

Carmen: Under the gypsy's spell

She's back, as feisty, sexy and indomitable as ever. As the curtain rises on a new Royal Opera staging, Jessica Duchen tells how Bizet's heroine sings to us all

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The librettist's friend didn't mince his words. "Your Carmen is a flop, a disaster! It will never play more than 20 times. The music goes on and on. It never stops. There's not even time to applaud. That's not music! And your play - that's not a play! A man meets a woman. He finds her pretty. That's the first act. He loves her, she loves him. That's the second act. She doesn't love him any more. That's the third act. He kills her. That's the fourth! And you call that a play? It's a crime, do you hear me, a crime!"

The year was 1875. Paris's Opéra-Comique had just staged the world premiere of Carmen by the 36-year-old composer Georges Bizet. The first act - man meets woman - was much applauded. The fourth - he kills her - was received in little more than silence. Three months later, its devastated young composer was dead.

But 131 years after that, Carmen is one of the most popular operas in the repertoire, and tonight the Royal Opera House is unveiling a new production of it, its first since 1991, by the American director Francesca Zambello. Three exciting young stars will be in the spotlight: the Italian mezzo-soprano Anna Caterina Antonacci as the free-spirited Spanish Gypsy Carmen; the German tenor Jonas Kaufmann as Don José who loves and kills her, and the Italian bass-baritone Ildebrando d'Arcangelo as Escamillo, the toreador for whom Carmen deserts José. The ROH's music director Tony Pappano wields the baton. And, with every critical eye turned on it, punters paying highly for their seats and expectations at fever pitch, it's up to Zambello to conjure up a Carmen to remember.

Staging an all-time favourite for one of the world's leading opera houses is a massive challenge. On the one hand, of course, Carmen is a gift: its story and characters are archetypes of the most extreme yet persuasive variety, based on a marvellous novella by Prosper Mérimée. And it's brought to colourful life by Bizet's score: the drama taut, the unforgettable melodies overflowing with Spanish character, the orchestration glittering, and the action carried forward through the music in a manner now de rigueur in West End musicals. Still, even

people who think they've never heard an opera can hum "The Toreador's Song". How do you make such an overfamiliar work turn out fresh and new?

"It's all about chemistry," Zambello says. "First, it's my favourite opera in the standard repertory. It really is a brilliantly crafted work. But what makes it so exciting to direct is that it's all about the people. With Carmen, the real test of the cast and the production is to work together to produce something honest, real and truthful. It's not like there's any great concept behind Carmen except how you get great performances out of everyone, and how you create the chemistry to make it work."

Isn't it daunting? "Oh God, totally!" Zambello says, laughing. "As a director, I prefer doing lesser-known repertory because you're not under such scrutiny. When you go into the standard repertoire you basically have to open yourself up to huge criticism, because everyone thinks they know how the work should go. They just do! Archetypal characters, like Carmen, are people everybody thinks they either know personally, or are themselves. They're iconic. I think that because people feel they know the characters so intimately, they have very strong opinions, often more visceral than cerebral. But there comes a point where you have to put that behind you and focus on the task in hand. I want to be doing Carmen for generations to come, for people who are discovering it for the first time."

Carmen has been adapted and reworked more often, and probably more successfully, than any other opera. First, there was the musical Carmen Jones. Set in an African-American army camp, Oscar Hammerstein II's musical creates a new classic. Here, Carmen is a parachute-maker, Joe is about to undertake pilot training for the Korean War, and Husky Miller is a prize fighter. The lyrics are punchy, the drama convincing and stagings pretty regular - one is planned for the Royal Festival Hall next summer. Otto Preminger's 1954 film stars Dorothy Dandridge as Carmen and Harry Belafonte as Joe, their singing dubbed by Marilyn Horne and LeVern Hutcherson.

But take out the singing, add choreography and it still works. In 1967, the Russian composer Rodion Shchedrin was asked to write music for a Carmen ballet for his wife, the Bolshoi's prima ballerina assoluta Maya Plisetskaya. He adapted Bizet's music into a rip-roaring orchestral score full of tearaway percussion and many clevernesses, including the reduction of that "Toreador's Song" to accompaniment alone - the audience, we infer, knows how it goes. Matthew Bourne used Shchedrin's version for his dance adaptation, The Car Man, in which a bisexual male mechanic causes mayhem in 1950s America.

Aside from ballet, what about flamenco? Bizet's score is quintessentially French in many ways, but it feels Spanish. The film director Carlos Saura updated the action to a flamenco company, in which the choreographer, played by the dazzling Antonio Gades, while preparing a dance version of Carmen, is gradually

captivated by the young woman playing the leading role. Their tale soon mirrors that of their ballet. With both genuine flamenco and genuine Bizet, and one occasionally transformed into the other, this 1983 film is a stunner.

