

WARSAW, June 2004 – Bizet's Carmen is one of the few operas I can watch over and over, never growing tired of it. The performance by the National Opera at Teatr Wielki in Warsaw (June 18, 2004) was in most respects a world-class production and performance, up there with the better ones I've seen.

The singing was very good. The star attraction was Argentine super-tenor wannabe Jose Cura, who acquitted himself very well. His is a nice smooth voice, easy high notes, although he did stumble on the downturn from the high note in the penultimate phrase of the Flower Song. Otherwise that showpiece, and his other arias, were very good. One drawback is that he seems to have gone to the Al Gore school of acting – very wooden.

Mezzo-soprano Ekaterina Semenchuk, originally from what is now Belarus, was splendid in the title role. Hers is a rich voice, notable for its great expressiveness and finesse rather than spinto forcefulness, but capable of dazzling with power and volume where appropriate. A truly virtuoso performance, both vocally and visually – she is a consummate actress. And one of the few times when a dramatic female lead is, if anything, too slender (does that mean this performance is never over?).

Micaela, the home-town former girl-next-door character, is a fiendishly difficult role, but because of its limited stage time is not often filled by top-rank singers. Here, Izabella Klosinska was absolutely stunning, near perfect. My only quibble is my usual one – too much vibrato.

Escamillo the Toreador was sung by Polish baritone Mikolaj Zalasinski, who has a great voice, with a style that was the antithesis of the soprano's: all force and bluster, which fits this role perfectly.

Secondary parts were very well done. The chorus, as always in this company, was impressively large and vocally spectacular. Musically, the low point of the performance was the orchestra. Whether through the fault of conductor (Jose Maria Florencio) or lack of individual musical skills, many lapses were apparent. The opening phrases of the overture sounded muddled and lacked definition – if you can imagine that an orchestra can have a sustain pedal, this one's was being overused. Hard to say whether this was the conductor's fault, or lack of skill, e.g. imprecise bowing, on the part of the musicians. The lovely flute part in the intro to Act II (shared with l'Arlesienne Suite) was played with poor intonation. In this company, the orchestra is unfortunately at the opposite pole from the excellence of the chorus.

The staging was, to say the least, interesting, but strange. Surrealism seems to be the fashion in this company, as it was in a Don Giovanni which we saw here last year. Here, some of it was effective, most not.

During the opening overture, the stage shows a huge statue of a bull, all in darkness with smoke machines generating lots of vapor. Then the first scene, which is supposed to be in the sunny center of Seville, opens with a dark background and lots of residual smoke. The soldiers sing of watching the people going to and fro about the square, but the only items strolling about are the buildings, which come gliding out of the wings to form the town's façade. It takes a while, but then the bright town center takes shape and people start strolling as the chorus says – merchants with baskets, nuns, priests, and an auto-da-fe of inquisitors in tall pointed hats. Eventually it becomes quite effective, but it takes a while.

The signature scene of Carmen throwing the flower at Don Jose is very strange – she plucks it out of the ground next to the well and hands it to an androgynous figure dressed in blue-green tinsel tunic and skirt and angel wings, who just happens to be passing by unseen by the others; he/she then carries it across the stage and drops it at Don Jose's feet. Huh? The angel appears in several later scenes, with equal incongruity.

The second act is at Lilas Pasta's tavern; here the feast is in the courtyard, which allows for more townspeople to pass by (including a return of the auto-da-fe; more on this later), and the toreador's entrance is preceded by two very live horses dragging in a very dead bull. The latter has significant impact on the plot development (Lt. Zuniga, in his later duel with Don Jose, catches his sword on the carcass and is thus disarmed). This act seems to be the opposite of the first – whereas it is usually portrayed as dark and smoky, here the backdrops have the bright colors of Seville building façades.

During the intermission before act 3, a figure hooded and draped in white comes out and stands stage front center before the closed curtain, back to audience. The action takes place in the mountains where the smugglers are planning to take their contraband across the border. The above-mentioned figure stands there through most of the action, apparently unseen by the others – symbolizing death? fate? At one point, the auto-da-fe procession re-appears in the middle of nowhere, also unseen by the others, and the figure in white joins the procession as it walks offstage. As the toreador invites everyone to see him at the corrida in Seville and the smugglers leave, Don Jose then takes up the position at stage front center, back to audience, as the scene shifts to Seville for act 4. As was the figure in white, he is unseen by the participants of the ensuing toreadors' procession. VERY effective! There is no curtain here; the mountain crags glide into the wings amid clouds of smoke and the outside of the arena is revealed at stage rear.

This opening of act 4, again supposedly in bright sunny Seville, is again shrouded in the mists of smoke machines working overtime. Effective – NOT! After the toreadors' march and her duet with the toreador, Carmen finally sees Don Jose, who has been standing there all the time, and their final duet begins. At this point, the revolving stage starts turning, and the inside of the arena is revealed, holding the huge chorus in its tiers of seats, with the large statue of the bull in the arena area. The mechanics are truly spectacular, but they unfortunately divert your attention from the lovely singing of the protagonists at stage front, and periodically the lighting on the revolving stage shines in your eyes.

So overall, whereas the musical values of this production were on balance very good, the stagecraft was less than pleasing – interesting, but not entirely satisfactory.