

Detailed Staging Notes

Please note: the staging details below are an example of how our concept and characterisation choices might be realised. Of course, as with any production, consultation and conversation with the performers and music staff will be a vital part of ensuring a successful dramatic realisation of this project.

There has been an assumption that there are no musical cuts in this production, although some may be made in consultation with performers and music staff. The most likely candidates for cuts are, of course, the cabaletta sections.

Act 1 – Violetta's Party

The space is dominated by over-sized objects. A large mirror leaning on a hardcover book creates a raked walkway on SL. Just visible on the book are the letters spelling the title – *MANON LESCAUT*. US of the mirror and book is an open fan, creating a wall. On SR is another wall, this one made of sheets of musical notation paper. The front page is marked '*Invitation de la valse*'. A statue stands in front of the notation paper wall.

During the prelude, the lighting changes in the space allowing us to focus on individual objects as the room slowly becomes brighter. Almost at the last moment, we see Violetta, who is sitting on the DS edge of the mirror looking at her reflection. She is dressed already in her Act 1 gown.

As the sudden change in the music occurs, Violetta looks up for a moment, hearing guests start to arrive through the gap between the Fan Wall and the Music Wall. She steadies herself, we see her put a smile on her face –putting on her mask for society – then she turns to greet the guests who start flooding in.

The guests (tenor & soprano chorus) enter the space and spend time greeting Violetta on the ground level, as well as admiring the décor of the room, wandering around and talking to one another when not greeting the ladies. Violetta is greeted by the Barone, Grenville and other guests, then makes her way to climb the treads at the US edge of the book to stand on the mirror. In the fermata, the assembled guests give her a round of applause and she accepts their accolade for the beautiful decoration of her home for the party. The rest of the chorus (basses & mezzos) enters the party late in the middle of this applause and they awkwardly join in, which prompts the tenors to sing '*Dell'invito trascorsa è già l'ora...*'. Entering with this second wave of chorus is Flora and the Marchese and, at the rear of the group, Alfredo and Gastone.

From the top of the mirror, Violetta bids them all welcome (her '*amici*' perhaps with a smile and directed towards the stranger Alfredo), as the chorus bow to her and Flora and the Marchese join Violetta on the mirror.

Their exchange '*E goder voi potrete / Lo voglio*' is private, then Violetta steps out to proclaim her next line to the chorus down below. The chorus reply and then split to either side of the room, drinking and talking, allowing Gastone to escort Alfredo to the base of the mirror to be introduced. The marchese's line '*caro Alfredo*' is an unwelcome interruption for Alfredo, and Violetta takes the opportunity to leave Alfredo and go back to the Barone, which prompts Gastone's line '*T'ho detto...*'.

Violetta asks her question '*Pronto è il tutto?*' to a servant loudly enough to get everyone's attention. They all respond and then watch as dinner items are paraded through the space – servants carrying silver trays, pushing serving tables with exotic meats on them – out through the back of the space to US-SR of the Fan Wall, where the dining room is. Each new dish gets a small cheer or an intake of breath; the final offering is a tray of peacock with feathers still attached. There is a smattering of applause again for Violetta as the last tray is taken off, and the chorus turn their backs to watch it go and talk to one another about how beautiful it all looks. Gastone seizes the moment to try again with Violetta and drags Alfredo to the mirror, where Violetta is sharing her excitement at the good reception with Flora, while the Barone and Marchese talk further up the mirror, each keeping a watchful eye on their lady.

Gastone begins his second attempt by offering his hand to Violetta to help her off the mirror and onto the ground floor. Alfredo remains on the floor and waits for Violetta to descend before intruding on their conversation, which prompts Violetta's '*Vero è dunque?*'. Flora, who has followed Violetta down the mirror, now asks Gastone to help her down as well, setting up the romantic interest between them that culminated in Act 3. Seeing their ladies being assisted by other men, the Marchese and Barone move down the mirror to join the others at the base. Violetta takes a champagne glass from the Barone and wields it – this theft creates a further rift between the Barone and Alfredo. Her line '*Sarò l'Ebe che versa*' is public and the chorus responds by charging their glasses and announcing '*Beviamo*'. The Barone is the only one without a glass, which increases his sense of outrage when he is asked by Gastone to propose the toast.

Alfredo's questioning of Violetta '*Vi fia grato*' is as private as he can make it – a test of her goodwill towards him – and it is only Gastone's intervention '*Dunque attenti!*' that prevents Alfredo and Violetta's private moment from going on too long.

The chorus crowd around the mirror, which Alfredo mounts for the toast, while Violetta stays at the bottom of the mirror with the Barone, Marchese, Flora and Grenville. Gastone escorts Alfredo to the centre of the mirror and then retreats back to watch Violetta's reactions. Alfredo's toast is a success and the chorus join him in their repetition of the toast and all are about to drink when suddenly Violetta starts to sing from SR. The chorus are surprised and forced to lower their glasses, lest they commit an unpardonable sin and drink before the hostess has completed the toast.

As the chorus begin their reply to Violetta's toast (*'Ah godiamo la tazza...'*), Violetta makes her way through the crowd to join Alfredo on the mirror. He assists her to climb up onto the mirror and they complete the brindisi together.

A servant enters with a dancing stick and bangs it on the floor to motivate the chorus *'Che è ciò?'* which breaks the spell between Alfredo and Violetta and causes Alfredo to move down off the mirror while Violetta re-assumes the role of hostess. She falls onto the mirror and, when she assures everyone that nothing is wrong, the guests all exit to US-SL of the Fan Wall. The Barone stops and looks at Alfredo on his way out – a clear threat – Alfredo and Gastone pretend to leave the room, but Gastone at the last moment tells Alfredo he should stay and Gastone exits alone while Alfredo quietly climbs the steps at the back of the book and approaches Violetta cautiously.

Violetta looks at herself in the mirror from her prone position *'oh qual pallor'* and then sees Alfredo's reflection – *'voi qui'*. They remain on the mirror for the duet – here the mirror is reflecting their honestly held emotions for one another ... Alfredo has seen through Violetta's mask, he has seen her as she really is and he loves her. They are about to kiss when Gastone returns to the room with Flora, with whom he has clearly been flirting, to check on the progress of Violetta and Alfredo. After his interjection, he and Flora return to the other room.

Violetta gives Alfredo a red flower from her hair; she finds his amorous energy amusing and laughs through her response *'domani'*.

After his *'Addio'*, Alfredo runs back to find Gastone, who has re-entered to watch the scene and spends a brief moment with him telling him what happened, then he runs out of the party as the other guests return from US of the Fan Wall. Violetta remains on the mirror as the guests bid her farewell, lost in her own thoughts. The guests bow to the Barone and the Marchese as they leave, Flora leaves with the Marchese, though she manages to blow a kiss to Gastone as she goes, Gastone leaves alone and the Barone waits until last, when he bows stiffly to Violetta who is still in her own world on the mirror and then he exits.

Violetta's aria is a genuine struggle within herself as she wrestles with the idea of allowing herself to truly love; she saw in Alfredo something she hadn't seen anywhere else – someone who would completely accept her for who she is. But, of course, she has to think about how she will survive in Paris if she risks losing patronage. At first, Alfredo's voice comes from offstage, as if it is a memory but then he is ushered into the space by Gastone who then leaves Alfredo to watch Violetta before his second vocal entrance. She and Alfredo come together on the mirror and it is not until the very last moment that Violetta makes her decision and rushes to kiss him just as the lights come down on the final chord.

Act Two, Scene 1 – The Country House

The set is dominated by a pile of packing cases that have been stacked high along the SR wall, the SL wall is a giant envelope. Rising from mid-SR is a spiral staircase made from suitcases. Leaning against the envelope is a half-covered mirror and in the DS-SL corner is a mantel clock, facing the DS-SL corner.

As the Act starts and the curtain is raised, we see Alfredo coming down the spiral stairs, he carries a book that he has been reading in an upstairs room. Servants are adding boxes to the pile against the SR wall. He looks around for Violetta, then leans against the banister for his aria.

