

Seattle Opera's 'Carmen' is tremendous fun until it's horrifying — as it should be

Seattle Opera's 'Carmen' is tremendous fun until it's horrifying — as it should be

May 7, 2019 at 11:54 am Updated May 7, 2019 at 2:12 pm



By

[Gemma Alexander](#)

Opera review

You've heard the music of the opera "Carmen" [on "Sesame Street"](#) and in commercials, but that's not why it's been called opera's [guilty pleasure](#). Even the critics who panned Bizet's opera at its premiere in 1875 had only praise for the music. "Carmen" is a sordid story of seduction and obsession ending in murder — hence the guilt in our pleasure.

Seattle Opera's current production is the 10th "Carmen" in Seattle Opera's history. And this coproduction with Irish National Opera and Opera Philadelphia, directed by Paul Curran, uses clever staging to provide a modern interpretation — and a different lens for some of the problematic themes — of the 144-year-old story, without changing a word of the libretto. The result is three acts of exquisite earworms and engaging action scattered with visual pop-culture references, followed by a final act — still beautifully sung — that is horrifyingly effective.

Updating the "other"

Initial audiences were scandalized by the femme fatale Carmen. Today, her actions read more as a proto-feminist determined to live on her own terms at all costs. Modern audiences are disturbed that the cost of her independence is death.

Historically, Carmen's life and death were made palatable through musical and plot devices that conveyed her "otherness" as a working-class Roma woman. By setting the story in a quasi-historical Spain evoking both the 1950s and Havana, the Seattle Opera production sidesteps many of those stereotypes. Midcentury imagery makes the outsider characters relatable instead of mysterious and encourages a modern interpretation of the libretto's use of "bohemian," which in Bizet's day was a racial slur for the Roma — equivalent to the English "Gypsy."

In this context we see the free-spirited Carmen and her friends, Frasquita (Madison Leonard) and Mercédès (Sarah Coit), more like the Pink Ladies from "Grease" than exotic foreigners. Actions that sometimes belie the words point out the characters' own prejudices. When the soldiers sing "look how flirtatious they are," about factory workers on break, most of the women are reading magazines.



Sarah Coit (Mercédès), Rodion Pogossov (Escamillo), and Madison Leonard (Frasquita) in Seattle Opera's "Carmen." (Philip Newton)

The performances

Regardless of the century, "Carmen" lives and dies on the performance of its titular character. Seeming born to sing Carmen, mezzo-soprano Ginger Costa-Jackson, on opening night May 4, sounded rich and velvety even while expressing a wide range of emotions. Her Carmen leverages her sexuality (the infamous interrogation scene from "Basic Instinct" is referenced), but she's motivated more by freedom than gain. Impetuous and impatient, her big personality deflates when she is confronted with her powerlessness. When her lover Don José first becomes violent, she folds into herself. (Zanda Švēde plays Carmen on alternate nights.)

Advertising



Ginger Costa-Jackson in the title role in Seattle Opera's "Carmen." (Sunny Martini)

Compared to the independent Carmen, Don José is defined externally; his identity and morality collapse under pressure. That collapse was admirably performed on opening night by tenor Frederick Ballentine — a last-minute replacement for Scott Quinn, who fell ill. (Adam Smith performs on alternate nights.) Ballentine pushed through jet lag to perform after only two days of local rehearsals, and shone in "Flower Song," an aria so sweet that even worldly Carmen is won over.

As Don José's commanding officer and a rejected suitor of Carmen, bass-baritone Daniel Sumegi's Zuniga channeled Alan Rickman with a mixture of chronic irritation and vague menace.

Don José's intended fiancée, Micaëla, exists solely to counterbalance Carmen as a wholesome example of femininity; it's a shallowly written role. But soprano Vanessa Goikoetxea (Emily Dorn on alternate nights) gives it such depth of character that, while we love to watch Carmen, in real life, we'd rather know Goikoetxea's Micaëla.

Like Fonzi from "Happy Days," Rodion Pogosssov's Escamillo makes his entrance on a motorcycle. He's a good match for Carmen, a risk-taker in bullfighting and in love. While Carmen and Don José sing at each other, Escamillo sings with Carmen. Their duet "Si tu m'aimes, Carmen" harmoniously promises a happy ending.

An ugly ending

The actual ending — in which Don José brutally murders Carmen and then kills himself — is horrifying (and potentially triggering). It comes as a shock even though we expect it. Many events in opera are unrealistic, but in 2017, approximately 30,000 women around the world were [murdered by an intimate partner](#). Like Don José, many of them were motivated by jealousy and fear of abandonment. To Seattle Opera's credit, the final scene of "Carmen" is hard to watch because it refuses to sugarcoat an ugly reality.

Seattle Opera presents "Carmen," through May 19; Marion Oliver McCaw Hall, 321 Mercer St., Seattle; \$59-\$335; 206-389-7676, seattleopera.org

Advertising

Gemma Alexander is a Seattle-based freelance writer; gemmadeealexander.com. This report is supported, in part, by the Rubin Institute for Music Criticism, San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation.