Kept her cool

Zeani shines as Traviata's Violetta

By BRUCE COATS

Houston Opera was very good at the Sunday student matinee of Verdi's "La Traviata."

The four act done in Italian describes the life of the Parisian courtesan Violetta Valery as she falls in love with young Alfreda Garmont, but dies of tuberculosis before their devotion to each other is realized. The plot is greatly complicated by Alfredo's father who forbids such an alliance and Violetta's own attempts to make Alfredo jealous. The whole of the drama is set in the 1850's, allowing for elaborate stage settings and extravagant costuming.

The female lead was remarkably played by European soprano Virginia Zeani. A beautiful woman, she played the shapely lady of pleasure perfectly, combining the outward flirtatious manner with an inner desire to be finally loved by just one man instead of many.

Perfect Control

Her most powerful scene was in the fourth act. Slowly dying and alone in her chamber, Miss Zeani had exact control of the mood and her voice, causing the audience to cheer numerous bravos for the fine acting. The role was most certainly the most challenging in the opera, and Miss Zeani interpreted the character with clarity and fullness.

The climax of Violetta's death was paralleled in my mind only by a superb "keeping your cool" job. Miss Zeani accidentally picked up a filled champagne glass from the table, and she fervently tried to drink it before her next cue. But the moment came to throw the glass over her shoulder, and unfortunately she had not drunk it all. The champagne went spilling into her hair and down her face, but without breaking character or missing her aria, Miss Zeani slowly wiped herself dry. Finally, after nearly a minute and a half, a tremendous smile crossed her face as she carefully put her handkerchief away.

Fine Blend

The male leads, Alfredo (Michelle Molese) and M. Germont (Calvin Marsh), were fine complements to Violetta, their strong voices blending well with hers. Baritone Marsh was the audience's favorite as he strode powerfully across the stage to defend his family honor.

Adding to the excitement of the opera, but in a different tone, were the Hungarian gypsy dancers, especially four fiery girls who commanded attention with their beauty and dancing. Only the swaying scenery (with pillars and walls moving with the breeze of actors' exits) detracted from a perfect opera.