Annina enters from US-SR as if she is going to exit DS-SL when Alfredo catches sight of her. His initial questions are still in the loving mindset of the aria, but everything changes *'che mai sento'*. He sends Annina away DS-SL, she returns with his hat and then he takes his coat from its pre-set position on top of one of the packing boxes US and exits through US-SR.

Violetta enters from DS-SL with several papers. She is keen to not be caught with them by Alfredo and is relieved when she finds only Annina. They talk on CS as Giuseppe enters from US-SR with several letters on a tray. He places the tray on the spiral staircase and then exits US-SR. Germont Père enters from US-SR with his daughter Blanche, whom he motions to stay back while he enters the room. When he enters, Violetta reacts with surprised happiness when he introduces himself as Alfredo's father and attempts to embrace him but is rebuffed. She straightens at his unexpected insult and turns her back on him. She gives Germont Père some of the papers that she was carrying when she entered, and he sits on the spiral staircase to read them. He stands to ask for Violetta's sacrifice and as he says *'Due figli'* he motions for Blanche to step forward. Violetta turns and sees her.

Germont Père moves to Blanche and kisses the top of her head as he starts to sing *'Pura siccome un angelo'*. It is clear that Blanche is afraid of her father. Violetta sinks on the spiral staircase and uses it to support her in the face of Germont Père's emotional blackmail. Blanche gradually gets more affected by Violetta's protestations of love for Alfredo. Germont Père attempts to calm Violetta's growing hysteria by slapping her just before his line *'E grave sacrificio'* and then looking deep into her eyes as he continues. This violent action gives Blanche a start, and she shrinks back to hide against the Envelope Wall by the mirror.

Germont Père starts sweetly *'Un di quando le veneri...'* and then starts to become more nasty *'Pensate...'* which forces Violetta to go back into her subservient courtesan mode *'E vero, e vero'*. He calls Blanche to join him *'Siate di mia famiglia'* and she obeys. Violetta sinks even further and turns away, which causes Germont to motion for Blanche to join Violetta on the floor. She does so, and it is this proximity that motivates Violetta's *'Ah! Dite alla giovine'*. She collapses into hugging Blanche as Germont Père sings *'Piangi, piangi'*.

Violetta leaves the hug during Germont's singing and he motions for Blanche to leave – she's served her purpose. Blanche returns to hide by the Envelope Wall and watch the scene, awaiting her father's departure. Once she has left Violetta, Germont adopts a more kindly attitude towards Violetta, eventually joining her on the staircase for the repeated '*Piangi, piangi*'.

He starts to assume a more business-like countenance during the '*Imponete / Non amarlo ditegli*' dialogue; having achieved what he wanted, he now takes up his hat and coat and makes to leave. He is completely taken aback when Violetta asks him to embrace her as a daughter and his reluctance motivates her to laugh and complete her transformation back into the courtesan shell that she had lowered while in Alfredo's loving company. Aware that he has been rude in refusing to embrace her, Germont Père attempts to be civil by calling her '*Generosa*' and smiles to himself as she talks of dying. His '*No, generosa, vivere*' is spoken like a father indulging a child's tantrum rather than with any expectation that she will actually die. The lightness of Germont Père's approach is vital as it contrasts with the knowledge that Violetta has and makes both her sense of isolation, and his sense of regret in Act 3, of much greater consequence.

Giuseppe makes a re-appearance to motivate the music before Violetta's '*Qui giunge alcun*' – she waves him away and he returns to his duties. Violetta and Germont say goodbye, but as Blanche moves to join her father to exit, Violetta makes a sudden move towards her and delivers her last lines '*Addio ... felice siate ... addio*' to Blanche, before Germont Père pulls his daughter away and they exit, leaving Violetta crying on the floor.

Violetta gets herself up and writes a letter hurriedly which she gives to Annina who takes it and exits US-SR.

