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Chautauqua's gripping production of 'Carmen'



Derek Gee/Buffalo News

Leann Sandel-Pantaleo sings the title role in the Chautauqua Opera Company's upcoming production of Bizet's "Carmen."

CHAUTAUQUA -- Watching the Chautauqua Opera Company's staging of Bizet's "Carmen" is like slipping into a painting by Goya. The beautiful sets and costumes reflect the hues he used: deep reds, pale ivory, deep green and, above all, gold.

The whole production is vivid and gripping. Right in the first scene — when you see the bored soldiers lounging in the square and the cigarette girls slouching down from the factory — you know trouble is brewing. You can smell it. [Literally. The cigarettes the cast puffed made operagoers think fondly of Smell-O-Vision.]

The action is youthful, earthy and straightforward. Leann Sandel-Pantaleo plays Carmen with a dangerous, feral feel. The way she beat up another cigarette girl, flinging her onto a table and knocking her to the ground, could remind you of modern girl gangs.

She was a no-boundaries Carmen. The nasty way she flung the rose at Don Jose, the way she derided him when he wanted to leave her to rejoin his regiment, the way she sidled up to Escamillo, the Toreador — I could go on. Her acting was fabulous. Her voice was strong and flexible.

Which is lucky, because when a performance of "Carmen" is in English, not French, you have to make up for the sultriness that is lost in translation. In the famous "Habanera," no English can quite compensate for the loss of the words "L'amour." Sandel-Pantaleo made up for it, and then some.

She has a great foil in Michael Wade Lee, who plays Don Jose. Low-key at the start, Lee grows in presence and vocal power until, at the opera's end, he steals the show. The aria in the last act when he declares his love for Carmen was the most moving moment of the night. His high notes were clear and ardent.

Jan Cornelius brought innocence but also passion to the part of Micaëla. Her blond hair gave her a sweet, old-fashioned look, like a 1930s starlet.

Derrick Parker looked maybe a tad young for the part of Escamillo. The Toreador, large and macho, is supposed to stop the opera in its tracks. But that deep bass baritone stood out startlingly.

The production gains from the presence of “A Dancer,” portrayed by Oscar Valero. Valero has great Spanish flair, and during orchestral entr’actes, he used dance to communicate the emotions of the characters. In the exuberant tavern scene in Act II, he jumped on tables, his thundering feet adding color, clatter and excitement.

The final scene, set off briskly and boldly by the excellent orchestra, was a shocker and a delight, even though you knew what was coming. In that final line, did Bizet mean to quote Wagner’s “Tristan und Isolde”? It’s just a thought, but an interesting one.