

# Violetta Undone

Getting closer to opera by not making opera

Dr Daniel Somerville

University of Worcester

# Opera for Drama Students

- Anecdotally I find that drama students, who I have encountered as both a student and a lecturer, tend not to think of opera as part of the landscape of performance.
- There are, it seems, several engrained prejudices to do with inaccessibility and elitism - and just that it is plain 'old fashioned' - that actively put drama students off from going to the opera.

# Why the prejudice?

- Peter Brook (1968) characterises opera as 'Deadly Theatre'
- Barba & Savarese (2005) make no mention of European opera in their exploration of intercultural practice, but do include Asian music theatre forms
- Schechner (2002) also neglects to include European opera in his wide ranging introduction to performance

# Opera in Academia

- Opera is mostly taught in music schools
- Opera is most frequently the subject of musicological analysis
- There is a degree of dramatic analysis and more recently research that applies analysis from Performance Studies has begun to enter into Opera Studies
- My PhD research concerned the corporeal aspects of opera – what it is to move ‘operatically’
- My practice with students looks at how opera theory can be applied to drama and performance

# Opera for Drama Students

- Opera is a dramatic form that does several of the things that contemporary theatre aims to do and much of the theory surrounding opera can be used as a model for contemporary performance.
- Structural issues, artificiality, *gesamtkunstwerk*, manipulation of time, multi-media, intertextuality.

# Projects at Worcester

- Devising Performance, 2<sup>nd</sup> year module, 2014 students created performances in small groups taking inspiration from Britten's *Peter Grimes*
- Directed Public Performance, 2<sup>nd</sup> year module 2015, students adapted Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* into *The Gilded Remains*.
- Devising and Adaptation, 2<sup>nd</sup> year module, 2016, students adapted Verdi's *La traviata* into *Violetta Undone*.

# The Gilded Remains



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# The Gilded Remains



# Devising and Adaptation

2<sup>nd</sup> year module at University of Worcester

Students are given a stimulus in the form of an exiting 'text' and then led through a process for devising an adaptation of the work.

In 2016 the stimulus was Verdi's *La traviata*

# The Process

Students saw the Royal Opera production by Richard Ayre via live stream at the Odeon Worcester.

Using Moisés Kaufman's 'moments' work they created scenes in small groups.

These are then arranged and rearranged and developed throughout the process.

# Wider Research

Dumas, A. (1848) *La Dame aux Camélias*

Clément, C. (1988) *Opera: the undoing of women*

Hutcheon, L. & M. (1996) *Opera Desire Disease  
Death*

Wagner, R. (1849) 'The Artwork of the Future'

# Ideas derived from wider research

- Violetta as a celebrity – famous for being famous
- Violetta's downfall as a result of the male dominated world in which she existed rather than as a result of a character flaw
- Disease as metaphor for oppression and misunderstanding
- *Gesamtkunstwerk* as collaboration; artists working together, a technique derived from Wagner, and all the elements of performance considered together. The approach Kaufman describes as 'horizontal theatre'.

# Artist of the Future

“Who then will be the artist of the future?

Without doubt the poet.

But who will be the poet?

Indisputably the performer.

But again: who will be the performer?

Necessarily the community of all artists.”

(Wagner: 1849, p. 78)

Collaborative and devised theatre.

# What they created

- An immersive, found space performance (accessible, interesting for contemporary audiences to explore a story and have some agency)
- Elements of movement, video, spoken text, audience involvement (*Gesamtkunstwerk*)
- Multiple Violettas (from idea that there are three voices needed for Violetta)
- Period and contemporary were mixed (relevance to contemporary audiences)

# The mediated experience

Immersive theatre was considered by students to counter the sense of distance and separation they felt they had with opera, and especially because their encounter with it was live but had been mediated through cinema.

The idea of involving the audience and surrounding them with the production was a response to this.



# The mediated experience

However, as the screening had formed such an influential part of their experience of the work they wanted this to be reflected through the use of video projections for some of the scenes.

Some action that appears in the videos was then duplicated live in the performance, either adjacent to, or in front of, the video projection.

