

KATE KELLAWAY

Post-industrial Carmen

How does Jonathan Miller's reinterpretation of Bizet's opera cope with the impassioned heroine's story?

Carmen does not like men who cramp her style. Jonathan Miller should, like her other admirers, be on his guard. His new production for English National Opera, designed by Peter I. Davidson, looks marvellous—a heady day for the eye. The walls of Seville are sun-baked, there is a lot of dazzling blue sky at the back of the stage. The cigarette factory seems to have been doing good business: the air is smoke-filled, the mood indolent. Beyond the shade of the conservatory, idling soldiers watch as the cigarette girls pour out of the factory gates, tired but sensual, dabbing water on bare flesh, tossing water into their mouths, all their actions somewhere between practicality and seduction.

Jonathan Miller and the company endeavour to make Carmen and her environs believable, to sling away the castanets and allow her to be a scurrying, real girl. Louise Winter, with dark eyes and jet black hair, looks made to order. She wears a silky black dress sprigged with flowers, a saffron cardigan tied in an ungainly fashion around her waist and flirty little boots. When she walks, she has a swagger to her hips. When she sings, her voice is fine and strong. Her habitual pose is of scornful provocation, she leans her head back, pinning her body against the wall like a butterfly too stubborn to fly. She convinces. But the trouble is we do not need to be convinced by Carmen, we need to be thrilled.

Bizet's opera does not care for or court realism, and Carmen's unreality should be part of her allure. She is larger than life and bolder, abnormally audacious and doomed. Her opening shot, her invitation-cum-warming: 'If you love me... ought to be electrifying. It is a bit of amazing sexual exhibitionism. In this production it seems mopey peculiar that this handsome, ordinary girl should want to hold forth about love in such florid terms — 'love is a child of pipe blood etc' — to the assembled company.

From the start, there is a conflict between the high drama of the music and the understatement of the production. The opera itself defies understatement, its intimate moments are seldom private — there are often more than 40 witnesses to personal encounters.

The second act is a huge improvement on the first: seener and more animated. It is set in a teeming café where predatory couples tango, with feet like fastidious insects. Escamillo's manager bustles about in a salmon-pink suit distributing leaflets about the forthcoming bull fight.

Escamillo's appearance in this act is a companion piece to

Carmen's first appearance in Act One. Both are stars certain to dazzle, playing to the crowd. Fortunately there is no such thing as an 'ordinary' matador, so Robert Hayward can be accommodated into Miller's scheme of things and still be attractively over the top.

When he walks in, everyone welcomes him and we do too as the opera comes to life for the first time. He treats the whole world as if it were a bullfight. He can't pick up anything without treating it as a cape. He indicates that he could dispose of the ball at least as easily as he tosses his hat across the room.

In this act, Carmen seems suddenly to have caught Escamillo's fire. She caresses her cheek with an empty wine bottle and then suddenly breaks into violent song, offering a dance for Don José in a voice filled with an emotion that fuses hate and love.

As Don José, Robert Brubaker's voice does all the work for him. He sings well but acts poorly, often seeming to stand about like a spare part. Perhaps this is how Carmen makes a man feel. But when he poses his defiant, jealous little floor down, stamping on an upturned crate in protest against Escamillo, the gesture looks risibly mechanical. Carmen, in contrast, can move sinuously with her hands tied behind her back.

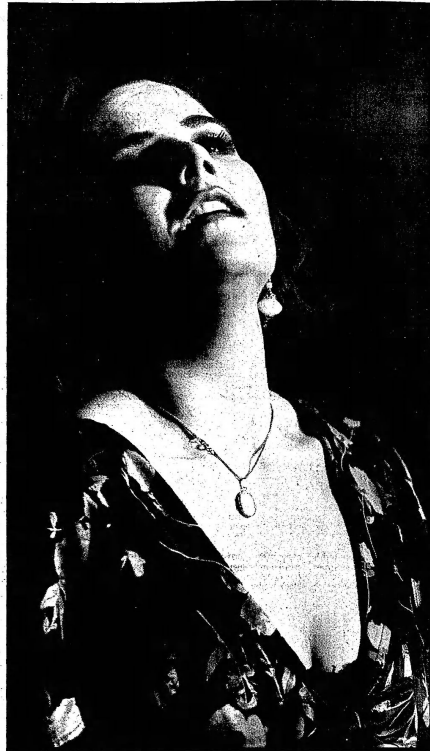
This production is risky but not dangerous. The music should make the heart dance and flinch. I particularly missed the sense of tension and fear that the sea-sick intensity and swell of the music can generate.

In the scene where the girls are reading the cards and the music is shuffling awesomely too, in readiness for the terrible moment when Carmen's fate reveals itself, the mood is not urgent. The moment in which the cards foretell Carmen's death came as an anticlimax and the orchestra, conducted by Sun Edwards, seemed more jerky than menacing. But the heart did sing with Janice Watson's Mizels.

The last act is splendidly staged: the matadors parade past in the dust like mermen with sparkling gold and silver scales. But about Carmen herself, who looks as though she had walked straight out of Dickens & Jones in her spotty frock, one hardly cares.

She redoes her lipstick and while looking in her make-up mirror spies José. The finishing touch is that as she totters upstage, dying, she reaches for her lipstick once more. This is a nice idea but it doesn't work. It does no service — not even lip service — to Carmen's tragedy.

Carmen ENO, London WC2 0Q7F, 6.58 (011) 27 29 Sept and dates throughout October



Real girl: Louise Winter captures Carmen's essential indolence. Photograph by Richard Milderall

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