And it was on film that a whole generation was blown away by Carmen in * * the shape of the sex-bomb mezzo-soprano Julia Migenes-Johnson. Filmed in southern Spain, in locations appropriate to Mérimée's novella, Francesco Rosi's 1984 film of the opera gave the work full-on spectacular treatment, both musical and visual. Alongside Migenes-Johnson, Plácido Domingo is the embodiment of Don José's passion and desperation, Ruggero Raimondi is a dashing Escamillo and the dramatic scenery of Andalucía becomes a character in its own right. Lorin Maazel conducts.

Last year, another take emerged on film, this time from South Africa. Mark Dornford-May's U-Carmen eKhayelitsha was made on location and sung in Xhosa, transposing Carmen to a post-apartheid township with uncanny aptitude. The music has been much cut, but at times the drama's power is strengthened. Carmen still works in a cigarette factory; her lover is a policeman; the girl his mother wants him to marry is his brother's widow. It's enhanced, too, by local contexts: Carmen's fate is foretold by a witch doctor and the slaying of the bull is a ritual ceremony undertaken by the Escamillo character, Lulamile, a famous singer returning to his roots and attracted to "Carmensitha" by her lovely voice. His signature aria is, naturally, "The Toreador's Song"; Carmen sees him for the first time singing it on television.

There's also a stunning juxtaposition between Bizet and the traditional a cappella South African music that welcomes Lulamile home in place of "The Toreador Song". Charles Hazlewood conducts and Pauline Malefane stars as a feisty yet vulnerable Carmen. The film scooped the Golden Bear for Best Film at the Berlin International Film Festival 2005 and was an official selection for the Cannes Film Festival's Tous les Cinémas du Monde.

The amazing thing is that all these transpositions work as well as they do - something that tends to prove the power of their source. One of Zambello's former productions (Covent Garden's is her fourth) set the action during the Spanish Civil War. "Carmen works in any time or place," she says. "The smugglers could be smuggling human cargo in the present day and it would still be fine."

For Covent Garden, however, she's created a traditional staging on a grand scale - period costumes, flamenco dancers, the orange trees of Seville - which should have the pulling power necessary for a national opera house, plus the potential to run and run. "We have to get back to the essence of the piece and be truthful to it," Zambello says.

"We've spent a lot of time on the words, going back to the source material. With the costume designer, Tanya McCallin, we wanted to set it in the late 19th century, a little while after Bizet wrote it. We're trying to create a realistic environment for it. We've used a lot of reference material; we're going back to how people looked then, how they acted, talked and moved, and we're using a lot of flamenco dancing with the choreographer Arthur Pita. We want to capture the world of Seville of that time: not only the laconic atmosphere of Spain but also the sense of danger and the class differences between the Spanish and Gypsy worlds."

The story of Carmen, Zambello says, embodies the essence of 19th-century personal dilemmas: "At this time, people realised they could either act upon their desires or they could act upon duty." In literature, theatre and opera, the stories returned to this theme time and again. "Take Verdi's Violetta in *La Traviata* or Berlioz's Aeneas in *Les Troyens* - these characters are torn between what they want to do and what they're supposed to do. Rather than big political stories like Verdi's *Nabucco* or Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* and *Kovanshchina*, this is much more about individuals: real people experiencing truthful emotions and being torn apart by them."

Desire versus duty is precisely the conflict facing Don José, but Carmen herself does exactly as she pleases, even though it ultimately leads to her death. What drives her? "Carmen's arc is that she exists outside of normal society and is an individual, a rebel," Zambello says. "I think she's an incredibly powerful woman who has a strong, independent spirit. As she says herself, 'Live free or die.' She doesn't want to be chained down by a man - there's nothing wrong with that!"

Today, it seems obvious that this opera has all the ingredients of success - so what went wrong in 1875? Why should Carmen have been such a flop that it helped drive Bizet to an untimely grave? Perhaps Paris in the 1870s couldn't cope with an overtly sexual and bloody opera. "I think it was hard for the audience to watch people who were so passionate and so real, not fantastical or metaphorical," Zambello suggests. "It's about a woman plummeting towards her end - it's the end, really, of all of the opera's characters. I think it was too much to take."

