

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

CARMEN

BY GEORGES BIZET | APRIL 23, 27, 29, AND MAY 1, 2016

LYRIC OPERA OF KANSAS CITY'S INVITING, DRAMATIC
'CARMEN' CLOSSES THE SEASON

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By Libby Hanssen

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Even gypsies and thieves have a code of conduct. In “Carmen,” the Lyric Opera of Kansas City’s final presentation this season, this anti-heroine is true to herself — a woman whose intelligence and independence threaten a society driven by machismo — and to her code until her dying breath.

This production of Georges Bizet’s opera, directed by Jose Maria Condemi, opened Friday at the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts. (The company last presented a version of the perennially popular work in 2010.)

The cast gave an inviting, full-hearted rendition, with a well-honed chorus and spirited, thoroughly enjoyable children’s chorus. R. Keith Brumley’s set design of large, vertical, earth-toned pieces was versatile while retaining a Spanish element (though neither too period- nor site-specific) and was enhanced by Kendall Smith’s lighting design.

Eduardo V. Sicangco’s costumes ranged from beige shifts for the cigarette girls to a bright silk toreador outfit, with a glamorous, glittering gown and veil, for Carmen’s final scene.

David Charles Abell conducted the Kansas City Symphony. Despite a lukewarm overture, the orchestra played the familiar themes with enthusiasm and (once balanced) accuracy, especially from the full percussion section squeezed into the back of the pit to play the requisite tambourines and castanets.

Zanda Švēde, in her Lyric Opera debut, played the gypsy with convincing flair. Her luscious voice was fruity, full and varied. Each aria was given a different color, from the flirtatious “Habanera” to the fateful “Card Aria.”

Though outwardly fickle, Carmen is consistent to her code: She gives everything to her lovers, but she expects everything in return while they are together. Carmen and all who know her acknowledge and accept her tendencies. Everyone, that is, but Don José, played by Rafael Davila.

The impulsive José wants her to bend to his expectations, torn between his duty and his lust. Davila's tenor was clear and declamatory. He gave a tortured performance, his obsession and jealousy making him incapable of accepting the reality of loving and losing a woman to whom he never had any rights.

Tellingly, Davila was better matched with soprano Janai Brugger, who played an appealing Micaëla. Though a modest contrast to Carmen, the character is savvy, not unaware of the ways of the world, and Brugger balanced her sweet demeanor with searing passion and pure, untarnished vocals.

Perhaps the most iconic song belongs to Escamillo, the toreador. Baritone Corey Crider was an engaging and genteel showman.

Rounding out the cast were bass Jeffrey Beruan as Zuniga, portrayed with dubious intent in this interpretation, and the funny, conspiratorial gypsy quintet.

This version used a mix of dialogue and recitative to a successful degree, though the effects of turns and trills sometimes hampered the diction and therefore the tempo, especially in the ensemble pieces.

The dance scene is a traditional feature of Act 2, with the gypsy girls amusing themselves and their male counterparts during a languid afternoon at the tavern. The choreography was skillfully incorporated, if more subdued than was ideal to allow the non-dancers to keep up.

Unfortunately, the ensemble and individuals fumbled through the fight scenes. Generally unconvincing, the soldiers especially seemed less menacing than the cigarette girls.

The opera succeeds because of its defining melodies, the exotic theatrical material and the dramatic relationships, and because of its title character, who attracts attention with her overt sexuality. But there is more to her than that. It is Carmen's confidence and challenging nature that make her a distinctive and visionary character.