

If I Love You, You Best Beware

Eugene Ballet Company's *Carmen*

Many of the best bits of the *Carmen* score, like the sexy *Habanera*, come straight from the folk music traditions of Cuba and Spain. With a shimmying 2/4 rhythm, perfect for couples dancing, this sound is like a little black dress, fresh strawberries and bottle of chilled champagne: beguiling, intentional, even a little bit naughty.

But be warned: This seductive love comes with a pretty hefty price tag, as the fortunes of the heart are won ... and lost. Sure, *Carmen* and Don José could settle down and celebrate their golden years together, but where's the fun in that? Much more delicious to tease out this premise: *Love is a rebellious bird that cannot be tamed.*

I caught up with Eugene Ballet Company's stalwart artistic leader, Toni Pimble, as she was putting the finishing touches on her company's premiere version of this classic tale.



You're such a nice, mild-mannered person, Toni. But Carmen is not known for her etiquette. Was it fun to choreograph against type?

Oh, yes, it's lots of fun, because everybody has aspects like this that they just don't show. The hardest part, for the women dancers, has been *Carmen's* open sexuality, and getting comfortable showing that in front of their peers.

Tell me about creating the Carmen and Don José characters through dance.

Carmen was a ballet before it was an opera. The libretto talks about *Carmen* dancing and being open and free. The one change I had to make was to the timeline. (We didn't have three months to wait while he sits in jail.) I've made the timeline pretty much continuous. And we don't have time for love — *Carmen* is using her sexual charms to entice him, to get him to lose his head and so she can get free. But once she opens this Pandora's box, she unleashes his jealousy.

This is an old story, and you mention that it wasn't well received initially due to a moral clampdown in writer Merimée's mid-19th century Paris. What is it like to create works in our current artistic climate?

Part of coming to the theater is a social aspect: To get out, and to see something. Eugene audiences are very open-minded.

You're working with some pretty juicy tropes here: passion and piety, virility and jealousy. How have you brought it into the contemporary?

Because it is dance, because it is so physical, we've been influenced by Spain and Spanish dance. We've used it, but we haven't

been so formal. We've taken those steps, and moved into partnering that's extremely sensual.

How have the various ballet incarnations inspired?

I've been mostly inspired by the opera, especially the DVD of Julia Migenes and Plácido Domingo. She is something, watching her betrayal.

We're playing with cloaks, flags and fans, a lot of pageantry. And I try to be as free as I can with the choreography. -Toni Pimble

And how does the flamenco influence the piece?

The arms, the *ports de bras*. We did a Bolero a few years ago, so we pulled in some steps from that. And I've got all these folks from Spanish descent in my company who respect and want to work off this. It's great working with them.

Your sets look amazing, from the Seville cigarette factory to the bullring. How does this tension between narrative realism and contemporary creativity play out?

In the floor work, and that the acting is real and makes sense. After watching the opera on DVD, while working scenes, the dancers would say, "What I'm thinking my character is thinking is ..." and we would engage in that motivational process.

And the Bizet: There are some very well-loved tunes here. How do you work with such recognizable pieces while keeping it fresh and lively?

I try not to make it so rigid and "set." We're playing with cloaks, flags and fans, a lot of pageantry. And I try to be as free as I can with the choreography.

Carmen, the Eugene Ballet Company's latest tour de force and the 45th ballet choreographed for the company by Artistic Director Toni Pimble, plays at 8 pm Saturday, Oct. 20, and 2:30 pm Sunday, Oct. 21, at the Hult Center. For tix, go to www.hultcenter.org or call 682-5000. **EW**

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