

Duo behind Scottish Opera's *La bohème* cast aside escapism for gritty reality



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The challenge with *La bohème* is to be simple and sincere." That's director Renaud Doucet, one half of a director/designer duo with André Barbe, thinking aloud about their new production of Puccini's tragic romance for Scottish Opera.

It might sound obvious. But staging *La bohème* does come with challenges. For a start, the opera's tale of doomed love among penniless artists in Parisian garrets is known and cherished the world over.

That makes it a popular closer for Scottish Opera's 2016-17 season, but it also means that many people in the audience will come with their own expectations. "Everyone has an opinion on *Bohème*," Doucet continues. "But there are a lot of preconceived ideas – and, as I said to the singers, let's not mistake tradition for bad habits."

By those particular "bad habits", Doucet is referring to Puccini's music, which he feels has accreted plenty of heartstring-tugging liberties down the decades. Barbe picks up the same theme: "We've been through Puccini's score in detail, bar by bar, with Stuart Stratford [Scottish Opera's Music Director, who conducts]. There's a lot of pulling about that just doesn't exist in the score. If you go back to early recordings – by Toscanini, for example – the pace is much faster, and there's a real rhythm to it all."

So we can maybe expect a leaner, sharper offering in musical terms. But they have a fresh perspective on its subject matter, too. As in their well-received dayglo *Don Pasquale* for Scottish Opera back in 2014, there are some weightier issues being tackled behind what promise to be Barbe's lavish designs.

"People say: 'Oh, *La bohème*, it's such a romantic opera!'" Doucet continues. "But virtually the first thing that happens to Mimì is that she collapses – there's nothing romantic about starving, or being ill."

They go further, picking up on the opera's theme of illness as a metaphor for our own troubled times. "In our personal lives we've witnessed many deaths of family and friends in recent



André Barbe and Renaud Doucet: 'Let's not mistake tradition for bad habits'

years, due to illness," Barbe explains. "And I think there's a general feeling at the moment of the world going mad, and that a lot of people would like to step off and take a breath."

The easy answer, of course, would be to create a *Bohème* that's simply an escapist fantasy. But that, thankfully, seems out of the question. "This is not nostalgia," Doucet states categorically. So what answers – or even consolation – can an opera like *Bohème* provide? "I think what people like about it," explains Barbe, "is its sense of community. There are four men sharing a flat, for example, and

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only one is making money but brings back food for everyone. It's the kind of camaraderie that's missing today."

Another contemporary slant they have planned is for Mimì herself. "We've decided to do a prologue, about five minutes long," explains Barbe. "We've set the whole action in the flea markets of Paris in the 1920s. Mimì travels there from another country, and she's probably already ill. She has one wish – to see the Paris of her dreams, which of course doesn't exist. So she goes to a stall and listens to a recording of *Bohème*, and she's transported into the Paris she wanted to see – the Paris of her

dreams, with its great writers and artists."

And it's in reference to those great artists of 1920s Paris that Doucet and Barbe have big plans for the Scottish Opera chorus. "Every one of them plays a character – Jean Cocteau, Gertrude Stein, Man Ray, Diaghilev, Picasso, many more," explains Doucet. "We took them through all the research as to who their character is, and their relationships with each other – nobody in the audience will necessarily know, but the chorus singers know, and that's what's important."

"There's a sense of community there, too," Barbe continues. "An international community, because all of those people chose Paris as a place to live and create their work – which is what Mimì wants to do as well. And it's important to nourish the sense of community within the chorus and the company, too – to point out the links between them all."

It looks set to be a sumptuous new production, in Doucet and Barbe's trademark style – but also one that has its own angles on contemporary malaise and the crucial importance of community. And rather than offering escape from current concerns, maybe even reminding us of ways to tackle them. ■

Scottish Opera's *La bohème* opens at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, on 9 May, with performances in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Inverness until mid-June. For more details, visit www.scottishopera.org.uk