

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

CARMEN

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

CLOSING WITH “CARMEN”

Superb singing and gorgeous visuals merged as a fitting finale to the Lyric Opera's 2016 season. Whether a first-timer or the one who's seen "Carmen" a dozen times, this standard delivers on dramatic and musical fronts to make it a sure thing for most audiences. There's nothing like betrayal, vicious threats, crooks on the lam, and good 'ol fashioned girl fights to start a Saturday night.

April 25, 2015

By Sarah Tyrrell



The audience waits and waits for the title character to appear, along with some leisurely soldiers (also waiting for Carmen) and the saucy, smoking factory girls. Some in this audience seemed bored by what maybe felt like a slow start, while others caught on to Director José Maria Condemi's take on Bizet's sense of pace – and his attempt to build tension and intrigue.

Zanda Švēde as Carmen did not disappoint. That voice—that bottomless voice! It's a heavy mezzo with luxurious layers and some surprising color up top. It somehow resonates alternately in the depths of her chest, then her head—and still manages to project. Her first two arias also proved a wide range, and that she was embedding sensuality to spare into her Carmen.

In her first steps toward bringing down Don José, Carmen handily destroys the social barriers between them, then gets to work on the real problem: his integrity. She uses the Act 2 aria “Je vais danser en votre honneur ... La la la” to demand his commitment, and here Švēde demonstrated more nimble delivery (not that flighty agility is something anyone listens for in a Carmen). Overall, Švēde crafted a moderate character—all temptress, for sure, but balanced by other traits, like a certain playfulness. Admittedly, I like my Carmen to be more sinister, and while in the final scene we do get a glimpse of venom, Švēde mostly worked the ambivalent, mocking, and flippant angles. I did like how Švēde reacted to all of the stage, to all aspects of a scene—all of the time; clearly she's a generous actress and collaborator.

Don José is not supposed to at first blow us away with leading-man luster, and Rafael Davila entered with the mandatory anemia. As his character explored darker emotional territory, Davila's voice and movements freed up; I can only assume this was his own strategy—or perhaps Condemi's idea—to dole out only so much at a time. Soon enough, Davila demonstrates that he's quite fearless about pushing, willing to lean into a sustain, even if it means a wobble or hit-and-miss intonation.

Davila morphed into a leading man during the “Flower Song,” (“La Fleur que tu m'avais jetee”), but he was not at his best until the Act 4 interaction with Carmen, where his desperate pleas alternated with

her recitative-like rejections. Davila's performance evolved as his character devolved: here, Davila was untouchable.

Frankly, it's not easy for other male characters to compete with the stuff Escamillo is made of, and Corey Crider layered the profile with so much style and assurance that it's no wonder Carmen couldn't resist him after "En garde Toreador." Finally, real romantic chemistry. Crider's performance was riveting, his rich baritone fused with a very physical stage presence. His effortless movements during the Act 3 duet with Don José ("Je suis Escamillo, toréro de Grenade") helped the audience imagine a toreador's calculated steps. Bass Jeffrey Beruan reigns as the stand-out actor of this cast. He positively commanded the stage as Zuniga, with a voice that boomed in both dialogue and melody. It's fantastic to see Beruan carving out what will no doubt be a signature role.

The contradiction that is Carmen versus Micaela was strengthened via costuming, staging, and pure actor instinct. Janai Brugger's sweet (never naïve) Micaela was rendered with believable charm—demure yet forceful. We watch Micaela set standards that her beloved Don José will never manage to meet, but really awesome was the made-to-order, zero-chemistry factor between them (really noticeable in "Parle-moi de ma mère," where he begs for news about his mother—not romantic). We already know these two won't pan out, so it's spot-on drama to just sadly watch them flounder. Brugger's tour-de-force was the Act 3 "Je dis que rien ne m'épouvante," where her crystal tone made for an ideal contrast to Švėde. Carmen's claims of love to José never resonate as truth either, so a kind of sterility threads through the story. A full-on love duet would cement some authentic emotion between lovers, but Bizet didn't write one. The closest thing we get comes in Act 4 with the Carmen/Escamillo duet, "Si tu m'aimes, Carmen."

In all, this latest version of a stand-by was solid, but I did crave more believable assault action in the fight choreography: black eyes aren't necessary, but this opera does after all hinge on conflict and violence. As usual, Mark Ferrell prepared a stellar chorus. How fortunate to be able to call on many fine local singers to fill these musical and dramatic positions. There was no skimping when building the children's chorus, either, so the full-on choral numbers in Acts 2 and 3 were awesome, where vivid costumes, coordinated by Eduardo Sicangco, contributed to the overall effect. We heard fine solo and ensemble playing from the pit, so Bizet's score, with carefully chosen and arranged timbres, added significantly to drama and spectacle.

With the Kauffman space advantage, we've come to expect imaginative sets, and R. Keith Brumley is clearly reveling in the square footage. Carmen was set in hard angles and bold masses, all decked in a monochrome matte texture. That design presented as rather minimalist, then adapted to a dark tavern where levels added interest mainly by demanding more direct and deliberate movements (up and down stairs, for example). In Act 3, pending desolation was matched brilliantly in the visual—almost as if the set reduced even more to match Don José's moral degradation.

Overall, Carmen can throw an audience off: it's French opera, which calls for crowd scenes and flashy moments ... followed by dead air. Most recognize signature arias like "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle" and the "Toreador Song," but these are closed numbers: they start. They stop. One moment doesn't bleed into another. Continuity suffers. A disjointed sequence emerges. Those signature songs and rousing crowd scenes are thrilling, making tolerable the spoken dialogue (necessary to advance the plot); that said, though, some segments still suffered from a lukewarm lethargy, where the "start and stop" may have disappointed those hoping the entire opera would resonate as effortlessly as does Carmen's "Habanera."