

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH

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# Spontaneous combustion in a hothouse Carmen

**OPERA**  
**Carmen**  
Coliseum

Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR



Raunchy and brooding: Carmen (Louise Winter) is portrayed as a slut and no-hoper in Jonathan Miller's ENO production

ONE thing you can predict about Jonathan Miller is that he is not going to be predictable. His new *Carmen*, which has just opened English National Opera's autumn season, adopts precisely the sort of refreshing, well-considered approach that makes opera exciting and potent, and leaves you wondering why nobody has done it that way before.

Above all, Miller bears in mind that this is a French, not a Spanish, opera. Of course, Bizet aimed for local colour, in much the same way that Rimsky-Korsakov culled Spanishisms for his *Capriccio Espagnole*. But essentially the sounds, the style and the general mien of *Carmen* are French.

So Miller has abjured any picture-postcard imagery: no mantillas, not even any castanets for Carmen's dance in Act 2. The setting is vaguely Spanish, but could really be anywhere hot and smokey. The partially obscured sign on the cigarette factory reads "Fabr... Ciga..." — linguistically we could be in any number of countries. Let's say, though, that we are in a sort of East End Seville, in the 1920s or '30s, with wideboys and villains with an eye to the main chance, and girls willing to oblige. The designs (by Peter J. Davison) conjure up a hothouse atmosphere to match the vehement emotions of the opera: the sets may be, in the main, of walls, but there is tremendous character, texture and suggestive interest in them. The light

(Tom Mannings) is warm yet sinister and full of intrigue.

There are some quasi-Cockney accents, though Don José, the American tenor Robert Brubaker, wisely does not attempt one. In a production that strikes such an imaginatively universal stance, this scarcely matters. The voices

are superb: Brubaker himself, Louise Winter as a raunchy and brooding Carmen (Miller has interpreted her as a slut and no-hoper, and this comes across with a raw vengeance), Janice Watson as a more than usually assertive, beautifully sung Micaela. Sian Edwards conducts with a keen ear for vary-

ing paces and tensions, matching Jonathan Miller's own ideas on stage.

One of Miller's other attributes is that he knows how to make his characters move naturally — and equally so his chorus, or the children pretending to be soldiers. In this production, you are drawn into

the drama simply because everybody is behaving — or misbehaving — spontaneously. This *Carmen* is, in operatic terms, the nearest thing to Real Life that you might experience. It's marvellous.

Tickets: 0171-652 8500

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