# Music choices

- At the beginning of the process there was not much willingness to include actual music from the opera.
- Some rock and hip-hop were included, plus the tango from the film *Moulin Rouge*.
- One live song was created.
- Gradually as the process developed, students began experimenting with music from the opera and some scenes included recordings of the music.

# Violetta Undone



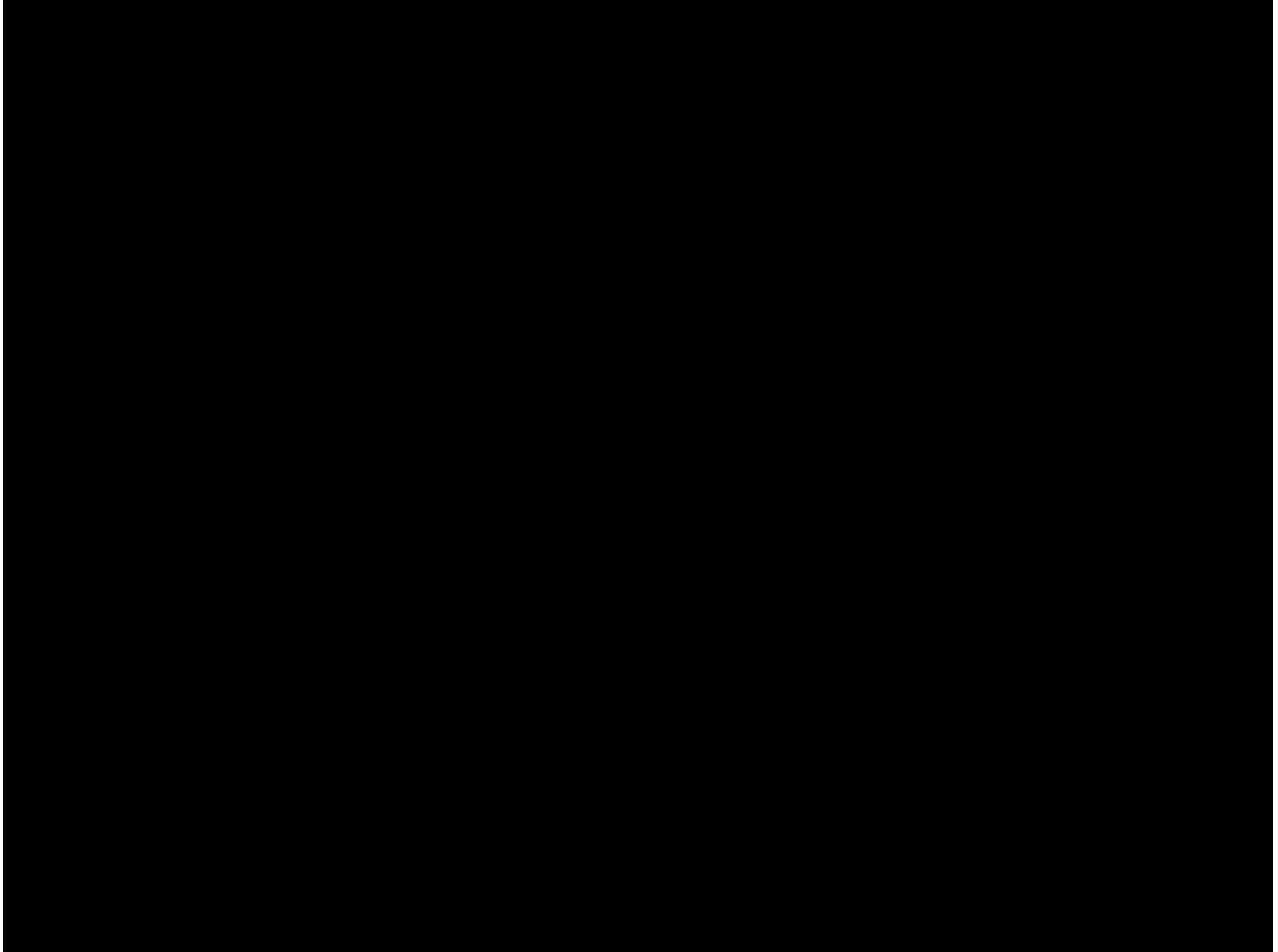
# Violetta Undone



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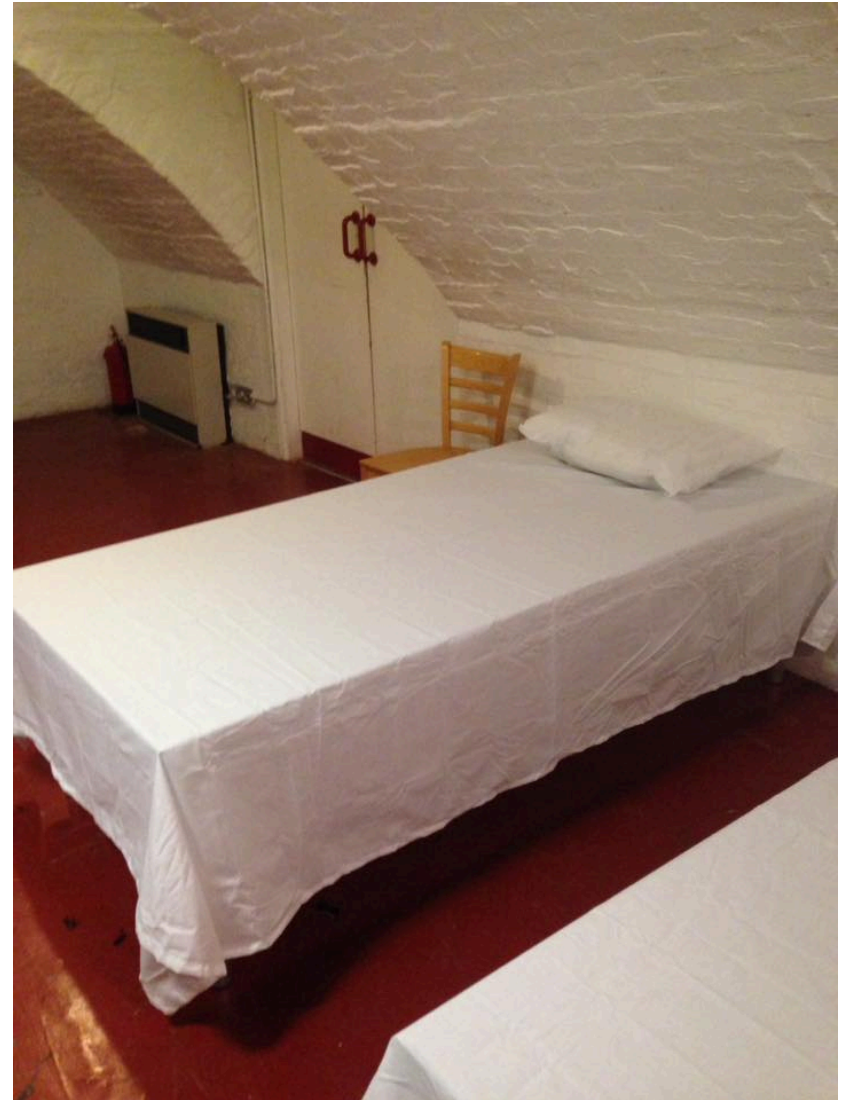


