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Review: NZ singer Claire Egan and a London La Traviata

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As a child, one of life's mysteries for me was that people didn't burst out into spontaneous song and dance acts. It happened on the big screen and television with remarkable alacrity but real life just never seemed to correlate with the MGM studios or Covent Garden.

The Merry Opera Company brought that childhood sensation back to me on Saturday night through their small setting production of La [Traviata](#) – how I wish I were a tenor named Al.

La Traviata is one of the world's biggest operas - perhaps the biggest. And New Zealander Claire Egan's voice is suited to the lead role of Violetta in this burlesque setting of The Fallen Woman. The Kiwi soprano brings a lick of fire to Violetta, her lyric coloratura and acting chops garnering a great deal of empathy from an intimate gathering above The Gatehouse, a North London pub.

Churlish I know, but if there is a weakness to Ms Egan's performance, it would lie in balancing the vocal gymnastics required of the role with an English libretto; occasionally it is difficult to make out her diction in this English language version of La Traviata. But this is not just Claire Egan's downfall; at times the entire cast struggled with that balance between enunciation and the score, a translating librettist's nightmare.

Kiwiphiles will be delighted to note the other New Zealanders in the La Traviata cast. Composition student Oliver Brignall obtained his Masters at Canterbury University and is now studying for his Ph.D at Brunel University. He gives a credible performance as showman Gaston. Paloma Bruce, ex-Victoria University, is also a London based singing teacher when not involved in productions.

For many opera lovers, La Traviata means big, lavish sets. The Merry Opera Company make do on a very limited [budget](#). Setting this opera in modern London and the burgeoning burlesque scene adds the x-factor that a big budget could otherwise gloss over.

The scenes set in the La Traviata club have more energy than the apartment scenes, as one would expect from burlesque versus domesticity, but the simple set designs that work for the club look awkward elsewhere. Librettist and stage director Kit Hesketh-Henry was given a big task to bring La Traviata into a more intimate and budget friendly production. London burlesque works very well. Doing something as equally liberating with Violetta and Alfredo's love nest needed some thought but was overlooked – a slick, designer minimalist Canary Wharf apartment, perhaps? Something that really would quickly chew through Violetta's cash supply, surely an important plot point.

La Traviata as performed by the Merry Opera Company has a lot of positives going for it. High levels of energy and talented leads plus a London burlesque angle make the trip to Highgate for this small budget production very worthwhile. Grabbing a glass of wine from the pub beneath the theatre feels like a great way to ease into the evening.

This production is a [great opportunity](#) to reacquaint yourself with – or be introduced to - Verdi's master opera in an intimate atmosphere and with a recession-friendly price. Claire Egan is worth the price of entry alone and the addition of so much young talent in the cast is a welcome bonus.

The Merry Opera Company continue to perform La Traviata at the Gatehouse until Saturday, 3rd March before touring the production through the UK. The cast is on rotation so check which singers are featured before booking if any particular singers are of interest.

Verdict: a solid production well worth the trip to Highgate. See it now.

- Where: Upstairs At The Gatehouse, Highgate Village. N6 4BD. <http://www.upstairsatthegatehouse.com/>
- When: now until 3rd March, 2012.

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Claire Egan in La Traviata. Photo: Merry Opera Company



Robin Bailey and Claire Egan. Photo: Merry Opera Company



Claire Egan and Matthew Quirk. Photo: Merry Opera Company



Claire Egan as Violetta. Photo: Merry Opera Company

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