

Review: La Bohème in District Six

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This year's Suidoosterfees (South Easter Festival) remembers the District 6 evictions that started 50 years ago. Africa Arts chose Puccini's *La Bohème* to illustrate the artistic and warmhearted spirit that existed in this vibrant area where creative people of various races and creeds could mingle and share ideas and laughs.

This production doesn't force the District 6 metaphor, and moves the action to the present. One sees life in the aftermath of the demolitions and eventual end of Apartheid – races once again mix freely, creatives flock to the cheap rents of the surrounding area, but the bulldozers are back to clear ground for new development as gentrification creeps in. One hydraulic digger is visible in the background of the set, and the bucket of another serves as a fireplace inside the apartment of the bohemian quartet of friends.

The libretto remains unchanged, but the surtitles have been treated with a liberal dose of artistic license to give it local flavour. The opera has been shortened to a single act of 90 minutes by opera veteran Angelo Gobbato, and thankfully the cuts don't harm the story or the musical integrity, save for a few missing details.

I had some reservations about opera in this space. Unlike the [Artscape Opera House](#), the acoustics in the [Artscape Theatre](#) are not great for classical music, and the previous operas I've seen here used amplification, which creates an artificial sound at odds with the essence of what

makes opera singing special. I was delighted at the lack of microphones, and the voices were mostly big enough to come across strongly. The orchestra was reduced to a handful of players to fit both the budget and the postage stamp-sized pit. They sounded rather thin at times, but with the music at full force, voices and instruments were in perfect balance. Maestro Alexander Fokkens led his band of musicians expertly, giving the singers the support they needed, while staying true to the spirit of Puccini's score.

The opera opens with Owen Metsileng as the artist Marcello and Given Nkosi as the poet Rodolfo lamenting their creative block, and complaining about the cold. Rodolfo offers to burn a rejected play for heat. Philosopher Colline (Kabelo Lebyane) and Schaunard (Njabulo Sifiso Mthimkhulu) join their friends, and Schaunard offers to treat them to a celebration at Café Momus with his pay. The usual appearance of landlord Benoit is cut. After some jesting and superb ensemble singing, three of the quartet set off, leaving Rodolfo to finish writing an article before joining them.

Mimi (Amanda Osorio), a neighbour with a bad cough, knocks on the door to ask for a match for her candle. A flirtation ensues, and to extend the encounter, both pretend that the wind has blown out their candles as they look for Mimi's apartment keys. Rodolfo finds her cold hand in the dark, and sings the first showpiece, "Che gelida manina". A single bum note did not detract from Nkosi's otherwise stellar performance. Osorio's equally strong voice matched him well in their duet.

The surtitles announced the change of scene to Café Momus, somewhere in Woodstock. This is not the classy Parisian street café, but rather a rundown dive bar with overpriced drinks and poor service – the kind of place where everyone goes to be seen, but no one would admit to not liking. The friends are introduced to Mimi. Shortly Musetta, Marcello's ex girlfriend, shows up with her elderly and affluent lover Alcindoro, fresh from a shopping spree. Musetta tries to make Marcello jealous, while he pretends to take no notice. Meanwhile Angelo Gobbato's Alcindoro tries simultaneously to calm her and order from the hilariously disinterested hipster waiter with the terrible top knot hairstyle. Gobbato's comic playing was understated and funny, reminding me of Bob Newhart, although his voice was underpowered. Similarly, Lynelle Kenned's tarty Musetta struggled to penetrate the auditorium's hostile acoustics. The usual street parade scene here is jettisoned, and isn't missed at all. As Alcindoro is sent on a wild goose chase to replace an uncomfortable boot, the feuding lovers are reunited, and the troupe leaves the extravagant bill for the older man to settle.

Where the interval would normally have been, the action fast forwards a bit, with everyone still wearing the same clothes. Rodolfo confesses to Marcello that he is leaving Mimi because his drafty room is making her illness worse, but postpones the parting until the spring. Marcello and Musetta have a passionate fight, and they separate.

The next scene suffers a bit from narrative cuts. Artist and poet are pining for their lovers. Friends join them for another round of shenanigans. Musetta interrupts them, telling them that Mimi is gravely ill, and needs help getting up the stairs. They lay her down on the couch and make her comfortable, and everyone offers to sell possessions to pay for a doctor. Everyone exits, leaving Mimi and Rodolfo to sing their final duet. Confusingly, the returning friends outside realise Mimi has expired before Rodolfo does, despite him being right beside her. Perhaps the staging here needs refinement. Regardless, Tara Notcutt has done a sterling job of directing her first full opera production.

In the absence of a programme with full credits, a bit of digging revealed that the disinterested waiter, Stefan Benadé, designed the production. His sets are basic but effective, and clever use of lighting and stage machinery helps to create the illusion of different locations. Confetti rains down from above frequently, mostly to signify snow or rain, but it becomes a bit much after a while.

I didn't think I would enjoy this opera as much as I did. I entered the theatre with very low expectations due to my past disappointments, and I was blown away. This smaller scale production put some larger ones to shame. It's heartwarming to see a small and passionate team produce a quality show in what is often an impractically expensive art form.

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La Boheme in District Six ran as part of Suidoosterfees 2016 at the Kyknet Teater (Artscape Theatre) 28 April to 1 May 2016.