizing varied facets of Violetta's character, these productions offer novel insights into familiar narratives, amplifying subtle messages that might otherwise be overlooked.

Ultimately, this research emphasizes the potency of architectural atmospheres in visual storytelling and shaping perceptions of marginalized individuals, underscoring the potential for theatrical productions to serve as platforms for social critique and catalysts for change. The nuanced use of atmosphere enriches our interpretation of Violetta's character, revealing layers of her personality and societal constraints that traditional staging might overlook. The spatial dynamics and scenic design not only frame her narrative but also evoke emotional and psychological responses that deepen our understanding of her plight and resilience

Keywords: affective atmosphere, spatial dramaturgy, opera production, La Traviata

1. INTRODUCTION

This research seeks to deepen our understanding of the specific elements linked to the creation of affective atmospheres, further contributing directly to the shaping of spatial narratives and dramaturgy in opera productions. On the broader plan, it is inevitable to stress the fact that theatre *always* operates within the field of socio-symbolic practice, making the aesthetic investigations of several analysed productions intersect with ethical, moral, political, and social aspects. This phenomenon will be examined through the list of different opera productions of Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* both set accurately in epoch following well-known traditional staging tendencies, and also contemporary productions that base their entire aesthetic appeal on accentuating specific aspects of the main heroine's persona. By identifying the individual components that construct atmospheric narratives and linking them to key moments in the libretto, the aim is to address whether certain types of productions utilise similar expressive means to emphasise elements of spatial dramaturgy through the construction of affective atmospheres. In this manner, the final goal is to highlight the hidden potential of incorporation of these specific elements in a precise manner, to magnify through staging all questioning and destabilising of entrenched societal norms, revealing the intricate relationship between spatial dramaturgy and societal critique.

Given the infamous background of the main character Violetta Valéry, the analysis has to be conveyed with feminist theories and concepts closely related to the term gender performativity. In the opera productions being analysed in this research (which are firmly connected to Violetta's identity decomposition and decoding on personal and intrapersonal levels) it is essential to have in mind the quotation of Jürs-Munby from the Introduction to Lehmann's *Postmodern Theatre* where it is stated that "performance has the power to question and destabilise the spectator's construction of identity". These claims will be examined through the breakdown of all elements that serve as the initial trigger, ultimately leading to the formation of spatial narratives - providing fertile ground upon which the audience bases their perceptions.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Individual ideas emerging from dramaturgical and architectural studies focus on how space can shape the narrative and elicit emotional responses from the audience. Therefore, the theoretical base for the analysis of opera through atmospheric narratives will be based on **spatial dramaturgy** and **affective atmospheres** being present through all different stagings of Verdi's *La Traviata*. Both selected terms are purely based on Anderson's definition written in *Emotion, Space and Society*:

"...atmospheres are singular affective qualities that emanate from but exceed the assembling of bodies. As such, to attend to affective atmospheres is to learn to be affected by the ambiguities of affect/emotion, by that which is determinate and indeterminate, present and absent, singular and vague." (Anderson, 2009, p. 77)

Following the main concepts of affective atmospheres defined by Mikel Dufrenne in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, the atmospheres will be understood through their possibility of performance that "it is through an atmosphere that a represented object will be apprehended and will take on a certain meaning".

For Dufrenne, the "atmosphere" of the aesthetic object elicits a feeling or emotion in a spectator, viewer or listener which "completes" the aesthetic object and "surpasses" it (Dufrenne, 1953). The singular affective quality of an aesthetic object is "open" to being "apprehended" through feelings or emotions (Anderson, 2009).

Of course, not only can we analyse the aesthetic and "affective qualities" of space. Following all the contemporary theatrical tendencies, the question is if the classically established aesthetic criteria of "sublime, tragic, comic and beautiful" are even for the detailed analysis of performativity in the modern era. Probably, the answer is negative, because it is impossible to focus solely on the aesthetic presence of stagings, as Lehmann stated more than twenty years ago:

"...theatre which is embedded in society in multiple ways – from the social character of the production and the public financing to the communal form of reception – exists in the field of real socio-symbolic practice. While the common reduction of the aesthetic to social positions and statements remains empty, inversely

all aesthetic interrogation is blind if it does not recognise the reflection of social norms of perception and behaviour in the artistic practice of theatre.” (Lehman, 2006, pp. 18-19)

Through the methodology, which will later be explained, the main goal in this research is to underscore how stage space and visual elements become an integral part of the narrative, creating emotional layers that the audience experiences as part of the performance. In this context, each production of *La Traviata* can utilise space to “tell us” different aspects of the narrative through the atmosphere, adding complexity and depth to the well-known plot. Additionally, theories of affective atmospheres, developed by many authors such as Böhme and Deleuze & Guattari, offer a compelling perspective on the role of space as both an emotional and narrative agent. According to these theories, the atmosphere is never merely the result of spatial elements (lighting, scenography, movement) but also something intangible that arises between the performers and the audience. Therefore, each new production of *La Traviata* can be analysed through this lens - examining how it generates distinct atmospheres and how space acts as a mediator of emotions.

