

THE SPITFIRE OF SEVILLE

The Eugene Ballet Company puts its own spin on Carmen

In its initial release, George Bizet's 1875 opera *Carmen* received mixed reviews. Today, in its 140th anniversary year, many see *Carmen*, the story of a woman far before her time, as a feminist text.

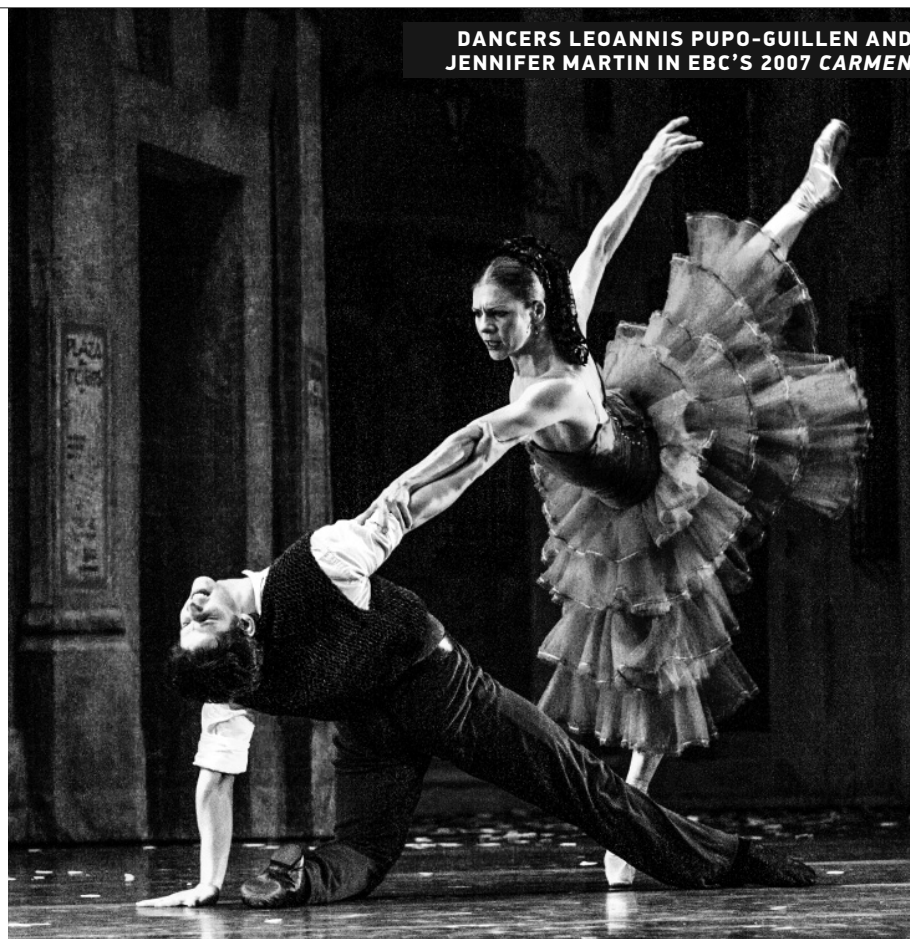
"I certainly think that when you read the newspapers, you just see the same sort of continuous problem between men and women," says Toni Pimble, artistic director for Eugene Ballet Company. "There are those men that just feel that they have to own a woman, and that's the whole essence of Carmen — that she is a free spirit, that she does not want to be owned, that she believes in her freedom to choose her lover and to discard lovers."

Eugene Ballet Company will perform *Carmen* just in time for Valentine's Day on Feb. 14 and 15 at the Hult Center.

For strangers to the original spitfire femme fatale, *Carmen* is set in early 19th-century Spain, telling the tragedy of its namesake, who seduces the gullible soldier Don José. He gives up his childhood sweetheart and job for her, only to find that she has fallen in love with Escamillo, a matador. The show climaxes in a fury of passion and jealousy that is illustrated best by Bizet's poignant score.

