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Chautauqua Opera presents 'Carmen'

By **ROBERT W. PLYLER**

CHAUTAUQUA — Once again, the stage of Norton Hall is filled with gypsies and bullfighters and seductions, as Chautauqua Opera presents one of the most popular operas in the world: Bizet's "Carmen."

Surely everyone knows by now, the story of the beautiful gypsy who seduces an earnest young soldier into betraying his duty and abandoning his beloved, only to dump him for a handsome toreador. But everyone loves the music, and everyone wants to know what interesting approaches will be taken by the particular production.

The Chautauqua production was especially well sung. Leann Sandel-Pantaleo brought a lush, dark mezzo to the title role. She was tall and moved very well, and never left any doubt she could turn a man's head. Michael Wade Lee had a robust and unforced top register which made his Don Jose a standout.

Derrick Parker had the most vibrant baritone I personally have experienced in the role of Escamillo, the famous bullfighter. He gave the role a physical energy which was most appropriate. A word of praise for the lovely Jan Cornelius, who sweetly, yet powerfully sang the role of Jose's abandoned love, Michaela. Director John Kramar introduced a number of effective elements. For example, during the orchestral preludes to each act, he had actors pantomime events which had happened, before the singing began. This made their characters more understandable and their staged interactions more effective. The one dramatic failing came at the end of the opera, in the final confrontation between Carmen and Jose.

The couple just walked back and forth until the woman who had been so seductive and so attractive all evening was allowed to become tedious and almost boring.

Ari Pelto and the Chautauqua Opera Orchestra accompanied sensitively and proved themselves flexible and capable of a wide palette of musical colors. Franco Colavecchia's set always set both the place and the proper mood perfectly, yet never interjected itself into the action, nor delayed the flow of events. Michael Baumgarten's lighting and Paula Peasley-Ninestein's costumes always enriched the activity on the stage.

Many opera fans feel they have heard enough productions of "Carmen," at least for a while. This one isn't so wildly different that you'd need to see it above all others, but it is a solid, well-sung and musically powerful rendering. You certainly would never regret having attended it.

"Carmen" was reviewed in dress rehearsal, at the request of the company. It will be performed Friday and Monday evenings at 7:30 p.m.