In theatre, political engagement does not consist in the topics but in the forms of perception. Yet theatre is an art of the social par excellence. Its analysis, therefore, cannot settle for depoliticisation because its practice is objectively politically co-determined (Lehmann, 2006). Theatre serves as a powerful tool for challenging societal norms, particularly those tied to gender roles and the restrictions placed on women like Violetta, whose identity as a courtesan inherently carries the weight of social judgment and stigma. Through its ability to disrupt established narratives, theatre exposes the rigid constructs that define morality, propriety, and femininity. It unravels the layers of societal critique embedded in such roles, shedding light on the systemic oppression and double standards imposed on women. By creating a space for alternative perspectives, it encourages audiences to question the societal constraints that women navigate, often against their will, and to reconsider the narratives that perpetuate such inequalities. With this in mind, the different productions of *La Traviata* provide unique audience experience through their management of space and atmosphere, creating singular spatial narratives.

3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Previous research conducted earlier in the same year focused on examining how the staging modalities reflect the interpretation of Violetta as the main character. Therefore, this research aimed to deepen our understanding of how spatial organisation and architecture in theatrical set design emphasises the power of architectural atmosphere in visual storytelling and shapes our character perception (Stefanović, 2024). The central research hypothesis was that regardless of the audience’s prior knowledge or musically oriented professional background, well-defined directorial concepts can convey intended interpretations effectively through atmospheric elements. In other words, the prior should lead the audience to a clear perception of character depth and understanding of the societal critique being presented on stage. For this examination, the main character of *La Traviata*, the role of Violetta Valéry, was suitable regarding her role as a marginalised individual easily concocted to social judgment and oppression.

The study employs a case study methodology, focusing on three productions that intentionally deviate from classical interpretations of *La Traviata* to offer modern perspectives on Violetta’s character. Again, it is necessary to cite Hans-Thies Lehmann to understand the importance of a contemporary and non-traditional approach to libretto:

“...the majority of spectators, who – to put it crudely – expect from the theatre the illustration of classic texts, may well accept the ‘modern’ set but subscribe to a comprehensible fable (story), coherent meaning, cultural self-affirmation and touching theatre feelings. It is essential to accept the coexistence of divergent theatre forms and concepts in which no paradigm is dominant.” (Lehmann, 2006, p. 19)

This was one of the reasons that productions selected in this work were once by Willy Decker, Robert Carsen and Henning Brockhaus - all of which were primarily based on the diversity of interpretations of Violetta’s character in order to highlight specific messages of the libretto through her portrayal and provide new readings of her as a representative of marginalised social strata (Stefanović, 2024). Each of the three selected productions shaped Violetta’s character through one emphasised aspect of her persona. Each production’s

set design was analysed in terms of geometry, mise-en-scène, and thematic symbolism. These analyses included spatial decomposition, decoding symbolic design choices, and assessing the staging's alignment with thematic objectives. The productions were compared based on recurring themes and elements such as mortality and societal judgment. This framework allowed for a systematic evaluation of the spatial and atmospheric differences across productions.

Later, qualitative data were collected through structured interviews with audience members from various backgrounds, who provided insights into their perceptions of each production's set design and its impact on their interpretation of Violetta's character. The findings indicated that each production's unique staging successfully communicated distinct interpretative nuances of Violetta's character. Interview data revealed that spatial elements and staging choices did evoke varied emotional responses, with audience members reporting feelings of empathy, judgment, or critique in line with each production's design intent. For example, in Decker's production, the symbolic clock reinforced empathy for Violetta's plight, while Carsen's depiction of moral decay elicited critical reflections on societal expectations. The data also demonstrated that audiences interpret symbolic elements consistently, affirming that clear spatial organisation effectively supports directorial intention through spatial narratives. Additionally, participants noted that Violetta's aria, "Sempre libera", served as a pivotal moment for forming their perceptions, suggesting that architectural staging, combined with several spatial and narrative elements, significantly shaped the direction of interpretation. This conclusion leads further to the analysis of distinct elements building these affective atmospheres. Atmospheres will be perceived as "the shared reality of the perceiver and the perceived. It is the reality of the perceived as the sphere of its presence and the reality of the perceiver insofar as he or she, in sensing the atmosphere, is bodily present in a particular way." (Böhme, 2013, pp. 41-42)

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Atmospheric generators

Given the theoretical explanations, throughout the methodological approach, the focus will be on understanding precisely which role these elements play in the overall production of atmosphere. Obviously, the whole is more than its parts, but this is not sufficient. As such, to attend to affective atmospheres is to learn to be affected by the ambiguities of affect/emotion, by that which is determinate and indeterminate, present and absent, singular and vague.

