

PALM BEACH, April 2010

Full disclosure: The reason for seeing yet another production of Carmen was because the title role was sung by a close friend, whom we had heard many times in recitals and concert stagings, and with whom we met on many social occasions discussing operatic experiences from our respective sides of the footlights.

On balance, this was a very successful production by Palm Beach Opera. Mezzo Magdalena Wór gave a thrilling performance, with great singing and even better acting. Her voice – clean, rich, smooth – exhibits amazing maturity and depth for someone at the start of her career. All of her performances are noted for expressive acting – a couple of years ago, the Washington Post critic reviewing her recital of art songs at the Polish Embassy was amazed at how much emotion she conveyed, in contrast to the usual dead-pan rendition of this form of singing. In Carmen, she could perform with even greater dramatic expression, which greatly enlivened the character she portrayed.

Tenor Rafael Davila was truly amazing – of the many Don Joses I've heard in live performance, the ones remain alongside him in my memory are Placido Domingo and Jose Cura, although the latter was not an impressive actor, which Davila certainly is. His tone was clean throughout his range, and even in the softer passages he could project to the balconies.

Georgia Jarman as Micaela was very good – this is a difficult role to cast, being vocally demanding yet short on stage time, so most A-list sopranos are not interested. Her tone was most pleasant, with only one instance of a slight roughness when she pushed the high register (her solo aria in Act III). Other secondary roles were also good, especially Carmen's gypsy friends Frasquita (soprano Debra Stanley, whose voice stood out wonderfully in the ensembles) and Mercedes (mezzo Irene Roberts), and bass Bradley Smoak as Jose's commander Lt. Zuniga. But baritone Nmon Rod as Escamillo the toreador was somewhat of a disappointment – see the description of Act II below.

Carmen's entry, the Habanera, was uncharacteristically for Magdalena somewhat subdued, but with flashes of dramatic brilliance at the right points. Her next aria, the Sequidilla, was much more universally spirited, striking just the right dramatic subtleties, as did all her subsequent arias and ensembles. For example, the reprise of the Habanera, as she is led off under arrest just before her escape, was beautifully soft – a delicate, soft-spoken temptation to Don Jose alone, a fitting antithesis to the first dramatic performance for the crowd at the market square. However, the vocal high point of Act I was the duet of Jose and Micaela, wonderfully done – she showed no roughness here.

Act II, in Lilas Pastia's tavern, had one high point after another, by Carmen (many high points of singing and acting), Zuniga, the chorus, culminated by a very good Flower Song by Don Jose. As mentioned, the only disappointment was Escamillo's entry aria, the Toreador song – his voice did not project well, and overall his performance (also in subsequent acts) lacked energy and did not sufficiently project the swagger of the character.

Act III, the smugglers' camp in the mountains, was very good vocally, but the staging was somewhat incongruous (more on this later), and the lighting was too dark. Yes, it is supposed to occur at night, but soloists should have been highlighted with follow spots, since it was difficult to distinguish which of the several murky figures was actually singing. The high point was the trio of Carmen and the gypsy girls in the reading of fortunes from cards. Also, Escamillo partially redeemed himself with a somewhat better performance than in Act II.

In Act IV, the corrida, the orchestra somewhat fell down in the oom-pa music of the March of the Toreadors – the percussion dominated the sound, muddying the definition of the winds and brass which are supposed to delineate the melody. That was a surprise, because elsewhere the orchestra acquitted itself very well, and performances of the difficult flute and oboe solo parts were without flubs (I've heard worse from more prestigious ensembles).

The staging in Act IV was very physical – Jose throws Carmen to the ground and attempts to strangle her – what, instead of stabbing her with a knife? Well no – but anyway, no knife. The climax is staged very unusually but highly effectively. Instead of stabbing her to prevent her from entering the corrida, Jose slips offstage while Carmen goes upstage to the entrance of the arena where the crowd is cheering the toreador – the lighting beyond the gateway turns to red. Against this blood-red backdrop, as Carmen raises her arms in triumphal homage to her new lover, Don Jose suddenly rushes in from stage left and “pierces” her with a picador's lance.

That's a very effective end to the production (by John Pascoe, whose productions have been seen in the major opera houses of the world) that, with few exceptions, is effective overall. The sets consist of massive masonry arches which are variously arranged to represent facades around the square of Sevilla, the interior walls of Pastia's tavern, and the arcade of an entrance to the corrida (very closely depicting the form of a stadium entry ramp used since the Roman Colosseum to this day). This set design is less than successful in Act III, where one of the arches is incongruously placed in the mountain campsite. Another anomaly: Carmen wears high heels in the mountain scene! Yes, she is petite and the tenor is tall, but in Act I she is barefoot and that does not detract from their joint scenes.

But these are mere quibbles – I recall very few of the almost 200 opera performances I've seen in which I didn't find quibbles. On balance, the performance was on a very high level – musically, visually, dramatically, emotionally – and the company and performers should feel justifiably proud. We are sure that this addition to Magdalena's resume will contribute to her further success.