

BEST LOVED OPERA

La Boheme in District Six

Fiona Chisholm

IT IS 2016 in District Six and four Bohemians sharing run-down lodgings in an old building which survived the forced removals of the inhabitants in 1966, are broke, hungry and cold. There's been load shedding. Yet again...

I'm sitting at the second rehearsal of *La Bohème in District Six* listening as director Tara Notcutt with passion and enthusiasm helps her cast make the leap in time and place from the premiere in 1896 in a Christmas Eve setting in the Latin Quarter of Paris, to Puccini's opera today in District Six.

Not a note has been sung. The cast are reading aloud from their scripts and being urged by Notcutt – revelling in directing her first ever opera after assisting Matthew Wild with dark and scandalous *Salome* – to give every word thought and meaning.

So I feel their joy at the brief warmth from a fire fed with pages from poet Rodolfo's cherished play and understand the problem of Marcello the artist looking out through the big window striving to find something inspirational to paint. All he will see today are weeds....

The sad fact is that 50 years after a community was bulldozed from their homes in the lively space, most of District Six stands empty.

The opera being staged jointly by the *Suidoosterfees* and *Africa Arts* at Artscape Theatre on April 28, 29 and May 1, has been re-imagined by Angelo Gobatto to honour the memory of District Six and its bohemian atmosphere where artists of all races and religions had mixed freely and were united in their opposition to apartheid.

It has been cut from four acts to an accessible 90 minutes for a young modern audience, while retaining the key operatic moments for a cast of seven and a 25-piece ad hoc orchestra conducted by Alex Fokkens.

The leading role of Mimi the consumptive seamstress will be sung by soprano Amanda Osorio who is the producer as well as the founder of *Africa Arts*.

Last year she successfully co-produced Gian Carlo Menotti's dramatic opera *The Medium* at the *Suidoosterfees*.

The four Bohemians are tenor Given Nkosi (Rodolfo), baritone



PLAYFUL: Owen Metsileng and Lynelle Kenned as the lovers Marcello and Musetta in *La Bohème in District Six* at the *Suidoosterfees* on April 28, 29 and May 1 in Artscape's *Kyknet Theatre*.

Picture: NARDUS Engelbrecht

Owen Metsileng (Marcello), bass Kabelo Lebyana (Colline) and baritone Njabulo Sifiso Mthimkhulu (Schaunard).

The award-winning soprano soprano Lynelle Kenned is Musetta and Gobbato makes a guest appearance as Alcindoro, Musetta's rich, doddering sugar daddy.

The romantic plot lends itself to adaptations. Hal Shaper's 1998 *La Bohème Noir* was a success in a Soweto environment – although the English translation produced such quaint translations for arias as *Dear Girl Your hand is frozen* and *I am also called Mimi*.

Notcutt is sharing the challenges of staging an old opera sung in Italian but in a modern environment with Stefan Benade the set and lighting designer from Stellenbosch.

"The trick for us is to keep the balance between the past and the present of District Six," she says.

"The opera was set 120 years ago and District Six was demolished 50 years ago and we are trying to find a space that speaks to the spirit of

District Six rather than the way it looks today."

Meaning don't expect the *Seven Steps of Stone* and more.

Some 1830 emotions are quite a challenge to convey in 2016.

The philosopher Colline enters the Bohemians' freezing flat and describes his "terrible day" trying to pawn books in the street.

Who does that anymore?

Or gets paid handsomely to play the violin to a dying parrot? Thanks to the protracted death of the bird, Schaunard the musician earns enough to come home with fuel for the fire and his mates and also take them out to supper to celebrate Christmas Eve.

But everyone will relate completely with Mimi's first entrance when she knocks at the Bohemians' door carrying her candle in need of a light.

Weren't we all lighting candles in outages this time last year?

Suddenly I'm hungry to hear some of the beautiful Puccini score and pointedly ask Notcutt will the

singing ever start?

As she agrees to jump to Act II, conductor Alex Fokkens leaps into action and gets out his baton and the pianist turns his score to the scene in *Café Momus*.

The rehearsal room resounds with the blend of rich tenor, baritone and bass voices as the Bohemians are joyfully reunited and are introduced to Mimi.

Before long Musetta arrives with Alcindoro and after a bit of play acting on her part as she pretends not to notice her former lover Marcello, she begins singing that wonderful area known as *Musetta's waltz*.

As Kenned's voice soars effortlessly, I can understand why she wins awards.

Wiping away spontaneous tears I decide it is time to go but I leave the best still to come knowing I will get to see the rest of "the world's best loved opera" at the end of the month at Artscape.

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