By categorizing productions into traditional and contemporary stagings (Fig. 1), the study relies on analysing specific methodological approaches through which spatial gestures shape the interpretation of atmospheric narratives. The focus is on providing empirical insights into dramaturgical effects, as well as an in-depth analysis of affective atmospheres by examining the impact of aesthetic and interpretative decisions on audience perception and experience. Within the framework of a multiple case study conducted to analyze affective atmospheres in the opera *La Traviata*, the methodology examines the individual impacts of various compositional elements—lighting, colour palette, and spatial elements present on stage.

The approach itself consists of several key steps:

Identification of Atmospheric Generators: The initial phase of analysis emphasizes identifying key stage elements that function as atmospheric generators—lighting, colour palettes, scenery elements and/or props. These elements are examined for their capacity to direct audience focus and elicit targeted emotional effects, positioning them as fundamental contributors to the construction of the stage atmosphere.

Segmentation of Elements into Functional Categories: The visual and spatial elements of the stage are systematically categorized into functional categories to allow precise tracking of the specific contributions of each group to the audience's affective response. Scenery elements were simply written down according to their position in the first plan or backdrop and (if existent) prop listing (Fig. 3). The differentiation of lighting is based on different illumination, such as point light/spotlight, general/total light, and mixed sources, alongside their intensity levels. Colour palettes, for instance, are systematically classified into temperature-based categories (cool, warm, or neutral) to facilitate a nuanced analysis of their influence on the perception of stage dynamics (Fig. 4).

Qualitative Analysis: Later, the representation of individual predefined elements is identified in relation to the traditional and contemporary opera stagings, with the aim of recognizing “established patterns” and solutions for “evoking affective responses in the observer.”

	Violetta Valéry	Location	Year of the performance	Type of production		Staging		
1	Stefania Bonfadelli	Teatro Giuseppe Verdi (Busseto)	2002	T		REALISTIC		
2	Patrizia Ciofi	Teatro La Fenice	2001		C	REALISTIC	FUSION	
3	Anna Netrebko	Salzburger Festspiele, Grosses Festspielhaus	2005		C			SYMBOLIC
4	Cinzia Forte	Opéra Royal de Wallonie	2009		C	REALISTIC		
5	Aleksandra Kurzak	Teatr Wielki	2010		C			SYMBOLIC
6	Natalie Dessay	Aix-en-Provence	2011		C			SYMBOLIC
7	Jessica Pratt	Her Majesty's Theatre	2014		C			SYMBOLIC
8	Venera Gimadieva	Glyndebourne Opera House	2014	T			FUSION	
9	Renée Fleming	The Royal Opera London	2015	T		REALISTIC		
10	Marlena Devoe	Clonter Opera Theatre	2016		C	REALISTIC		
11	Ermonela Jaho	Teatro Colón	2017	T		REALISTIC		
12	Emma Matthews	Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour	2017		C			SYMBOLIC
13	Diana Damrau	Metropolitan Opera	2018	T		REALISTIC		
14	Julia Novikova	Volksteater Rostock	2019		C			SYMBOLIC
15	Pretty Yende	Opéra de Paris	2019		C	REALISTIC		
16	Lisette Oropesa	Teatro Real Madrid	2020		C		FUSION	
17	Aida Garifullina	Opera de Monte-Carlo	2023	T		REALISTIC		

(T-traditional vs C-contemporary)

Fig. 1. Listing of Traviata productions being analysed

4.2. Scene analysis

These elements were not analysed throughout the whole opera, but only through Scene 5 in Act 1. That scene is the one in which Violetta Valéry expresses her inner conflicts between the desire for love and/or the need for independence. The reason this scene was selected for analysis stems from the results of a previous study. Interview respondents highlighted this scene as the pivotal moment where the director's approach became most apparent. They described it as a turning point where they understood the context in which Violetta's character would be portrayed. The elements present on stage subtly suggested how their opinions and critiques should be directed. While it cannot be said that the audience was necessarily led to adopt a specific thinking pattern, in productions such as Robert Carsen's, the sheer brutality of the scene unequivocally influenced the initial impressions upon which audience members continued to build their perception of Violetta's character.

