

# Edinburgh International Festival – *Così Fan Tutte*: racial and sexual abuse should shock audiences – not the titillation

by [Eleanor Smith](#), [Edinburgh Napier University](#)

The new production of Mozart and Lorenzo da Ponte's classic opera [Così Fan Tutte](#) has attracted no shortage of controversy. After its premiere in Aix-en-Provence in France in July, the organisers of the Edinburgh International Festival [wrote to all ticket holders](#) offering a refund "due to the adult nature of some of the scenes" and its unsuitability for younger audiences.

[Christophe Honoré](#), better known as a novelist and auteur film director, also took the bold step of relocating the action from 18th-century Naples to 1930s Eritrea in the era of Italian rule.

We certainly need more gritty and relevant opera productions. Opera in the 18th century was often used as a way of commentating on issues of the day, especially [the opera buffa style](#), which distinguishes comic operas like *Così Fan Tutte* from the tragedies. There is no reason why present-day productions should not reflect this.

When it comes to staging a classic work, directors need to choose whether to follow the original in detail, using costumes and instruments to recreate a static idea; or try to capture the original's impact at the time. Thankfully scholars and performers nowadays agree that both approaches are legitimate – Honoré's production just leans towards the latter

category.

## Then and now

*Così Fan Tutte* is one of Mozart's most popular operas, but it was not often performed in the 19th century because the subject matter was considered vulgar. It tells the story of two girls, Fiordiligi and Dorabella, whose soldier lovers are called away to war.

A man named Don Alfonso has made a bet with the two soldiers that the girls will not be faithful, claiming that women never are. The soldiers come back in disguise to try and seduce one another's lovers to prove Don Alfonso wrong – though in the end they lose.



The soldiers and their lovers.

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Honoré has added sexual subplots which serve to highlight the high sexism in da Ponte's original plot, which is often glossed over. The original takes a very dim view of women's morals and even intelligence – extreme even by 18th-century standards. In the new production, Honoré's attempts to balance the ledger include a scene where the soldier Ferrando forces one of the chorus actors into sex when he discovers that Dorabella has been unfaithful to him.

Honoré continually seeks to emphasise the despicable nature of the male characters going out to trap their lovers through deception. The ending is particularly memorable in this respect. Where the women normally either return to their original lovers – or in some versions stick with the ones they "married" in disguise – Honoré's Fiordiligi sings that she "deserves death" for betraying her fiancée. She then wanders around the stage with his musket to her chin as if to end her life until the final curtain drops.



Fiordiligi and Dorabella.

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## Black comedy

Other new subplots comment on race and colonialism, often mingled with sexual abuse. Before the overture is a scene of two native girls dancing to a record playing a song criticising Mussolini. It is then torn off the record player and broken to pieces by one of the white soldiers, who goes on to rape one of the girls during the overture.

The Eritrean characters are mistreated throughout – mainly through heavy groping or outright rape. Race is also intermingled with the main plot when the soldiers, who disguise themselves as Albanians in the original, black up as Eritreans in this version.

This is about highlighting an underlying tragedy within the farce, but substituting colonialism and skin colour for the Albanian Muslim/Italian Christian antipathy in da Ponte's version. Too often in the past, this has been masked by spectacular costumes and beautiful singing.

One patron on the opening night in Edinburgh caught the mood when she said: "This is not a 'pretty-pretty' production and that suits the story so much better."

The programme notes were peppered with quotations on the nature of love and cruelty, paying homage to the opera's subtitle "La scuola degli amanti" (the lovers' school). Honoré writes in the notes:

*My intention is the same as [da Ponte's]: that for the lightness and irresponsibility of the comedy of love you should substitute the shamelessness and cruelty of tragic passion attacked by humour.*



Tragedy and farce.  
Edinburgh International Festival

## Curtain call

The casting draws together singers from all over the world, not all of whom were period specialists, but who blended in the ensembles like they had been singing together their entire lives. The acting from the main characters is outstanding.

The actors and singers of the chorus, drawn from the [Cape Town Opera](#), add to the Eritrean setting and give poignant substance to Honoré's revelations of the darker side of empire building. Meanwhile vibrato singing is kept to a decorative minimum, while the words were clear even in the upper circle.

Is the controversy justified? To some extent it will depend on your perspective. Apart from simulated sex and naked breasts at one point, most of the shock value was in the racial and sexual abuse.

You could sense that parts of the audience were shocked at white colonials groping black natives, albeit there are a lot of (non-racial) gropings in Mozart productions anyway. Friends and academics I have spoken to were not shocked – perhaps it depends on your exposure. In sum, it has probably been a bit of a storm in a teacup. But don't let that detract from the performance as a whole. Honoré's update of Mozart has important things to say about women and race. It is exactly what opera should be all about.

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