

*The La Traviata Affair: Opera in the Age of Apartheid.* Hilde Roos. 2018. Oakland, California: University of California Press. 24 figures b&w, bibliography, index, 171 pp.

The book reads like an opera plot. The book has a delightfully ambiguous title since Giuseppe Verdi's acclaimed *La Traviata* (The Fallen Woman) is the opera which both launched the opera division of the Eoan Group in the year 1956 and ended it in the year 1975, 24 years later. The "affair" refers both, in part, to the plot and to the state of opera within the Eoan Group from its beginnings until its demise.

Use is made mostly of primary resources, in order to sketch the narrative of "The *La Traviata* Affair" and "Opera in the age of Apartheid." Roos gives voice to the Eoan Group Archive in the crafting of her own narrative, since "[T]he idea of writing this book started with the Eoan Group Archive" (xi). Elsewhere she states: "Throughout the book the archive remains the key informant to this narrative" (13). She skillfully follows the golden thread of the narrative by citing relevant endnotes. This adds in no small measure to the richness of each chapter as well as to the book as a whole. She makes use of 202 endnotes in Chapter 5, the longest chapter, at 42 pages in all. Still, she is able to give her own authoritative insights, as required.

The book exposes the reader not only to opera and musicals in the so-called coloured community in Cape Town, but also to the harsh underbelly of apartheid in all its guises in controlling both who performs, what is performed and where. The acronym CAD (Coloured Affairs Department) appears regularly throughout the narrative because it provided the funding (in part) to the production costs and was privy to the granting of permission for the group to perform in so-called "whites only" venues. There was also the Council for Culture and Recreation which was the coloured equivalent to the Performing Arts Councils serving white people (132).

While Roos' key focus is on opera and musicals, especially "South Pacific" (Rodgers and Hammerstein), there is very little discussion devoted to how other musical forms from the rich smorgasbord of coloured artistic expressions, such as the Minstrel Carnival, Cape Malay Choirs and even church hymnody cross-pollinated into the high arts culture of the Eoan Group. And yet it is in the field of the musical that the Eoan Group was the most successful in terms of box office takings. Roos states that about fifty-thousand people had seen "South Pacific" by the end of its season (248). The time was ripe for a local musical in the mould of the Taliep Pietersen – David Kramer collaboration in "District Six: The Musical." Sadly, this avenue was never explored, despite the box office success of touring overseas musicals in South Africa.

The musical director, Joseph Manca, a white accountant by profession, ruled the opera company with an iron fist. He had the final say over the choice of repertoire and of the running of the opera company as a whole. This relationship between Manca and the Eoan Group is a constant motif throughout the book. He and Ismael Sydow, the chairman of the Eoan Group, were among the few salaried staff of this organisation. According to Roos, Manca earned twice the salary of Sydow, a normal practice during the apartheid era. Roos states that the majority of the members of the opera company of

the Eoan Group were teachers, maids, messengers, labourers, factory hands and clerical workers (126). They were not remunerated for services rendered to the company, unlike their white counterparts, who were paid by the Performing Arts Councils. It is to be noted that within the Eoan group there was a drama company – now defunct, and a dance company, which exists to this day.

While Roos gives well-deserved attention to Joseph Gabriels, the first South African to make his international debut in the Metropolitan (MET) in New York in 1971, May Abrahamse, who throughout her life as a singer sang principal roles in Eoan Group operas, and repetiteur, Gordon Jephthas, who, like Gabriels, also had a successful career overseas, she does not discuss Philip Swales nor Virginia Davids to the same extent. Virginia Davids subsequently became a Professor of Voice at the College of Music, University of Cape Town, and Phillip Swales, a teacher by profession and a professional singer, became the musical director of the Cape Welsh Singers.

Unfortunately, a list of interviewees is not included, although mention (albeit brief) is made in her list of acknowledgements on page xi. Roos makes reference to the “Golden Dixies” on pages 69, 96 and 141. This should read “Golden City Dixies.” On page 35 the word “servitude” should be changed to “service.” Unfortunately, the photographic reproductions are all of a poor quality. Roos could also have provided online resources for further research, thereby making this archive more alive. There certainly is room for further research, for example, of the lived experiences of the surviving Eoan Group singers. Their stories could constitute the subject matter of a separate publication.

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