The entire scene is divided into several key points based on the interpretation of the libretto. Each of these points carries a specific emotional state dictated by the musical and textual aspects of the work. The manner in which these points are further developed depends on the director and the performers themselves.

The analysed points are as follows, with sections of the text highlighted in different colours, respectively:

SCENE 5:	
1	<p>VIOLETTA (<i>alone</i>) How strange! How strange! His words are burned upon my heart! Would a real love be a tragedy for me? What decision should I make? No man has ever made me fall in love. This is a joy that I have never known before - loving, being loved! And can I turn his offer down, for the nonsense of my present life?</p>
2	<p>Ah, perhaps he is the one whom my lonely soul, loved to imagine in secret! Though I never knew it, he came here while I lay sick, awakening a new fever, the fever of love,</p>
3	<p>of love which is the very breath of the universe itself - Mysterious and noble, both the pain and the ecstasy of the heart.</p>
4	<p>I'm being so foolish! This is crazy! A poor woman, alone, lost in this crowded desert also known as Paris.</p>
5	<p>What can I hope for? What should I do? Revel in the whirlpool of earthly pleasures. Revel in joy! Ahh!</p> <p>Forever free, I must pass madly from joy to joy. My life's course shall be forever in the paths of pleasure. Whether it be dawn or dusk, I must always live. Ah! Freely in the world's freest places, Always seeking newer joys!</p>
6	<p>(<i>She thinks of Alfredo.</i>)</p> <p>VIOLETTA Oh! My love.</p>
7	<p>This is crazy! From joy to joy, forever free, I must pass madly from joy to joy. My life's course shall be forever in the paths of pleasure. Whether it be dawn or dusk, I must always live. Ah! Freely in the world's freest places, Always seeking newer joys! <i>etc.</i></p>

Fig. 2. Libretto pivotal points for atmospheric changes

5. RESULTS

The analysis of color palettes across various productions of Verdi's *La Traviata* reveals two dominant tendencies: warm and opulent tones or neutral and minimalist solutions, reflecting varied directorial visions and sociocultural contexts. Warm palettes—deep reds, golds, purples, and blues—are prominent in traditional venues like Teatro Giuseppe Verdi (2002), Teatro Colón (2017), and Opera de Monte-Carlo (2023). These tones evoke grandeur and align with historical interpretations, emphasizing the opera's emotional intensity. Neutral palettes, with whites, creams, grays, and pastels, dominate minimalist and modern reinterpretations, such as Aix-en-Provence (2011) and Teatro Real Madrid (2020). These choices highlight psychological depth, focusing on the narrative's subtleties. Productions like Teatro La Fenice (2001) and The Royal Opera in London (2015) balance elegance and tradition through soft tones, while venues such as Salzburger Festspiele (2005) and Volksteater Rostock (2019) adopt experimental approaches with stark contrasts or cool tones. Others, like Glyndebourne Opera House (2014) and Her Majesty's Theatre (2014), use vibrant colors or vintage glamour to enhance visual storytelling. The interplay between warm and neutral palettes reflects a balance of tradition and innovation. Warm tones immerse audiences in historical richness, while neutral tones invite introspection and focus. This diversity underscores *La Traviata*'s adaptability to varied artistic interpretations and cultural contexts. The analysis of use of lighting and spatial elements like backdrops or set props will be given in the following tables (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4):

PIVOTAL POINTS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
DÉCOR AND PROPS							
Teatro Giuseppe Verdi (Busseto)	props- pillows, backdrop: living room furniture (blue and golden)						
Teatro La Fenice	props-self portrait, elements: living room furniture, main acting place is her bed			props: banknotes and jewelry	props: selfportrait	props: money, performance is on the bed	
Salzburger Festspiele	elements: big ticking clock, red sofa (omnipresent)			props: glass with a bottle of champagne	props:white Camellia flower	x	
Opéra Royal de Wallonie	elements: round buffet tables, dolls, food and drinks			props: bottle of champagne	x	props: ceramic doll in red dress	
Teatr Wielki	elements: stage platforms, staircase, box units						
Aix-en-Provence	props: glass	elements: black chairs, bar			props: bottle	x	
Her Majesty's Theatre	elements: luxurious furniture, upholstered red chaise longue						
Glyndebourne Opera House	elements: two types of chairs- metal side chairs and softer armchairs						
The Royal Opera London	props: glass of champagne, elements: luxurious gold statues and ottomans					props: veil	
Clonter Opera Theatre	backdrop: gold Klimteasque mural motifs, funky furniture, alchocol bottles						
Teatro Colón	elements: warm and golden draperies, luxurious and ornate furniture						
Handa Opera	elements: crystal chandelier		props: glass	x	x	x	
Metropolitan Opera	elements: luxurious furniture, props: pillow		elements: luxurious gold end green living room furniture				
Volksteater Rostock	elements: red projection screen in the backdrop				props: small bottle	elements: salon furniture	
Opéra de Paris	elements: billboard		elements: public space, bicycle	elements: street food	elements: office		
Teatro Real Madrid	elements: modern minimal furniture, white Camellia flower						
Opera de Monte-Carlo	elements: line of red accent chairs, brick wall, mirror						

