

MUSIC REVIEW

Boheme Opera Presents Solid Performance Of "Carmen" in Its Spring Production

Over the past quarter century, Boheme Opera NJ has provided opportunities for up-and-coming singers to hone their skills, as well as more established artists to delve into major roles of standard operatic repertory. For its spring production of the 27th season, Boheme Opera NJ presented one of the classics — Georges Bizet's immortal *Carmen*, introducing a high-powered mezzo to the regional opera community. Full of the great melodies that characterized opera comique in 19th-century Paris, *Carmen* was popular from the outset, and has remained one of the world's most beloved productions to this day.

Boheme Opera's presentation this past Friday night (with a repeat performance Sunday afternoon) at the College of New Jersey's Kendall Theater centered on a simple set, often just a few tables, in front of a digital backdrop which established the mood for each scene. Technical Consultant Jason Milstein and Lighting Designer Mike Voytko created an ambience which moved the story into the 21st century. The most impressive scene was the opening of Act III, with a haunting moon bathing the stage in light as an ominously foretelling ace of spades unfolded within the moon during the "Card" scene.

As *Carmen*, mezzo-soprano Julia Mintzer took immediate command of the stage and the role. From her opening "Habanera," Ms. Mintzer was clearly a cut above the singers heard to that point in the opera, and she never came onstage without sultriness and vocal craftiness. Her scenes with tenor Patrick Miller's Don José were among the most dramatic of the production. Mr. Miller emotionally conveyed the Act II "Flower Song" well to *Carmen*, and provided an especially graceful ending to the aria.

Mr. Miller was also vocally well paired with soprano Lyssandra Stephenson, who sang the peasant girl Micaela, Don José's other love interest. Recognized as a "Rising Star," Ms. Stephenson clearly has a great future in lyric soprano roles, but with the layout of the Kendall stage and a large orchestra in the pit, she was hard to hear at times. It was a lovely voice, most impressive in the upper registers.

The toreador character Escamillo requires

commanding presence and vocal abilities to effectively act as a foil to Don José's pursuit of *Carmen*. Baritone Constantinos Yiannoudes had the most extensive performance background of any of the cast members, and carried the action well in the "Toreador" scenes, including the character's signature aria. Scenes among *Carmen*, Don José, and Escamillo were strong, often accompanied by a chorus well trained by Brittany Montoro. Additional choral performance was provided by members of the Trenton Children's Chorus, prepared by Tanya Coyne. The Trenton Children's Chorus singers were divided dramatically and by costume into red and blue theatrical groups, and were always ready for the conductor when it was time to sing.

Solid performers singing minor roles included baritones Kevin Grace (Zuniga) and Charles Schneider (Dancairo), and tenor Christopher Hodson (Remendado). Aiding *Carmen* in her often devious schemes were soprano Brynn Terry as Frasquita and mezzo Maja Lisa FritzHuspen as Mercedes. Particularly in the Act III "Card" scene, their two voices together with *Carmen* were a precise and convincing trio. To accompany the singers, conductor Joseph Pucciatti assembled a solid orchestra, which although overpowering at times and showing a few tuning problems here and there, held up well throughout the performance. Mr. Pucciatti maintained good control over both orchestra and singers and a number of instrumentalists provided elegant solos to accentuate the mood of a scene.

The few flaws in the performance came from inconsistencies in the direction and an unusual approach to costuming. Particularly in crowd scenes, singers occasionally seemed to be stuck in dead space, and the staging of couples dancing during *Carmen*'s "Habanera" detracted from the rawness of *Carmen*'s sultry proclamation that she is in charge. The costuming was disappointing in the missed opportunities to convey the vivid colors of the opera's Spanish theme, although *Carmen* and several other characters appeared from time to time in sinuous flamenco dress. However, dressing the women in jeans and casual wear was just a minor distraction in what otherwise was a strong operatic evening.

—Nancy Plum