For the letter to Alfredo, Violetta leans against the spiral staircase, writing with her back to the US-SR entrance, so when Alfredo enters she is unaware of his presence. Alfredo is still in the suspicious headspace of earlier in the scene and wears his suspicions obviously until Violetta snaps at him '*No, per ora*'. This checks Alfredo, and he apologises. Throughout the rest of this scene, Violetta is trying to fight back tears as she wrestles with keeping her courtesan mask on to cover her wounded heart; Alfredo can tell that something is not quite right but is so pre-occupied with the news about his father that he doesn't investigate it further. Although the music becomes very grand for Violetta, the performer playing Alfredo must ensure that he doesn't start to wallow in it; although pre-occupied, he doesn't know about Violetta and Germont Père and so must resist the instinct to be swept away in the emotion the music, which is Violetta's alone. Violetta, for her part, must treat her final '*Addio*' as though it is the last thing she will ever say to Alfredo, whom she will never see again.

After Violetta's exit, Alfredo paces expectantly – like every young man he is in a hurry and, his spirits boosted by a profession of love from Violetta, would rather confront his father sooner rather than later. Giuseppe enters to share his suspicions both from the conversation he overheard earlier between Germont Père and Violetta, and because of Violetta's sudden hurried departure. He is cut off by Alfredo, however, and so doesn't get an opportunity to voice his concerns.

Alfredo waits until he recognises the handwriting on the letter '*Di Violetta!*' before sending Giuseppe and the Messenger away. He has chosen to read the letter in private. Germont Père is shown in by Giuseppe through the US-SR entry and watches on as Alfredo reads the letter. Blanche accompanies her father again, but remains in the background.

When he turns to see his father, Alfredo's first response is one of surprise but that gradually turns to deep suspicion, and when Germont Père opens his arms seeking an embrace from his son, it is his turn to be denied a hug, as Alfredo backs away from his father, trying to work out what has happened. As he retreats, Blanche takes a step forward and allows herself to be seen by Alfredo. Alfredo's reaction is one of horror as he starts to piece together what must have happened. Faced with such an unwelcome reception from her brother, Blanche sits by the mirror with her head in her knees and starts to cry. As she does so, she pulls the cover off the mirror and hugs it tightly, comforted by having a soft material around her.

As Germont Père starts his aria, Alfredo sinks to the bottom of the spiral stairs in the same place as Violetta and re-reads the letter. As Germont Père begins the second verse of his aria, Alfredo staggers up from the staircase and gets a bottle of wine from amongst the boxes. He is about to drink from it when he notices Blanche crying. He goes to her and hugs her tight while looking at his father. Germont Père continues on his speech, however, undeterred – he is the head of the family and is used to being listened to.

Alfredo rises '*Mille serpi divoranmi il petto...*'. and resolves that he will duel with the Barone and runs up the spiral staircase and returns with a pistol, which he points first at Germont Père – the burning passion of a young man who just wants to take revenge on anyone nearby to settle his sense. He and Germont Père stare each other down and slowly, Alfredo lowers the pistol over the introduction to '*No, non udrai rimproveri*' and starts to drink from the bottle. Germont Père attempts to comfort Alfredo and references back to Blanche, who is still sitting by the mirror '*Un padre ed una suora a consolare*'.

Germont Père takes the bottle away from Alfredo, who rises and stands at the mirror, looking at himself with the pistol, while Blanche looks up at him in horror. Germont Père then uses the cabaletta to dissuade his son from suicide. Having succeeded, Alfredo then interrupts his father when he sees the invitation to Flora's party and, picking it up, he exits US-SR, leaving Germont Père and Blanche alone on the stage.

Act 2, Scene 2 – Flora's Party

The scene is dominated by a large jewellery box, into which are crammed male actors, principals and non-singing members of the chorus. Servants move around the perimeter of the space carrying trays filled with drinks. The Marchese and Flora are on DS-SR and DS-SL of the jewellery box watching on (it is Flora's party but the Marchese has paid for it).

Several female actors dressed as gypsies emerge from US of the jewellery box and dance on the thrust stage. The gypsy ladies chorus enter from US on either side of the jewellery box; they crowd around either Flora on SR or the Marchese on SL and read their fortunes. Flora is amused by the reading given to the Marchese (which has been arranged by Gastone) and enjoys teasing him in front of everyone, while the Marchese is serious in his protestations of innocence.