Bizet, unknowingly, was plummeting towards his own end together with his characters. The run-up to the premiere had been a massive strain. Quite apart from undertaking remedial work such as rewriting the lyrics of the "Habanera" 13 times, Bizet had to contend with a faction - no less than the theatre's director Camille du Locle, his assistant Adolph de Leuven and the joint librettists Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy (Bizet's wife's cousin) - who felt that the opera's shocking conclusion should be modified to become acceptable to the Opéra-Comique's habitual family audience. The lead singers, Célestine Galli-Marié and Paul Lhérie, took Bizet's part and responded by threatening to walk out. Fortunately for us, they won.

Matters seemed to improve with the final dress rehearsal in front of a small, invited crowd of friends, but - in true theatrical tradition - that did not bring good luck. It's possible that Carmen was actively sabotaged. Halévy noted later: "We might have gone to the opening performance full of confidence the following evening, had not several morning papers published vitriolic letters, written as though by the same person. One commented, 'Carmen presents most unsavoury characters, in such bad taste that the work might very well be ill-advised.'"

The opera ran, despite all this, for 48 performances and was much admired by other composers of the day. Tchaikovsky was bowled over, predicted its likely future popularity and became deeply influenced by the idea of Carmen's "fate" motif. Further praise came from such luminaries as Saint-Saëns and Gounod, while Wagner himself declared: "At last. Someone with new ideas."

Bizet never knew that his work would one day come to be recognised the world over as a crowning glory of the opera repertoire. He had suffered from throat problems for some time and now, exhausted and depressed, he fell prey to what doctors described as "acute articular rheumatism" (actually angina plus quinsy), which led to heart failure. Perhaps his health was so poor that he would not have lived long in any case; but the strain of Carmen's opening and disappointing reception can only have made matters worse.

Halévy wrote: "I was awakened at 2am on 3 June to learn that Bizet had died of a heart attack at the very moment the curtain had fallen on the 32nd performance." A legend exists that at the moment Bizet suffered his fatal heart attack, Célestine Galli-Marié experienced a sudden vision of him and was racked by pain. Some say that the unhappily married Bizet had fallen in love with her - his own Carmen.

But when the orchestra sounds the first notes of Carmen's overture tonight, Bizet and his Gypsy heroine will be reborn all over again. And if Zambello has succeeded in all that she's set out to achieve, new fans will be falling in love with Carmen in this fresh-minted classic staging for years to come.

'Carmen', Royal Opera House, London WC1 (020-7304 4000), in repertory to 3 February

Women In Love: Five great Carmens

CELESTINE GALLI-MARIE (1840-1905)

Bizet's original Carmen, Galli-Marié was born in Paris into a family of musicians. She was a stalwart of the Opéra-Comique, starring there in Ambroise Thomas's Mignon in 1866 and continuing to sing at the theatre for 10 years after the premiere of Carmen. Bizet is rumoured to have become somewhat infatuated with her. It's intriguing that her voice was described as a "high mezzo-soprano" -

the role of Carmen seems to straddle the mezzo and soprano ranges and has been sung successfully by both.

CONCHITA SUPERVIA (1895-1936)

The Spanish mezzo-soprano was associated with the role of Carmen for most of her short career. No wonder; in her recordings of highlights from the opera one hears how she assimilated music and character into an indivisible whole entirely her own: each twist of Bizet's vocal lines becomes an expression of Carmen's zestful personality. Few have achieved such a fusion of music and drama.

MARIA CALLAS (1923-77)

Not everyone likes Callas's Carmen. Beauty doesn't really come into it - but beauty isn't the point. For Callas, character was everything: her unique voice is all about drama, and her Carmen is not just wilful and compelling, but often downright nasty. This is no conventional interpretation: there are snarls and shrillnesses and one could even imagine a catlike spit in places. Like it or loathe it, the effect is electrifying. In this controversial recording, Nicolai Gedda takes the role of Don José and Georges Prêtre conducts.

VICTORIA DE LOS ANGELES (1923-2005)

The polar opposite of Callas's, the Catalan soprano Victoria de los Angeles's Carmen is one of the most beautiful on disc. For some, it's almost too beautiful. "Even the common Gypsy women have a pride and reserve," de los Angeles once said. "They stay faithful to one man at a time, no matter what. That is my Carmen." Full of spirit, with Sir Thomas Beecham setting the orchestra aflame, the recording is a classic.

TERESA BERGANZA (b1935)

Berganza, the limpid-voiced Spanish mezzo, is many people's ideal Carmen, supple, sensuous and proud. Her recording from 1977, conducted by Claudio Abbado with Plácido Domingo as Don José and Sherrill Milnes as Escamillo, is still Gramophone's top recommendation. Subtle, dramatic, progressing convincingly from flirtation to tragedy, this is a Carmen of considered and intelligent artistry, and it fulfils a perhaps startling aim on Berganza's part - to rescue the role "from bad traditions and from its insults to Spanish womanhood".