Fig. 3. Systematisation of atmospheric generators: Listing of used decor and set props

6. DISCUSSION

Based on these elements and the analysis of data presented in Figures 3 and 4, certain patterns in the use of atmospheric generators can be identified. These patterns demonstrate how the careful integration of scenographic elements, from lighting to props, shapes the audience's perception of Violetta.

All of these stage elements, directly suggest specific aspects of her character that are crucial to each production and they serve as narrative tools, subtly highlighting the emotional and psychological dimensions of her persona.

PIVOTAL POINTS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
LIGHTING (SL- spotlight, TL- total light, BL-backlight)							
Teatro Giuseppe Verdi (Busseto)	SL cold	TL cold		SL warm + BL cold		PL warm	SL + BL cold, then both warm
Teatro La Fenice	SL cold + backdrop point lights warm tones	SL cold + backdrop point lights cold tones	SL warm + backdrop point lights warm tones	TL warm			TL cold, + SL cold additional
Salzburger Festspiele	TL cold			TL warm	TL cold		
Opéra Royal de Wallonie	SL neutral, BL warm tones			SL warm		SL cold	
Teatr Wielki	SL cold	SL neutral	SL cold	SL cold, TL cold		SL warm	TL neutral, SL neutral
Aix-en-Provence	TL warm		SL warm			TL neutral, then SL cold	
Her Majesty's Theatre	TL warm						
Glyndebourne Opera House	TL neutral	SL warm	SL cold	//	TL cold		
The Royal Opera London	//				SL cold	SL warm	
Clonter Opera Theatre	TL neutral					TL warm	TL cold
Teatro Colón	//			TL warm		+ cold backlight	+SL cold
Handa Opera	//			TL neutral, SL warm		SL cold	TL cold+ chandelier
Metropolitan Opera	TL neutral warm						
Volksteater Rostock	SL cold	SL cold, BL warm		TL warm			SL warm
Opéra de Paris	BL warm	SL warm	TL cold, SL warm		TL cold		
Teatro Real Madrid	SL cold						
Opera de Monte-Carlo	SL warm	TL neutral	SL warm	BL warm, SL warm			TL warm

Fig. 4. Systematisation of atmospheric generators: Lighting

Lighting, as one of the dominant elements, further emphasizes and directs the audience’s thought process, creating focal points that guide their interpretation of key moments in the narrative. The findings indicate that lighting is often employed as a key element to guide the audience’s attention and highlight the emotional nuances of the character. In some productions, a focused spotlight on Violetta emphasizes her emotional vulnerability and internal struggles, while in others, total lighting contributes to a more lavish ambience, allowing the audience to perceive Violetta within a broader social context, amplifying the dichotomy between her public and private personas.

The colour palette used in various productions reveals notable differences in the atmosphere. Cool tones are frequently associated with detachment and isolation, warm tones with intimacy and emotional accessibility, and neutral tones serve as a balance, enabling smooth transitions between different emotional phases of Violetta’s journey. These choices reflect distinct interpretative approaches to her character, shaping the audience’s perception of her persona and emotional state.

By reinforcing emotional nuances and narrative depth, these atmospheric generators ensure that her character is perceived through a multilayered lens, enhancing the dramaturgical impact, Violetta’s portrayal, and the overall audience experience. This interplay between visual and emotional cues underscores the transformative potential of theatrical staging in conveying complex character dynamics and societal critiques.

7. CONCLUSION

The findings confirm the existence of certain patterns that directly connect our perception and guide us toward questioning societal norms. While these elements are evident, their role is not immediately discernible. Through affective atmospheres, a subtle influence on the audience is achieved, and with the use of these elements as a narrative apparatus, the story is conveyed clearly through space. This interplay also reinforces the findings from interviews conducted in the previous study, demonstrating that when a directorial concept is clearly articulated—relying heavily on the use of these atmospheric generators—the interpretation and perception of the character in a specific light, with a specific message, becomes unequivocal.

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