

**Carmen**  
**ENO / London Coliseum**  
**Edward Seckerson**

'Here's a show which could run and run. It looks great, kind of Broadway-grubby and just as busy, though not so the detail doesn't tell'

I was never going to be a picturesque Carmen. The good doctor's aversion to operatic 'tourism', to what might loosely be termed the 'mantilla factor', is well known. So away with those catanachs, hold the flamenco. Jonathan Miller once more has his itchy finger on the fast-forward button, depositing us somewhere in the 1930s at the scrag-end of Seville, where the old walls are crumbling, where the accents are oish, the men a nuisance, and the cigarette girls just fed up to the back teeth. Enter Carmen, their star turn. She's done all her numbers before, and they work every time. So who can she bait today? Draped against the factory wall, looking for all the world like she's posing for *Life* magazine (wonderful lighting by Tom Mornings), she's straight into her favourite Habenera - her signature number. ENO has a terrific Carmen in Louise Winter. Anyone who's been watching this singer's progress of late will know that the timing is good. She's ready, the voice is set. She certainly doesn't spare it, pulling everything she has up from the chest register, going all-out for the vocal bump-and-grind, the insinuating cleft and croon of a quasi-cabaret style. She and Miller meet well clear of the pared-by, hip-swinging obvious. Carmen doesn't need to work at being 'sexy', alluring - she is. And therein lies her feminism. Her free spirit. She'll exploit men as surely as they've always exploited her. That's the deal.

Don José is 'different' - she says it herself. He's a challenge. Any man who busily clears his rifle during her hit number has to be Miller's man up beautifully with that one action. He's too good to live, wet as the rainy season, more excited by a kiss from his hapless girlfriend (Micaëla) (the excellent Janice Wilson) when he knows it's from his mother, the kind of man who'll lose control, fling a chair halfway across Lilla Pastia's bar, but straightaway replace it. Carmen lives for the moment. José lives for a tomorrow that will never come. Which makes Robert Bullock's pathetic, broken, whinging figure all the more believable in the last scene. And Bullock really goes for it. Viscerally he's as unflinching as his Carmen. I can live without the finale. It's a brave performance.

So here's a show which, like Miller's *Rigoletto*, could run and run. It looks great (sets Peter J. Dawson, costumes Sue Blinn), kind of Broadway-grubby and just as busy - though not so busy that the detail doesn't tell. Miller knows his craft. He's good at living canvases. There's always something to catch the eye.

Like the boy who asks the other boy for a dance in the Act 2 bar scene. That opening number really holds in the choreography (Terry John Bates). Miller cross-cutting our focus from one dirty-dancing couple to the next. And again, it takes a real director to ensure that the crucial look that flashes between Carmen and Escamillo (a booming Robert Hayward) is not lost in the crowd.

The "chorus" - in the shape of that vociferous ENO Chorus (plus refreshingly raucous street-wise kids), were in fine fettle. It was a good evening, too, for Stan Edwards, with playing from the orchestra that was splashy and easy without lacking heart. But my mind will go back to Winter's proud Carmen, resolutely refusing to succumb to José's knife, still freshening her lipstick even as the last breath was leaving her body. ■ In review 15 Nov. *Bookings 017-622-2200*

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