The matadors enter from either side to perform on the DS edge of the stage, while Gastone signs from the thrust stage and dances first with the gypsy girl who is there and then with Flora, whom he pulls up on stage. This sequence will need to be carefully choreographed. At the end of the number, some dancing gypsies remain on the thrust stage and others wander to talk to the matadors or members of the chorus that are in the jewellery box.

Alfredo enters from DS-SL with a bottle of wine, he answers the chorus back with irony '*si, amici*' as he crosses to the SR corner of the jewellery box, perhaps sketching them a mock bow – he's here to confront the Barone and his wounded pride won't allow him to be civil to those he blames for being complicit in stealing Violetta from him.

When the game is due to start, the gamblers crowd into the jewellery box while on-lookers watch from outside; there are several games going at once between players who sit opposite each other. When a game is won or lost, the chorus reacts appropriately and then the defeated party moves from his chair by the table, leaving it free for someone else to take over. Each new gambler pays to join the game, and the winnings are kept at the head of the table by Gastone – this will be a winner-takes-all tournament. Alfredo remains watching on the DS-SR end of the jewellery box, but keeps an eye on the SL entry for any sign of Violetta.

Violetta enters on the arm of the Barone from DS-SL and Flora pre-empts Alfredo's attempt to confront them by rushing over quickly to greet them. Some of the observers have their interest taken by the new arrivals and people begin to look over to see what's happening. The Barone makes his warning to Violetta very public '*Da voi non un sol detto*' and then goes to sit in the SL side of the jewellery box.

Alfredo, having bowed ironically to Violetta and the Barone from the other side, makes his way to the SR part of the jewellery box and begins to bet heavily. As each defeated gambler leaves the SL side of the table, soon there is only the Barone left.

As he agrees to gamble with Alfredo, the jewellery box empties completely apart from Alfredo on SR, the Barone on SL and Gastone with the money. Violetta and Flora remain on the DS-SL edge of the jewellery box, while everyone else crowds around the SR, SL and US edges to watch the gambling as though it's a boxing match. The crowd are loving the high-stakes betting and even though Flora tries to make it all into a joke *'Del villeggiar la spesa farà il baron...'* it is clear that tensions are high.

The chorus begin to leave to US of the jewellery box when dinner is announced and Alfredo and the Barone face-off DS of the jewellery box. *'Se continuar v'aggrada'* is the beginning of Alfredo's prepared speech to challenge the Barone to a duel, but the Barone interrupts him – it would be rude to issue a challenge in the presence of ladies when no slight has been observed. Violetta is escorted out by Flora as the Barone and Alfredo continue to eye each other off; finally Alfredo says *'Andiam'* and exits with Gastone, the Barone's *'Andiam'* is through gritted teeth as he follows them off with the Marchese.

Violetta returns in distress through the US space used by the gypsy dancers and waits on the thrust stage. Alfredo re-enters by the DS-SR entry. Their confrontation takes place with Violetta on the thrust stage, Alfredo moving through the jewellery box – the symbol of his destruction of the treasure of their love. So worried for Alfredo's life is Violetta that she lies to him – *'Dunque l'ami? / Ebben, l'amo'* in order to get him to leave. Alfredo, reeling, calls everyone back to the room; they appear and surround the jewellery box. Alfredo mounts the thrust stage and stands framed by the tri-fold mirrors behind Violetta, who slowly sinks to her knees in the weight of the public humiliation Alfredo is subjecting her to. At the climax of his accusation, Alfredo picks up some of his gambling winnings that still lie piled at the top of the table and drops them onto Violetta from height.

Flora and Grenville rush immediately to Violetta, The Barone enters the jewellery box on SL as if to fight his way to Alfredo while the Marchese with several of the chorus men try to hold him back. The remainder of the chorus men are on SR side and are trying to pull Alfredo over the jewellery box while Gastone tries to stop them. The chorus ladies withdraw to either side of the jewellery box in order to avoid being trampled. This sequence will need to be choreographed quite tightly.

Germont Père appears in the US entrance by the tri-fold mirrors and the action calms as the chorus are suddenly made aware of his presence. Alfredo makes a move to go towards his father, who rejects him with the line *'Dov'è mio figlio?'* The chorus backs out of the jewellery box as they sing, Germont Père bends down to help Violetta stand; eventually the box empties so that only the Barone remains in the SL box, Alfredo in the SR box and Violetta on the thrust flanked by Flora and Grenville.

