

REVIEW

Small audience, big success for 'Carmen' at Liberty

Supporting actress exemplifies powerful wholesomeness

By PATRICK WEBB
FOR COAST WEEKEND

In fifth grade, I fell in love.

It was no ordinary love. It was with the image of a woman I could never hope to mate.

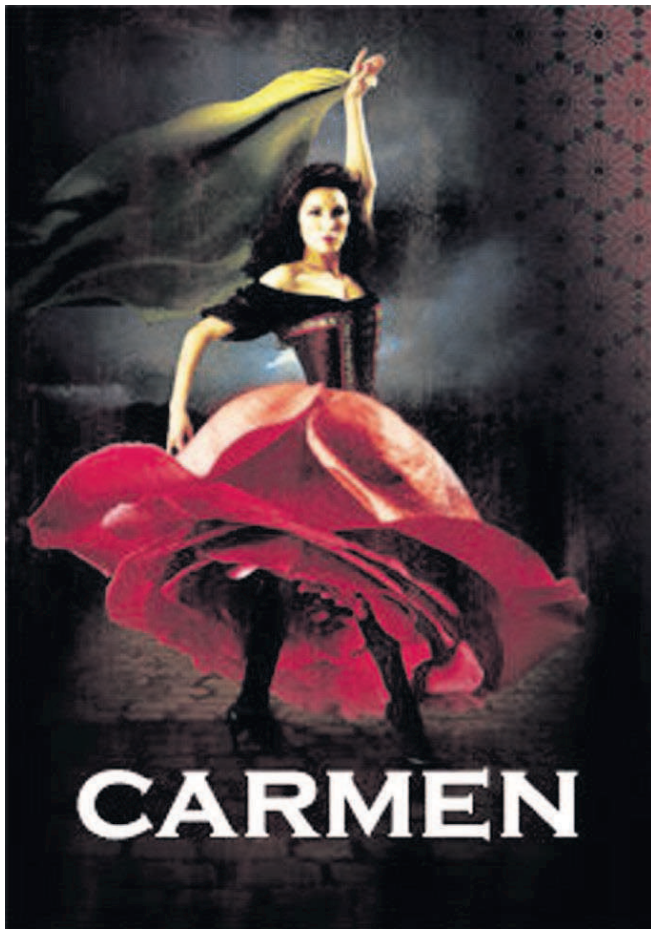
I fell for Carmen.

Like Don José, the doomed soldier in Bizet's opera, I came under the spell of that fickle vixen, that firebrand, that wondrous, free spirit. Oh, how I loved her, the image of her, that gorgeous French sound of her arias. Carmen is the most passionate fictional female character in Western performance art. She is spellbinding. And so it was with me.

Her spell, which has entranced me since a 1967 field trip to London, finally broke at Astoria's Liberty Theatre Friday night. For, unlike the love-blind corporal, I found the image of maidenly innocence infinitely more appealing.

Tacoma Opera brought a shortened version of the classic Spanish tragedy to the Liberty stage with a raw intensity. And the star of the show wasn't Carmen (though Stephanie Zuluaga was good), but the girl-next-door character of Micaela.

Jordan Corbin delivered such sweetness and power to the role. I have savored this masterpiece on both sides



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of the Atlantic for 50 years and can attest that she was the most believable Micaela I have ever seen. And I have heard plenty; on vinyl,

only Joan Sutherland in the well-regarded 1963 recording comes close to eclipsing her leading lady, Regina Resnik.

Corbin portrayed a paragon of wholesomeness, both at

her entrance when she offered her chaste kiss to Don José, and later, frightened, on her knees praying ardently for divine protection, in her

strongest aria.

My only disappointment was that there were only 125 paying guests to witness it.

Had Timothy Janecke as Don José paused, really listened, and realized that true, deep, lasting affection was staring him in the face, he would have carried Micaela back home to his ailing mom and we could have avoided any bloodshed. (Carmen is stabbed to death onstage by her spurned lover in the closing scene, one of many controversies that made Bizet's 1875 work scandalous and rule-breaking.)

With the troupe's general director, Noel Koran, serving as a fluent narrator, the company offered Spanish songs by blind Spanish composer Joaquin Rodrigo in a first act,



Jordan Corbin

PATRICK WEBB PHOTO

during which Zuluaga and Corbin warmed their voices. Rodrigo is best known for his Aranjuez guitar concerto, and the language barrier may have made the vocal selections less accessible to some.

The Bizet work featured a somewhat languid-paced but precise piano accompaniment from Denes Van Parys, linking scenes. Having played the "Overture" and "Toreador Song" with my English school orchestra, it was a

minor disappointment to hear no crashing cymbals.

But the manner in which Van Parys segued from scene to scene, incorporating those easy-to-hum tunes with dark foreshadowing, demonstrated considerable skill. Just four actors plus Koran united in a simply choreographed format that cut hours from the libretto without losing the essence; only the magic of the three gypsy girls' fortune-telling

(my favorite scene) was missing.

The one acting disappointment was Misha Myznikov as the toreador, though he conducted the stylized fight scene with aplomb. His voice offered deep sonority, but there was little presence in his Escamillo that would turn a woman's head.

Zuluaga was the most physical Carmen I have ever seen, practically ravishing Don José before our eyes before casting him off. She demonstrated the confidence, charm and effervescence that all Carmens need, occasionally losing clarity in her diction in the clinch, but was poised and commanding throughout.

Afterward, the group graciously met audience members who lingered for snapshots. A radiant Corbin deflected most praise toward her director. In turn, Koran clearly delighted in having such a mature performer in his cast. "She is just marvelous — expressive and effusive," he said.

The good news is that the group is staging a full-cast production of "Carmen" early next year.

Shows at the Pantagones Theater in Tacoma are planned Feb. 3, 9 and 11. Corbin and Zuluaga will portray gypsy girls Frasquita and Mercedes. Caitlin McKechney will fly in from afar to play the title character, which she has sung in Memphis and New York, and Kimberly Giodano, a Seattle-area regular, will portray Micaela. For details, log on to tacomaopera.com.

Meanwhile, the Liberty Theatre continues its Classical Series with small-group concerts Jan. 4, Feb. 4, Feb. 17, March 16, April 26 and May 25. For details and tickets, visit libertyastoria.org. 