

Cincinnati Opera's "Carmen" Unqualified Success

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Daniel Okulitch as Escamillo (center), Stacey Rishoi as Carmen (seated center front) in act II of Bizet's "Carmen"

She's back.

"Carmen," that is, Georges Bizet's *femme fatale*, and she filled the hall with music and fans (a nearly full house) Thursday night at Music Hall.

Cincinnati Opera's 171st performance of the universal favorite (the last was in 2009) was a spectacular success, with uniformly fine singing, acting, an eye-filling, "Technicolor" production and outstanding playing and conducting by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra led by Marc Piollet.

Starring as Carmen was mezzo-soprano Stacey Rishoi (in her role debut), whose sultry voice was ideal for the role. Tenor William Burden made a perfect match as the fatally smitten Don José, with bass-baritone Daniel Okulitch as the dashing, burnished-voiced matador Escamillo. Also compelling was soprano Laquita Mitchell as the faithful Micaela, in love with José but unable to save him from himself.

Bass Nathan Stark made a strong, blustery Zuniga, with fine contributions by soprano Alexandra Schoeny and mezzo-soprano Pojanowski as Carmen's friends Frasquita and Mercédès, baritone Joseph Lattanzi as corporal Moralès, and tenors Aaron Blake and Sumner Thompson as the smugglers El Remendado and El Dancairo. The Cincinnati Opera Chorus and Cincinnati Boychoir (directed by Henri Venanzi and Christopher Eanes) played a major role in the opera, with outstanding performances in all four acts.

A delightful addition to the *dramatis personae* were members of Cincinnati Ballet, who performed gypsy dances at Lillas Pastia's tavern in act II and formed part of the parade outside the bullring in act IV.

Director Alain Gauthier's characterization of Carmen was of a fun-loving, carefree gypsy, sincere in her love for Don José, if not "forever," as he would have desired. She may be poison,

but somehow you like her anyway and lay the blame for their tragedy more on Jose's obsession than on her fickleness.

Designed by Allen Charles Klein – scenery is from Atlanta Opera, originally produced by Florida Grand Opera -- the visuals drew the audience in from the outset. The set -- framed by walls on both sides, leaving the center stage to morph from the town square in Seville, to Lillas Pastia's, the mountains around Seville and a street outside the bullring -- **was beautifully lit by Cincinnati Opera lighting designer Thomas Hase. The warm, brilliant hues of Seville gave way to atmospheric blues and greens in the mountains, where Carmen read her fate in the cards.**

French-born Piollet led the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in a lithe, well-crafted performance that fully projected the work's tuneful abundance.

Highlights of the performance were many. Among them: the Boychoir (joined by a few girls) in their playful act I characterization of the soldiers outside the cigarette factory; Rishoi's smoky habanera as Carmen entices the soldiers and her equally seductive seguidilla directed at Don José; Okulitch's virile "Toreador Song," partly delivered atop a table at Lillas Pastia's; Rishoi's dance for Don José, complete with castanets, and Burden's heart-rending "Flower Song" as José confesses his love for Carmen, both in act II; Mitchell's beautiful, touching aria as Micaela seeks to rescue José from Carmen in act III; The parade in act IV with dancers as picadors and a matador preceding the entrance of Escamillo; and finally (literally), the tense, climactic scene between Carmen and Don José in act IV, where she protests her freedom and her love for Escamillo, whereupon José stabs her to death.

Bizet's "Carmen" repeats June 14 and June 20 at 7:30 p.m. and June 22 at 3 p.m. at Music Hall. Tickets begin at \$25 at (513) 241-2742 or order online at www.cincinnatiopera.org