# Video 1



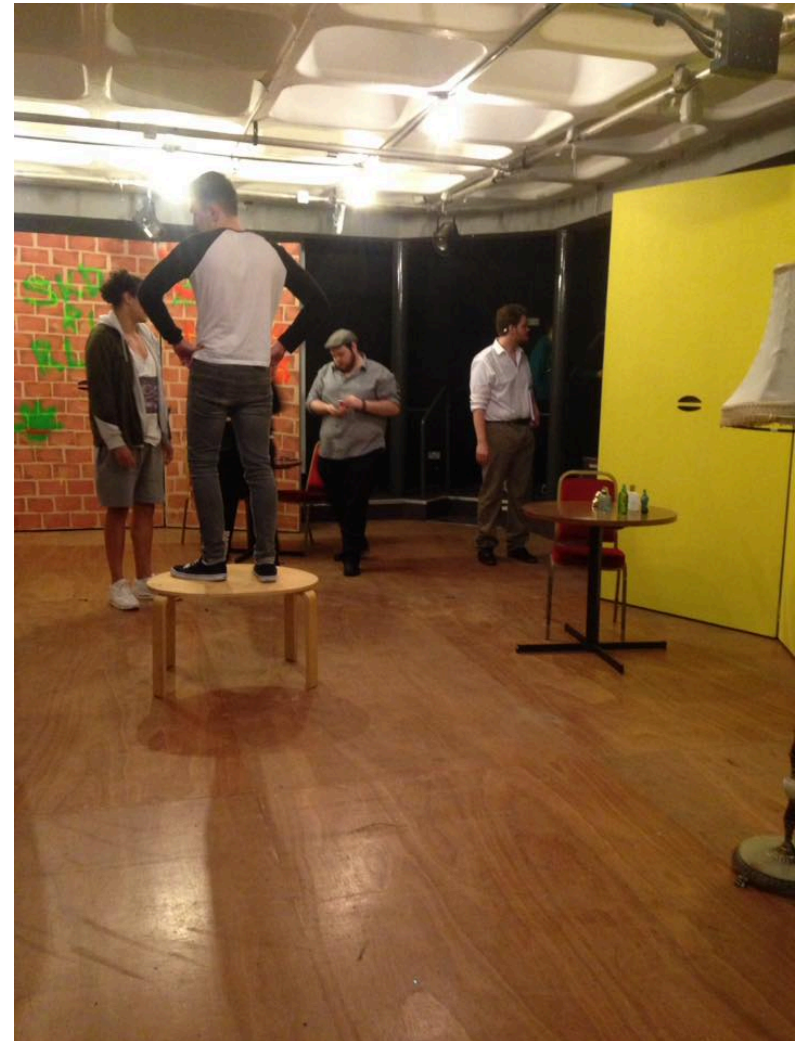
# Violetta Undone

- Audience led inside
- First video
- Alfredo writing letters
- **Hospital scene**
- Auction
- Violetta with Annina
- Auction of women
