

HUMN 3101  
Women & the Arts/Bonner

*La Bohème* (Kirk Browning, 1982; 123 min.)

Non-original Music: Giacomo Puccini  
Libretto: Luigi Illica & Giuseppe Giacosa  
Conductor: James Levine

Production Design: Franco Zeffirelli  
Costume Design: Peter J. Hall

**Cast:**

Mimi (Teresa Stratas)  
Rodolfo (José Carreras)  
Musetta (Renata Scotto)  
Marcello (Richard Stilwell)

Schaunard (Alan Monk)  
Colline (James Morris)  
Benoît, Alcindoro (Italo Tajo)  
Palpignol (Dale Cole)

**Synopsis (from The Metropolitan Opera.org):**

**ACT I.** Paris, Christmas Eve, c. 1830. In their Latin Quarter garret, the painter Marcello and poet Rodolfo try to keep warm by burning pages from Rodolfo's latest drama. They are joined by their comrades — Colline, a young philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician who has landed a job and brings food, fuel and funds. But while they celebrate their unexpected fortune, the landlord, Benoit, arrives to collect the rent. Plying the older man with wine, they urge him to tell of his flirtations, then throw him out in mock indignation. As the friends depart for a celebration at the nearby Café Momus, Rodolfo promises to join them soon, staying behind to finish writing an article. There is another knock: a neighbor, Mimì, says her candle has gone out on the drafty stairs. Offering her wine when she feels faint, Rodolfo relights her candle and helps her to the door. Mimì realizes she has dropped her key, and as the two search for it, both candles are blown out. In the moonlight the poet takes the girl's shivering hand, telling her his dreams. She then recounts her solitary life, embroidering flowers and waiting for spring. Drawn to each other, Mimì and Rodolfo leave for the café.

**ACT II.** Amid shouts of street hawkers, Rodolfo buys Mimì a bonnet near the Café Momus before introducing her to his friends. They all sit down and order supper. A toy vendor, Parpignol, passes by, besieged by children. Marcello's former lover, Musetta, enters ostentatiously on the arm of the elderly, wealthy Alcindoro. Trying to regain the painter's attention, she sings a waltz about her popularity. Complaining that her shoe pinches, Musetta sends Alcindoro to fetch a new pair, then falls into Marcello's arms. Joining a group of marching soldiers, the Bohemians leave Alcindoro to face the bill when he returns.

**ACT III.** At dawn on the snowy outskirts of Paris, a Customs Officer admits farm women to the city. Musetta and revelers are heard inside a tavern. Soon Mimì walks by, searching for the place where the reunited Marcello and Musetta now live. When the painter emerges, she pours out her distress over Rodolfo's incessant jealousy. It is best they part, she says. Rodolfo, who has been asleep in the tavern, is heard, and Mimì hides; Marcello thinks she has left. The poet tells Marcello he wants to separate from his fickle sweetheart. Pressed further, he breaks down, saying Mimì is dying; her ill health can only worsen in the poverty they share. Overcome, Mimì stumbles forward to bid her lover farewell as Marcello runs back into the tavern to investigate Musetta's raucous laughter. While Mimì and Rodolfo recall their happiness, Musetta quarrels with Marcello. The painter and his mistress part in fury, but Mimì and Rodolfo decide to stay together until spring.

**ACT IV.** Some months later, Rodolfo and Marcello lament their loneliness in the garret. Colline and Schaunard bring a meager meal. The four stage a dance, which turns into a mock fight. The merrymaking is ended when Musetta bursts in, saying Mimì is downstairs, too weak to climb up. As Rodolfo runs to her, Musetta tells how Mimì has begged to be taken to her lover to die. While Mimì is made comfortable, Marcello goes with Musetta to sell her earrings for medicine, and Colline leaves to pawn his cherished overcoat. Alone, Mimì and Rodolfo recall their first days together, but she is seized with coughing. When the others return, Musetta gives Mimì a muff to warm her hands and prays for her life. Mimì dies quietly, and when Schaunard discovers she is dead, Rodolfo runs to her side, calling her name.

**Thriller** (Sally Potter, 1979; 34 minutes)

Producer, Writer, Cinematographer, Editor: Sally Potter

Music: Giacomo Puccini from *La Bohème* & Bernard Hermann from *Psycho*

**Cast:**

Narrator/Mimi (Collette Laffont)

Rodolfo (Tony Bacon)

Musetta/Mimi (Rose English)

Marcello (Vincent Mecham)

**Abstract (adapted from a summary by Patricia Mellencamp, 1990):**

*Thriller* presents a murder investigation based on the story and characters of Puccini's opera *La Bohème*: "I'm trying to remember, to understand. There were some bodies on the floor. One of them is mine. Did I die? Was I murdered? If so, ... who killed me and why?" Throughout this murder investigation, however, Potter uses feminist poetics to investigate the myth of romanticism, the story of art (opera, ballet, cinema), how it is presented, who presents it, and why it is presented in one way rather than others. She repeatedly interrupts the narrative of *La Bohème*, returning to the scene of the crime and creating an alternate memory than that which is usually presented to us. She includes what was missing from the past—women's voice and point of view. She thus revises and rewrites the classical text.

**Questions for Discussion for *La Bohème* (\*\*Dr. Hoover will address these specifically\*\*):**

1. How would you describe the gender roles written for the male characters of *La Bohème* versus those for the female characters? Make a list that characterizes each of the four main characters, paying attention to differences and similarities for costume, artistic occupation, vocal range, dialog/lyrics (refer to your copy of the libretto), etc.
2. Find examples of "woman-centered community" in *La Bohème* for Mimi and Musetta (and/or others). When do women share the stage together to interact with each other?
3. \*\*Compare and contrast the vocal character (range, color, accompaniment) of Mimi and Musetta. How do these differing elements reflect their personalities?
4. Why must Mimi die in *La Bohème*? Who is the subject of this scene? Do you think the strongest dramatic emphasis centers on Mimi's death or Rodolfo's grief?
5. \*\*If you are familiar with other operas, compare women's roles in those operas as well.
6. Although there are stereotyped gender roles for the women (and men) in *La Bohème*, find examples of strength/feminism/voice or other anti-patriarchal moments in Mimi and Musetta's roles.

**Questions for Discussion for *Thriller*:**

1. Why does Potter title her film *Thriller*? Why does she choose a Hollywood-style, *film noir*/murder-mystery genre for her film instead of Puccini's original opera format?
2. Why do you think Potter chose black & white, grainy filmstock instead of color? And why does she use still photographs and freeze-frames so frequently?
3. Why must the woman die in *La Bohème*? By what process does Mimi figure this out in *Thriller*? How does Musetta's presence help her?
4. How does Potter use modern dance expressively?
5. Why has Potter cast a Black woman as Mimi?

6. Why does Mimì read long passages from Marx, Freud, Mallarmé, Cixous, and others?  
How does this relate to our class discussions of patriarchal language, silence, and voice?