Violetta slumps to the floor and reaches out in desperation for Alfredo - '*Alfredo, Alfredo*' – she no longer cares who knows that she loves him and it is this moment that cements the Barone's decision to kill Alfredo in a duel. Alfredo mounts the thrust, but finds that everyone turns their back on him. Eventually he drops to join Violetta, who can't face him. The act ends with everyone exiting the space, leaving Alfredo alone on the thrust.

Act 3 – Violetta's Bedchamber

We are in the same space as Act 1 – Violetta's house. The giant mirror is now covered with a large white sheet, which is where Violetta is sleeping. Over the prelude we slowly bring the lights up to reveal the change that this space has undergone – a change that is a reflection of the destruction of Violetta's own vitality.

Annina sleeps curled up at the base of the mirror. Violetta struggles to rise, but cannot find the strength. She crawls a little way towards the DS edge of the mirror, but that tires so much she must heave for breath. During the prelude, a bailiff stands near the place where the statue once was; other members of the chorus bring him boxes of objects; he notes down their contents and then they are taken away. He exits at the end of the prelude, having taken stock of the contents of Violetta's house.

Annina gives Violetta sip of water from a champagne glass and then goes to the space US of the Fan Wall to open the shutters, which throws some additional light on the room. The shadow of Grenville can be seen approaching. Annina tries to help Violetta stand, but it is too much for her; instead Violetta sits herself up as Grenville approaches – he mounts the mirror and kneels next to her to take her pulse as Annina waits at the base of the mirror. Grenville and Violetta share a half-joke '*A piu tardi / non mi scordate*' in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Violetta has the letter from Germont Père with her and, though she can't make out the letters in the gloom, she knows the words off by heart. Her aria takes place entirely on the mirror – here she is surrounded by the objects of her once vibrant life that are now forever shrouded.

The Masqueraders are shown in shadow-light coming from the US-SR place where the shutters had been opened. Violetta struggles to turn around to look at them but cannot; the intimacy of this theatre will allow us to see clearly the struggle that Violetta has in this moment with wishing once more to be part of the fun yet being unable to even get up to watch.

Annina re-enters from US-SR rushing up the mirror to join with Violetta on her knees. Alfredo enters from the same way and takes a moment to look around at how everything has changed before he sees Violetta. She stands and staggers down the mirror to his embrace. They sit on the DS edge of the mirror together and kiss passionately; she lays in his lap and he strokes her hair as he sings '*Parigi, o cara*'.

She sings her repetition in his lap, enjoying his touch. Over the course of the duet, Alfredo stands and Violetta finds the strength to accept his hand to stand with him. Annina thinks that a miracle has happened.

Violetta steps back with fervour '*Ah non piu, a un tempio*' but then staggers forward and Alfredo is forced to hold her by the arms. Her second stagger is to fall into his arms, and he gradually lowers her to the surface of the mirror. Alfredo realises that he is too late '*Ah crude sorte!*'

All of Violetta's instructions to Annina are said to Alfredo's face – a sort of last desperate attempt to convince him that she will be well again '*Ah! Digli che Alfredo è ritornato all'amor mio - Digli che vivere ancor vogl'io*' But it is the following line '*Ma se tornando non m'hai salvato*' that Violetta too realises that she cannot be saved. The music of the next section, then, is Violetta's railing against the Heavens that would condemn her so cruelly – her last reserves of energy being spent in anger at the unfairness of it.

Germont Père and Grenville enter from US-SR, led by Annina and also the rest of the male chorus, who stand in the room and bear witness to Violetta's last moments.

'E strano ... Cessarono gli spasimi del dolore' Violetta stands and wraps herself a little in the white cloth that is serving as her bedsheet and the cover for the mirror. She takes a few steps downstage before she falls dead from the edge of the mirror into Alfredo's arms. He carries her like a child towards the back of the space; the white sheet that has been covering the mirror is removed as they walk away, leaving the male chorus and Germont Père faced with their own reflections, unable to escape their guilt.