- Selling the child



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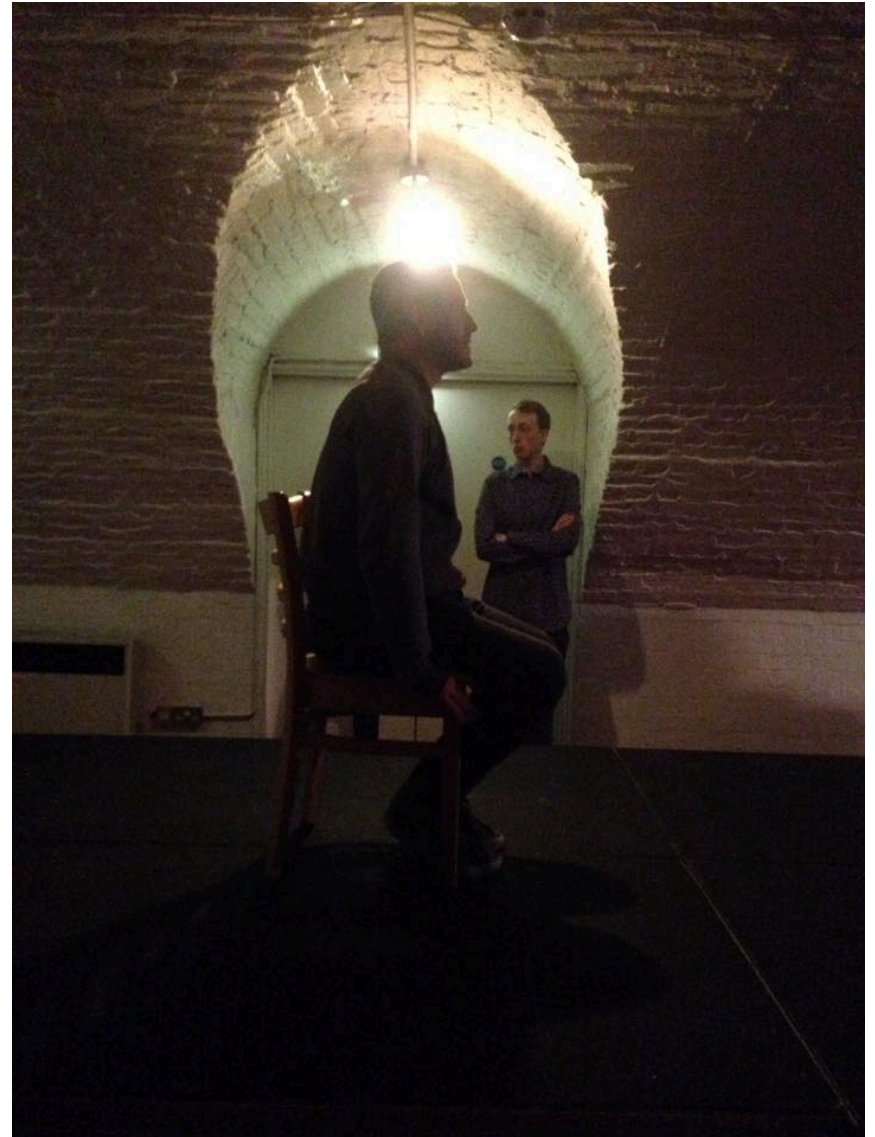
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- **Selling the child**



