La vie Bohème

Adapted by Zoë Ludski

"Bohemiens" was initially the French word for Gypsies; people believed to have come from Bohemia, an area located in what is currently the Czech Republic. The Bohemian people were considered outsiders of conventional society and were looked down upon by French society. When the young French artists adopted this term, it was out of defiance to the bourgeoisie* who disapproved of the gypsies. In the 19th century, Bohemian referred to those who lived an unconditional lifestyle, or were marginalized** or impoverished artists living in major European cities.

Although the Bohemian population was diverse, their one unifying factor was their rejection of bourgeois values. They rejected private property and materialism by having no permanent residence and surviving on very little. They rejected strict moral values and lived carefree lives of alcohol, drug use and open sexual freedom. They rejected the pursuit of wealth by living solely for art and pursued their passions regardless of income. Bohemian artists were socially and economically disadvantaged but they were proud of their nonconformity and practiced an alternative lifestyle. This being said, many Bohemian artists did not make a conscious decision to opt out of society; they simply did not have the resources. Many escaped their difficulties by using opium or alcohol. In the 1840s, this population of unemployed artists was large enough to be recognized. “La vie Bohème” became the nickname for this community.

Since the 19th century, the Bohemian ideal has been colourfully represented and none is better known then Puccini’s La Bohème. Puccini’s opera was actually based a set of short stories Scènes de la vie de bohème, written by Henri Murger in the late 19th century. In his stories, Murger depicted the life and times of the Parisian Bohemians; the artists, social rebels and radicals in Paris who lived for the sake of their art and their beliefs. Murger vividly captured their unconventional attitude towards freedom, pleasure, and love, but also reminded his readers of the harsh realities of this fatalistic approach to life. His characters endured extreme poverty, sickness, addiction and heartache. The moral of the stories seems to be that despite their dismal living situations, in the end, it was better that they lived a short life wrought with both love and pain, standing strong for the people and things they believed in, than lead a mediocre existence for all of eternity. Puccini’s adaptation of Mimi and Rodolfo’s love story is heartfelt, tragic, and has touched the hearts of opera and classical music lovers throughout the centuries.

*Bourgeoisie: [boor – zhwa – zee] a member of the Bourgeois, the middle class, but also someone who conforms to standards and conventions and is preoccupied by respectability, capitalism and material values.

** Marginalized: to be put outside of the main; to be relegated to a lower social standing.

A scene from La Bohème (COC, 2005). Photo: Michael Cooper
Today another word for Bohemian is Counter Culture. This still refers to a community of people who live outside of accepted norms. Counter Culture movements tend to follow a similar pattern through history. They begin as a movement that is considered outside the mainstream society’s values and ideas and are often looked down upon. As time progresses, the movement tends to become fashionable. After a while, the movement becomes accepted and is no longer seen as outside of the norm. This has happened with the Bohemians, the Beat Generation, the Hippie Culture, and more recently the Grunge Scene in the 90s. When it comes to living areas, what often happens is that developers will move into an area inhabited by a Counter Culture and gentrify the neighbourhood. This usually means the prices of real estate and the cost of living increase. This causes the initial inhabitants of the community to have to move as they can no longer afford to live in the area. In Toronto this has happened in many areas – most prominently, Queen Street West, West Queen West, and Parkdale. Currently there is a struggle between the city, developers and residents in an area called The Junction, as the residents try to stop the developers from tearing down old houses to put up condominiums.

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Cafés were much more than just a place to take a date on a Friday night or to get a quick double-no foam-no whip-soy-extra hot latte en route to work or school. They were a place where Bohemians could gather to watch the bourgeoisie and share ideas and experiences on art and philosophy. Henry Murger, on whose book La Bohème is based, frequented Café Momus which actually existed in the 1840s on the Right Bank in Paris near the church of Sainte-Germaine-L’Auxerrois.

* Gentrification: [jen-trih-fih-kay-shuhn]: the buying and renovation of houses and stores in deteriorated urban neighbourhoods by upper- or middle-income families or individuals, thus improving property values but often displacing low-income families and small businesses.