"There is a very sexual contract to the ballet," Pimble says.

Danielle Tolmie and Mark Tucker, engaged to be married themselves, dance the roles of Carmen and Don José and agree that this is still an envelope-pushing piece.



DANCERS LEOANNIS PUPO-GUILLEN AND JENNIFER MARTIN IN EBC'S 2007 CARMEN

PHOTO BY CLIFF COLES

"She just lived and had fun and didn't care what people thought of her," Tolmie says. "She's very much ahead of her time."

"It's a dark story, but it is not just about the pretty, classical ballet," Tucker adds. "It is all about a much more human, relatable story."

Bizet's opera has inspired thousands of performances — the Metropolitan Opera alone has done more than 1,000 — and adaptations, including everything from the *Carmen Suite*, a 13-dance, one-act ballet by composer Rodion Shchedrin, to *Carmen: A Hip Hopera* (the 2001 made-for-TV movie starring Beyoncé).

Pimble, however, has opted to do something nobody has ever done before.

She's woven all the music together to create a mosaicked four-act ballet, taking

Bizet's opera with music from Shchedrin's *Carmen Suite* and fleshing it all out with additional music from Bizet and Massenet, another 19th-century French composer. Pimble says *Carmen* is the only show in the season that will not feature live music.

"I didn't feel that I could tell it [with] justice as a suite," Pimble says.

The ballet features Spanish-style dance mixed with contemporary classical ballet and lots of acting without dialogue.

"Acting is just as important as the technique, which is rare," Tolmie says. "It is a very sensual ballet, and you can't really hold anything back or it looks fake. So it's been a challenge for sure, but it's been really fun as well." ■

Eugene Ballet Company performs *Carmen* 7:30 pm Saturday, Feb. 14, and 2 pm Sunday, Feb. 15, at the Hult Center; \$28-53.

PLAY IT AS IT LAYS

Very Little Theatre presents *Five of a Kind*

Chronicling the lives of five women in show business, the new play *Five of a Kind* spans half a century of friendship and social transformation. Written by Anita Dwyer and Adrienne Armstrong, the play premieres this week, Feb. 13-15, in a "reader's theater" format at the Very Little Theatre.

"We're going with reader's theater because it focuses on the material, the relationships, the dialogue and the characters," says Director Paul Rhoden. "The audience will be able to watch this play with their eyes closed and see everything."

With a decade lapsing between scenes, the dramatic comedy drops in on a monthly poker game in Los Angeles, beginning in the 1960s. We meet an ambitious Texan, a washed-up former child actress, an aspiring writer, a pampered trophy wife and a trust-funder who's perpetually furthering her education. The cast features Maya Thomas, Kari Welch, Abigail Borkin-Rius, Tanja Jenson and Darlene Rhoden, with Tim McIntosh narrating.

"As the women live through betrayals, trust issues, love, we see the evolution of the group as a family," Rhoden says.

The show explores individual experience within the context of tremendous cultural change.

"The overarching theme is the feminist revolution and the women coming into their own," Rhoden says.

The production sprang from the playwrights' 30-year careers in the entertainment industry. After writing for film and television, Dwyer and Armstrong didn't have to go far for inspiration.

"These are two substantial, accomplished, funny women," Rhoden says, "writing about five substantial, accomplished, funny women."

As Armstrong says, "We have both been in the business for so many years. We have met and, in some cases, known very well women who are the models for these five characters."

Armstrong quips, "Of course, in the writing they have taken on their own personas. As they say, 'any resemblance to anyone, living or dead, is purely coincidental' ... nudge, nudge, wink, wink," she adds.

A staged reading of *Five of a Kind* will perform 7:30 pm Friday and Saturday, Feb. 13-14, and 2 pm Sunday, Feb. 15, at the Very Little Theatre. An audience talkback session with the playwrights will follow each performance; \$5 suggested donation. ■

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