# Violetta Undone

- **Love duet**
- Moving to the country
- Flora & Baron scenes
- Germont scene
- Locker room
- Casino
- Second video
- Finale



# Violetta Undone



# Violetta Undone



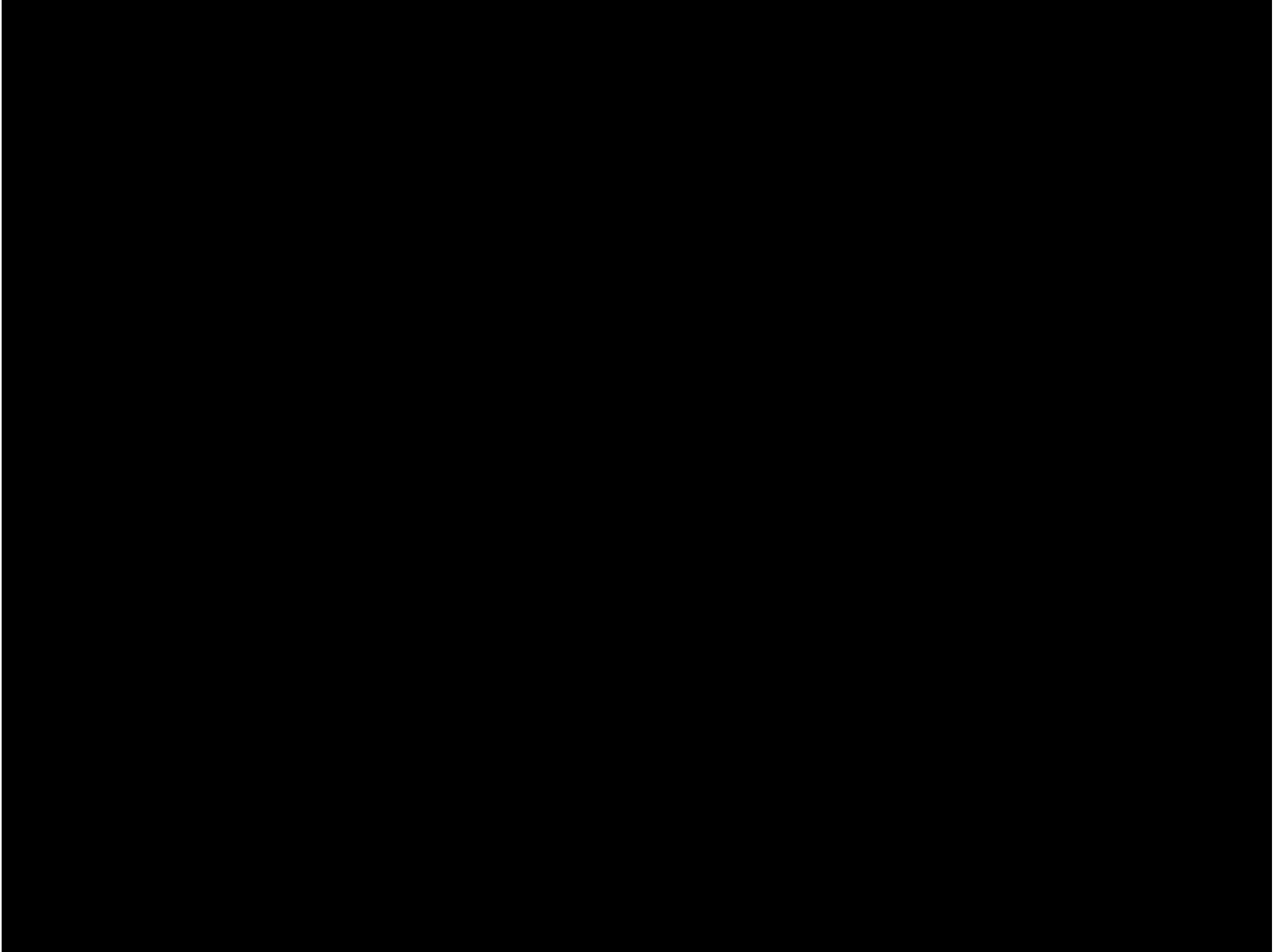
# Violetta Undone



# Violetta Undone



# Video 2





# Student feedback for Violetta Undone

“I am not an operatic person and never have been, from the start of the module I felt I was put in an uncomfortable position working on something I don't find inspirational. However, over time I dove deep into this immersive theatre and found my own enjoyment and inspiration. After studying such a popular opera (*La traviata*) I believe I can now find an exciting side which relates to me.”

# Student feedback for Violetta Undone

“My initial reaction to working on an opera was quite a worried one, as I had no previous experience with one. However, I feel that myself and the class were up for a challenge... my knowledge of opera performance has come a lot further, in comparison to when we started.”

# Student feedback for Violetta Undone

“When first finding out about us performing an opera I really wasn’t engaged with the idea but while working on the first ‘moment’ it really changed my opinion of the piece and I have learnt to never turn something away before trying it first.”

