

La bohème discussion topics

Setting

Puccini wrote *La bohème* in 1896, but set it in the 1830s - 70 years in the past. This was considered up-to-date in terms of the Italian opera stage at the time.

In this production, ENO has moved *La bohème* from 1830s Paris to Paris in the 1950s.

As a class, discuss why the director might have made this decision to update the setting? Would *La bohème* work in any other time or in any other city?

Discuss how the students would choose to update or modernise the story – could it be set in the future?

Tip: to help with this task, download the synopsis and visit the 'Director' and 'Stage' sections of the InsideOut website for information about the production.

Interpretations of *La bohème*

Consider retellings / interpretations of *La bohème* in recent popular culture:

- Baz Luhrmann's gloss on bohemian myths in *Moulin Rouge*
- *Rent* (a musical that turned Mimi's tuberculosis into HIV). NB - *Rent* and its Alphabet City was parodied ten years later in the musical *Avenue Q*.
- *Friends* (which features a similar friendship group who spend most of their time together, don't appear to earn much money but can afford to live good lives in the city – note also the significance of their regular meetings in a café)

Why is the story / group of characters so enduring?

What if?

As a class discuss the possibility of alternative outcomes at various points in the opera.

Give the students a list of key moments from which they can choose. For example, what if Benoit had stayed to demand his rent? What if Marcello had bumped into Mimi on the way up the stairs? What if Rodolfo sold one of his plays? What if Schaunard came back with no money? What if Musetta had stayed with Alcindoro? What if Mimi refused to go back to Rodolfo? What if Mimi got the right treatment for her consumption?

Working alone or in small groups students should choose one moment in the opera and develop a scenario of what might have happened if a different choice had been made.

Further development – divide the class into groups of 5 and ask each student to read their scenario to the rest of the group. The group should choose one of the scenarios to improvise and develop.

Narrative

How does Puccini tell the story? What kind of narrative does he use? Is it linear? What if it had been told as a flashback, or as a non-linear narrative? How would you tell it?

Tip: to help with this task, download the synopsis and Opera Pack for further information on the story.

Opera vs. Musical Theatre

Examine the differences between Puccini's *La bohème* and Jonathan Larson's *Rent*

If possible, watch the film of *Rent* (available on DVD) with your class, or listen to the cast recordings of both versions. If this is not possible, research both productions on the internet.

Discuss the similarities in the story and note the differences. e.g. both versions feature the same group of characters; *La bohème* is originally set in the 1830s (ENO sets it in the 1950s), *Rent* in the 1990s; *Rent* is set in New York, *La bohème* in Paris;

Discuss the perceived differences between Opera and Music Theatre. You might want to consider use of orchestra, amplification, use of dialogue, accent, language, style of voice, size of voice.

Which version do the students prefer and why?

Do the opera and the musical appeal to the same audience? If not, why?

Central issues of *La bohème*

Use some of the issues in the opera as tools for debating: Look at the moral issues within the story. For example, is Mimi just an empty vessel? Or does she, in fact, manipulate Rodolfo into falling in love with her? Why do the Bohemians not get proper jobs? Why are they able to trick Benoit and avoid paying rent? How fair is it that Alcindoro is left with the bill? Is their attitude to money a responsible one? Why was Mimi allowed to get so ill?

The way of life

The bohemian lifestyle by the mid-nineteenth century was about rejecting conventional ways of life. It was seen by many as a manifesto for freewheeling lives of pleasure and creativity, led by urban intellectuals. Look at and discuss modern comparisons, for example Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain all re-enacted the bohemian ritual of living hard and dying young.

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