

# LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

## CARMEN

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

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### REVIEW: LYRIC 'CARMEN' KEEPS US INTRIGUED, INTRODUCES STUNNING MEZZO-SOPRANO

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The highest compliment you can pay an operatic production is that you went out of the theater thinking not about stagecraft, acting skills, catchy tunes or vocal prowess but about the ideas in the piece, the “meaning” even. The Lyric Opera’s *Carmen* that opened April 23rd is just such a production: It excels across the board but it also deals with Bizet’s story with such economy and natural ease that I found myself examining the characters and their foibles in ways I had not explored before.

Several elements large and small have to be in place before this can happen. R. Keith Brumley’s stately sets, designed for the old Lyric Theatre in 2010, looked even better on the grander Kauffman Center stage, their naturalistic curves adapting well to town square, tavern, mountain pass and (with one of the panels turned) the portal of the bullring. They were enhanced by Eduardo V. Sicangco’s costumes, which ranged from the lavishly elegant (Carmen’s sparkly-black dress for Act IV) to over-the-top (the Nutcracker-ish military outfits). The cigarette ladies of Act I, aptly enough, wore simple pale dresses; Carmen sported only a red sash-belt, as a sort of wry challenge to the factory dress code.

The lighting design by Kendall Smith had subtle touches: When José and Carmen were embedded in the throng but on opposite sides of the stage (Act I), ever-so-gentle spots picked up the tension between them (pretending not to notice each other). The direction by Jose Maria Condemi showed a sophisticated grasp of the main challenge of *Carmen*: To make the big, “noisy” moments connect yet to focus on the love story. From flamenco dancers to chirpy bandits, cynical soldiers to kids “playing army,” there’s a lot going on in this opera and it mostly made sense through the way that Jose Maria kept it to “low boil.” No one hammed it up overly: Even the gypsy dancing (coached by Zhanna Saparova) had an authentic look.

There is of course no underestimating the importance of the singer playing Carmen in bringing this all together, and Zanda Švēde did not disappoint. With movie-star looks (intensified by Alison Hanks’ bold make-up design) and a luscious, chocolatey mezzo-soprano, Zanda sort of threw you off balance every

time she opened her mouth. It is probably not idle to predict she could become one of *the* Carmens over the next few years: She has the voice, the musical verve and a winning, controlled approach to movement that augur great things. At times we yearned for a more distinctive sense of phrasing and expression. No doubt she will gradually find ways to set herself apart from the greats who have sung this role.

Rafael Davila as Don José (no stranger to Lyric audiences) sang with maturity and a compelling sense of the more pitiful side of this character. What I missed was a strong sense that these two were really in *love*: We saw in their external actions that they loved each other, but not so much in their on-stage chemistry. Janai Brugger as Michaëla cut such a strong figure, as the hometown girl that José's mother wants him to marry, that we almost wished he would. In Michaëla's tender "Je dis" aria of Act III, fascinating for its details of vocal shaping, she seemed a much more interesting woman than Carmen could ever dream to be. Likewise Corey Crider sang Escamillo with more gentle bluster than bravado, injecting perhaps a bit more vulnerability than we're used to (and looking all the world like a *maître d'*).

Jeffrey Beruan brought warmth to the part of Zuniga, and the other smaller roles were nicely sung, especially April Martin's Frasquita and Samantha Gossard's Mercédès. David Charles Abell's conducting kept things moving at a clip: Somewhat heavy-handed in the Overture, it otherwise kept spirits high. The Quintet of Act II was quick and precise, and the Act IV love-torment was not drawn out unduly.

The character of Carmen is perhaps a flawed creation of 19th-century male fantasy, but in no century does she stand up as a model of female self-determination. Race, gender and social standing aside, she is not a nice person. If at the end we believe that she is as wretchedly clueless as her male counterparts, we can almost forgive the passive-aggressive manner in which she ruins men's lives. The Lyric's production was working for me until Act IV, at which point it became tenuous. I found Carmen too hard-hearted and José (who stabs her *in the back*) downright diabolical.

Giving this opera a satisfying conclusion is not easy, but it is possible. If Carmen remains utterly unrepentant we tend to think of her as a monster. (What kind of person asks you to desert your military duties, or scoffs at the idea you should go see your dying mother?) José is no innocent victim, either, but he's not a complete cad. Pride is his downfall, too: He won't go back to his dying mother because he can't stand the thought of Carmen being with Escamillo in his absence. At the end of this production I didn't like either character. That may be preferable to having sympathy for one but not the other. But I'd prefer to feel for both of them.