



A Heroine on Heroin: director Sophie Gilpin on La Bohème

by Francesca Wickers, Uncategorized

'At the moment there's a little bit of my brain here, there and everywhere!' laughs Sophie Gilpin, squashing a tea bag against the side of a mug whilst telling me about setting up her new theatre and opera company. 'Milk?'

It must be this ability to multi-task, along with an admirable level-headedness, that enabled this ambitious Warwick University graduate to make the smooth transition from working as a freelance opera director to starting her own company, HeadFirst Productions. Not only did Sophie create the enterprise from scratch (she refers to it as her 'brain child') but is also directing its first full-scale opera: Puccini's masterpiece, *La Bohème*.

The 25-year-old's résumé is an extensive read – impressive, given that she's only four years into post-university life. Armed with a Theatre degree, she was awarded a director traineeship with fringe opera company OperaUpClose in 2011, and has since worked as an assistant director with several UK production companies.

The first opera Sophie directed on her own was Puccini's *Tosca* ('start with an easy one!' she jokes) with the New London Opera Players in 2012. She met soprano Elizabeth Roberts and tenor Ashley Catling, who were keen to sing Mimi and Rodolfo in *La Bohème*. To stage the show she wanted, Sophie realised, meant forming a company.

The tragic story of *La Bohème* traditionally sees Mimi die of tuberculosis, but this adaptation – which opens on Friday 29 August in Wandsworth – has turned her into a heroin addict. Why did Sophie feel this was a necessary change? 'I wanted to update the story, and TB is very difficult to sell – it's not a realistic illness anymore. It still exists, but it's curable with antibiotics. I wanted to find something else which has the same level of secrecy; there's a lot of shame about TB, and a lot of shame about addiction.'

Forging links with schools and charities is to be a big part of HeadFirst's ethos. Sophie has already led numerous musical theatre workshops for young people, and with *La Bohème*, she hopes to raise awareness of drug addiction by partnering up with rehabilitation charity Addaction. 'We'll be running a workshop with service users, and helping them compose a piece of music based on their experiences. One of our chorus members will also come along and sing with them, and talk about opera.'

Sophie is keen for her productions to be relevant to modern audiences. She explains this doesn't necessarily involve updating operas to the present day, but thinking about how current affairs will affect people's interpretation of art. 'So much of what goes on in the news and in our own lives informs the way we see everything. For example, we'd started rehearsing *La Bohème* when Peaches Geldof died. And then Russell Brand has been talking about his addiction, and other's attitudes to addicts. Naturally, all of this feeds in.'

One of the reasons *La Bohème* is so acutely moving is because of its sweeping orchestral music, but HeadFirst is performing in small theatres with an ensemble of just four instruments. Sophie insists that they can still maintain the essence of that emotion. 'Even though it's Puccini, and you think big, *La Bohème* is actually a very personal, very intimate opera. Most scenes only have between two and four people. We've got two things going on: beautiful melodious music, and something that's really gritty and uncomfortable and broken underneath.'

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any surtitles to explain the story, and the singers weren't even in costume, but I realised he was weeping in the corner. I thought yes, that's what it's about! It's only when you sit back and really watch a Puccini opera that you think wow, this guy knew how to write music.'

HeadFirst Productions' La Bohème will be at the LOST Theatre in Wandsworth 29-30 August, and at the Trinity Theatre in Tunbridge Wells 4-5 September. Tickets £17. For more information and to book, [click here](#).

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