

Influenced to the Last Breath. *La Traviata*, a (Brief) Survey.

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It's an irksome truth. That we will, indeed, *must* die. Of all the arts, opera hinges most on death and suffering as narrative device and offers audiences an emotional proxy: suffering animated through singing, allowing viewers to empathize with, and voyeuristically process, their mortality. In *The Body in Pain*, [Elaine Scarry writes](#) that pain “has no voice.” Pain—and death—eschews language she writes. But, she adds, “When it finds a voice, it begins to tell a story.”

Hanging over Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* (1853)—the [most produced opera](#) in the world—from first note to last is the specter of phthisic death, a regular 19th-century literary theme. Based on *La Dame aux Camélias* (1852) by Alexandre Dumas fils, in turn, inspired by Dumas' love affair with [courtesan Marie Duplessis](#), *La Traviata* (The Fallen Woman) tells of Violetta, a Parisian courtesan recovering from tuberculosis who falls in love with Alfredo. After a few blissful months in the countryside, Alfredo's father arrives, imploring Violetta to abandon Alfredo for the family's reputation. Devasted—dying—Violetta acquiesces, reuniting with Alfredo briefly before succumbing to her illness.

Simon Stone's 2024 [Wiener Staatsoper](#) *La Traviata* draws Violetta as a social media selfie-snapping influencer with rizz. Hapless and hopelessly addicted to WhatsApp and [glurge](#), she channels [Anaïs Nin's](#) Hallmark-esque, “We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are.” Vocally, [Lisette Oropesa's shape-shifting soprano](#) is, at times, dark, suddenly shimmery, and occasionally piercing, in a good way.

Stone frames *Traviata* as a Verdian critique of superficiality, lionizing Violetta's quest for freedom, her tuberculosis positioned as a coded salacious byline: a loose woman objectified by louche men. The tragedy, now, the untimely death of a winsome disco dancer and not, as is usually the case, that of the whore with a heart of gold from a hypersexualized disease.

By comparison, the 1958 [Callas Lisbon *Traviata*](#) offers a more traditional interpretation. Once deemed the [holy grail of Callas performances](#), the Lisbon *Traviata* remained elusive—[its very existence questioned](#)—until EMI finally issued it in 1980.

Callas, always better in front of an audience, was near the end of her prime. Her reading, skating close to the edges of hedonism, presents a feral character and impresses because of her vocal idiosyncrasies, not despite it. Her Act I, “Ah fors’ e lui; Sempre libera,” represents a pivotal bravura moment, introducing the central theme of the broken woman allowing herself to love. Callas is deliberate, yet tentative. Under love's influence more than “influencer” per se, compared with the 2024 Viennese iteration. Callas doesn't sing Violetta; she *is* Violetta.

Susan Sontag writes in [“Illness as Metaphor”](#) that, like all successful metaphors, tuberculosis supplied contradictory applications. “It was both a way of describing sensuality and promoting the claims of passion and a way of describing repression ... and a suffusion of higher feelings.”

There is much to be said for the 1991 New York City Opera [Nicholas Muni production](#) that saw Violetta die of AIDS. Viewed historically, Violetta, the sexualized infected woman, parallels early-period AIDS stigma as a disease rooted in sexual indulgence, while HIV visuals share the bleakness of *La Traviata's* somber final act reunion and the ‘fallen’ woman's abandoned death. It's easy to see the connection. Mid-1800s medical texts suggested tuberculosis was linked to sex and questionable morality.

Sontag observes that positioning AIDS culturally as a “gay problem” set up a systemic illness metaphor that burdened a community already traumatized with existential guilt and blame: “Nothing is more punitive than to give a disease a meaning . . . invariably a moralistic one,” she writes.

It shaped gay culture for at least two generations. As a community, we are still processing the trauma. And few of us ever really talk about it. But then, the stuff of nightmares has always shaped gay culture—AIDS, loneliness, being “the problem,” being unacceptable—and many continue to deal with the fallout.

“It’s such a lonely life,” my mother once said, sincerely.

“That’s why we invented camp. And opera,” I said. “To cope.”

Dr. Ronald Caltabiano, former [Dean of Chicago’s DePaul University School](#) of Music, feels that Callas, the embodiment of wrath wrapped in beauty, transforms opera camp into realness. “Callas’ Violetta gains strength by letting go,” he says. “That *maybe* this thing with Alfredo will work. It’s Violetta’s party, and sure, she’s coughing up blood, but for now, she’s just fine.”

Like most of us, Violetta has difficulty dealing with mortality. Unlike most, she chooses not to suppress her uncertainty; instead, pursuing a last hurrah: a final shot at love and, possibly, redemption.

When she hits “Sempre libera,” a homogenized Callas/Violetta embodies her intent to remain “always free.” The Lisbon is a flagrantly liberated recording, and Callas caps the cabaletta with an electrifying, if strident, E-flat.

By comparison, [Natalie Dessay’s 2011 Aix-en-Provence *Traviata*](#) chooses the gaieties of singledom, her liberty residing in relentless pursuit of joy. Until Alfredo screws it up. Dessay’s

descending quavers and scale passages are limpid, showcasing her remarkable ability to flit effortlessly between them.

Where Callas [exemplifies the “tipo Traviata,”](#) an Italian code phrase for tubercular forbidden sexuality, Dessay inhabits the visceral phthisic conundrum of febrile intensity blended with spiritualized atrophy. Dessay inhales audibly—a taboo for a singer—her gasp telegraphing the gravity of her condition while indicating surprise at this, her second chance. Her last chance.

Rushing in, Alfredo declares his love for Violetta to be both a cross and delight (“croce e delizia”), much like the disease that perturbs yet allures him, delivered on what scholars term a [“broken consumptive melody.”](#) Violetta considers Alfredo’s ardor and launches “Follie! Gioir!” the coloratura manifesting her “madness” and “joy” at this new fever taking over (“nuova febbre accese.”)

It’s risky, this love thing... but maybe...this time. All she has is hope. Dessay’s Violetta knows. Callas too. Pain—fame—nothing lasts. Nor joy, really. But tell *that* to an influencer.

References:

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