

# No rush from La Traviata

by Sheena Masson

Opera can be a sensual experience. It was for me when I heard the Canadian Opera Company's *La Bohème* here two years ago. Puccini's score demanded a full range from both soprano and tenor. At certain moments their voices advanced like waves and I could actually feel rushes up my arms. Such occasions left me breathless.

On Wednesday night the Company performed *La Traviata* and I expected to repeat this experience. I was not, however, overwhelmed by sensation or anything else for that matter. Verdi's score is less demanding. It lacks any Liztian range of rapid fire notes. Yet when it did demand a slightly higher range from the lead soprano (the character of Violetta), she was often weak. As this opera is primarily a vehicle for this part, the soprano must be versatile. Within a certain range she was impressive, as was the baritone (Violetta's lover's father). The lead tenor, while technically adequate, lacked both feeling and depth. The entire cast, four men and three women, sang together with passion but somehow the rush didn't happen.

These same strengths and weaknesses were apparent in the acting. Acting in opera need not be realistic; indeed it is even expected to be overly dramatic. I was once told that in opera when a man is stabbed, instead of bleeding, he sings. This gives you the general impression. While Violetta's voice had its weak moments, her acting was enchanting. Violetta, the lady in Dumas' *La Dame Aux Camélias*, is a courtesan who allows herself to fall in love. Her lover's father asks her to renounce his son so that his daughter can make a good marriage. She agrees but, heartbroken, becomes increasingly ill from what appears to be consumption. Her lover, hearing of her sacrifice, returns only to witness her dramatic death. Riki Turofsky, in the role of Violetta, is slender and wore her hair loose, both unusual in opera. This allowed for free dramatic movement which enhanced her superb "vocal acting" and notable beauty.

In contrast, her lover (Michele Strano) did not move freely and tended to use his eyebrows more than his arms. The acting was not demanding except for the part of

Violetta and the cast generally were able to handle their parts with flair.

The set did not help the performance. It was financed by a grant (Imperial Oil) as is the Company itself (Canada Council and the Ontario Council). It consisted of a number of two-dimensional "flats" and curtains covered with Aubrey Beardsley-like drawings of naked women and lots of swirls. The setting was supposed to be France 1911 while Verdi set it in his own time (1840's). While the set was interesting in itself it was too busy and distracting. It was done in white, black and grey and as most of the cast were also dressed in these colours, they tended to get lost. This is not to say that an abstract set cannot make a successful backdrop but I tend to prefer stuffed red couches.

The orchestra provided a better backdrop. The Company has had a permanent orchestra of 23 since 1968. Usually music accompanied voice, carrying and changing the mood of each act. The music was more than just a backdrop, however, as it proved an effective foil for each soloist. Sometimes the soloist would sing unaccompanied and the orchestra would reply or delicately intrude. This rather than vocal virtuosity was the strength of the opera and the enjoyment of the evening.



A scene from the Canadian Opera Touring Company's production of Verdi's *La Traviata*

## O, God!

by Gregory J. Larsen

This Sunday I felt closer to God than I've felt in a long time. This wasn't because I attended a church service; no, it was because I saw a movie.

Who couldn't feel close to God if he were played by George Burns and appeared as George Burns? This movie, of course, is *Oh, God!*

This is another of those enjoyable film productions of this year. The difference is that in this flick Warner Brothers has cleverly and comfortably confronted the subject of God. There aren't any fantastic scenes of "the parting of the water" or "the raising from the dead"; this picture simply presents God in a fashion that is palatable and understandable to all.

George Burns still has the glow of life in him which is well illustrated in his role of God. It's nice to see the old boy speak in sentences and paragraphs for a change, instead of his routine one-liners. Oh yes, he also isn't seen with his usual Havana in hand because, as he says, "tobacco was one of my mistakes."

Of much surprise is John Denver who stars in the convincing role of John Landers, an assistant-manager in a supermarket. Landers happens to be God's choice of "entrepreneur" to the people. Things in the movie happen just as they would in reality given the right circumstances. Landers both benefits and suffers because of his experiences with God but apparently everything is for the eventual best.

This film does have a message. But as far as I can tell just what that message is is up to the individual viewer. After seeing *Oh, God!* I felt a closer, fresher sensation of "je ne sais quoi" than I've felt in a long time. See it!



Virtuoso violinist Philipp Hirshhorn will play an interesting programme of *Hetu*, *Brahms* and *Wagner* when he makes his Maritime debut with the ASO, November 28 and 29 at 8:30, in the *Rebecca Cohn Auditorium*. Tickets on sale at the *Cohn Box Office*—student discounts available.

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