# Student feedback for Violetta Undone

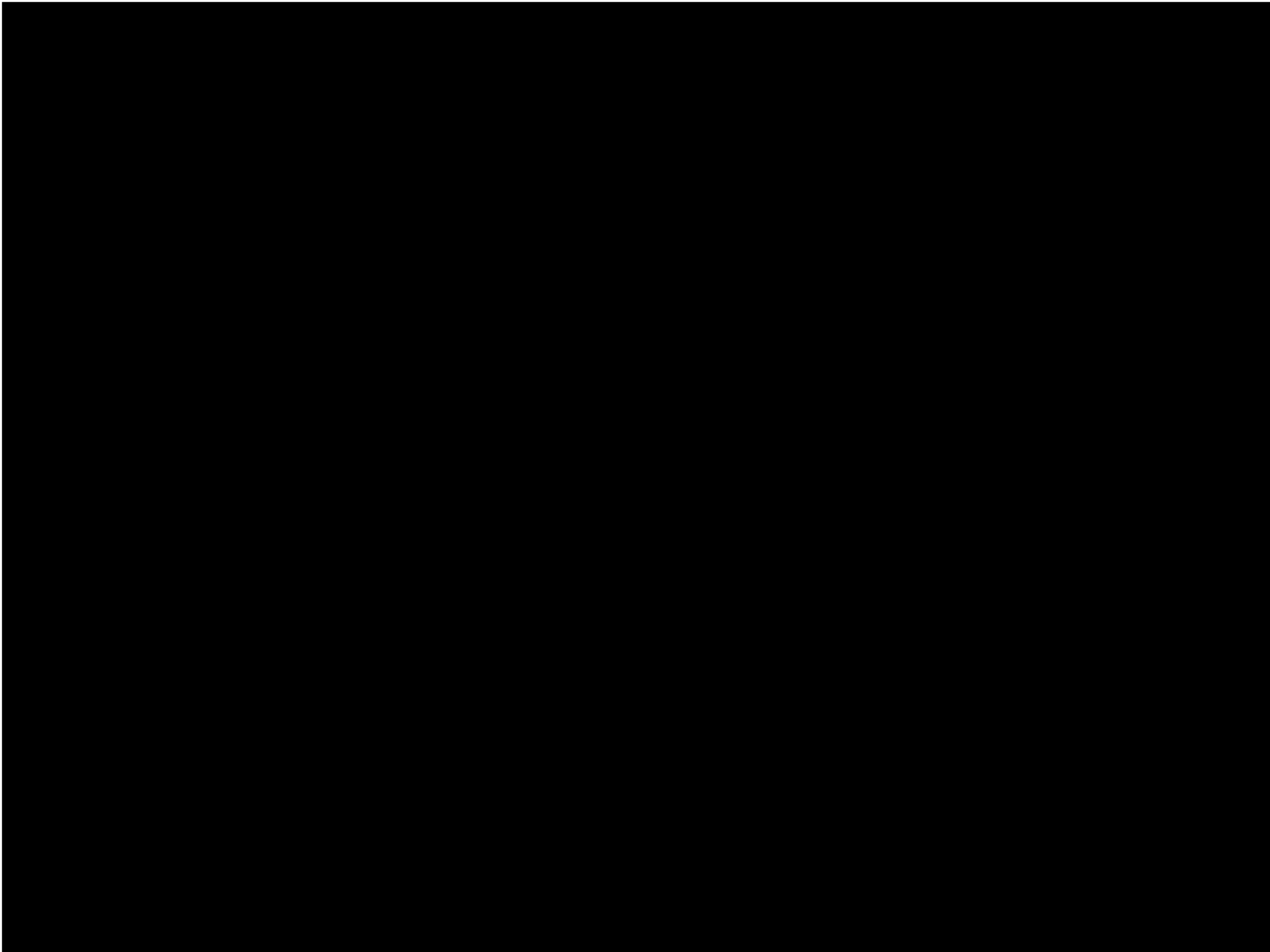
“We turned an opera into an immersive piece of theatre. We took an opera, which may not be appealing to many people because opera is seen as something high class and made it relatable to an audience who may not understand much about theatre.”

# Student feedback for Violetta Undone

“I loved watching the Royal Opera House production. I felt moved in a way I hadn’t been able to describe – the music was communicating without words. I did not understand what Alfredo and Violetta were saying during ‘Parigi, o care’ but from the way they held each other and sang, it was as if their voices were dancing together, and it was beautiful. But it sang so clearly of pain, or loss, it was a bittersweet beauty.”

# The Installation





# To Consider

What lessons might be learned about educating drama students about opera?

How might undoing opera in a collaborative way inform dramaturgical explorations of operas?



# Opera for Drama Students

This exploration of the opera:

- Drew students closer to the characters and their motivations
- Gave relevancy to the story (in the form of the original opera) for a contemporary audience
- Illustrated clearly the role of music in completing the emotional world of the characters

# Collective Dramaturgy

Acts as a kind of focus group – particularly if our interest is to attract young audiences.

Their focus was initially on the more salacious aspects of the tale, but also on referencing a real woman who resonated with them as a celebrity, ‘a 19<sup>th</sup> century Kim Kardashian’.

Their attention went to the degree to which gossip played a part in Violetta’s downfall.

# Collective Dramaturgy

They also sought to resolve or emphasise off-stage action to make the plot comprehensible:

- We see Violetta as a child
- Germont hears his peers talking about Alfredo
- The Baron overhears people talking about how Alfredo and Violetta have split up
- Flora is not Violetta's friend, but rather a 'mean girl' who drops her at the earliest opportunity

# Reference List

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