



Society : St. Albans Operatic Society
Production : Carman
Date : May 1998
Venue : Alban Arena
Report by : Joe Burgh, Area Membership Secretary
(with a little help from the Councillor!)

Report

Like I am sure, so many others, 'Carmen' was my first introduction to opera (in the first season Covent Garden reopened after the war). I therefore always find it rather special and am pleased to see it again.

Even to non-opera buffs, the Overture must be familiar and it can therefore get the show off to a good start. The playing here was good (brass in particular) and although I thought it began at a good pace without running away, I did feel that towards the end it began to drag.

The opening Act I must have been something of a shock to those who had not had time to read the programme notes! I was certainly not put off by the modern dress and I very much liked the minimal set, here and in the other three Acts where, if anything, it worked even better. Dorothy felt, however, that, particularly in Act I, there wasn't a sufficient Spanish feel about them - there must have been some locals apart from the soldiers, they couldn't all be just-arrived tourists - but everyone looked SO pale! The uniforms were fine and the other costumes also looked right for the setting.

Vocally, James Shipp was not at all confident which was a shame as Morales has the first solo one hears and it took a while before the audience was persuaded to concentrate again. The children looked confident enough and marched enthusiastically but their vocal did not really have enough punch behind it. I was somewhat surprised to find that Spanish National Service extends well into middle age! Certainly, some of the civilian men gave the impression of being rather dirty old men in their enthusiastic welcome of the factory girls! David Marshall's Zuniga was a confident C.O. with an effective singing voice.

The girls' singing was very well balanced, both among the principals and in the chorus. Their factory overalls looked correct but some of what was visible underneath them seemed a little too pristine to be real - these girls after all are working in dirty, sweaty conditions and it is high Summer (as the Tourists made very clear). A just laundered white crop top doesn't quite seem authentic, I feel!. Pam Homan's red dress was a wow but I think it stretched the imagination to believe that she had been wearing it in a fight - particularly as many of the other girls looked suitably dishevelled. Pam's earlier indisposition was still a little apparent in her singing voice which appeared to be holding back at times. Her characterisation was sensuous and controlled - the mistress of any situation, and any man she wanted. The 'Habanera', was particularly effective, as was her persuasive 'Far far away you'll follow me' towards the end of Act II. An over-powerful Carmen can sometimes destroy the vocal balance of the Smugglers quintet and the card trio but this was not the case here.

Michelle Wright began my tentatively as Michaela - I got the impression that she had not properly warmed up her voice - but she became more confident as her singing progressed, particularly in the upper register. Her diction, however, we have meant that those unfamiliar with the opera, were none the wiser after she had sung. Visually, she made a good contrast to Carmen.

The girls' fight was well choreographed and all of that scene very believable, girls and soldiers. Carmen's escape, however, was too perfunctory. Much more could have been made as the virtual climax of Act I.

The Act II set was simple and effective and David Berridge's Lilas Bastia made an impact, although he could perhaps have been a little dirtier and seedier. Some of the Tourists were rather ham footed dancers but then tourists usually are aren't they?! Clare Pettet and Jo Branch worked well together as Frasquita and Mercedes, their singing and dancing blending well - Clare had the edge with much clearer diction and dominated the quintet with her accurately sung soaring phrases.

They were well partnered by Ross MacInnes and Mike Fooks as Dancaire and Remendado, a couple of very believable organisers of organised crime, both of whom had a good sense of comedy timing. The quintets were very well sung with the good diction essential in what is almost a patter song.

Matthew Gregory made a very effective entrance as Escamillo, exuding the star quality essential for the role. So often, one sees no reason why Carmen should throw over Don Jose for a somewhat ineffective looking Escamillo - no possible danger of this here! It has been a delight to follow the progress of this talented young man since his days as a teenager at Harpenden. Matthew not only looked right, he also sang well and dominated the stage in all his scenes. The famous Toreador's song is notoriously difficult to sing as it makes demands on both the top and bottom of the baritone range - Matthew overcame this challenge with glorious panache. We also enjoyed the beautiful short duet in Act IV - so passionate for just a fleeting moment.

I liked Carmen being set looking out front whilst listening to Escamillo and the timing of her line 'he could always wait - and hope' was impeccable.

The oboe introduction to the Flower Song was delightful and John Innes' rendering of the number (always difficult when people have heard Tenors of all sorts singing or wrecking it) was gently ardent and dreamy, building up to an excellent climax. John's whole interpretation of the role was accurately studied. Don Jose is not the handsome hero type - he is an easily dominated young man who cannot control his bare emotions. This understanding of the character shone through from his first fateful meeting with Carmen to his brooding build-up of jealousy in Act III and disintegration in Act IV.

The Act III Intermezzo is my favourite of the three but was somewhat marred by the flautist running out of breath at a crucial point. The opening, however, made up for everything. The simple but effective setting and brilliantly designed lighting gave the perfect atmosphere which was enhanced by the smugglers' costumes and props - I assume they were gun running from the weight of some of the boxes! The eating and drinking business during the card trio added to the atmosphere without detracting from the singers. Again, the lighting design played its part by focussing on Carmen for her part of the trio.

Michaela in this Act was much more confident and her diction was better. The contrast between Don Jose and Escamillo was again drawn to good effect in this Act and their fight was also well choreographed the break up of which by Dancaire and Remendado looked like the real thing.

The Entracte to Act IV was exceptionally well played - particularly in the woodwind section. Again, the set was all it should have been; the crowd barriers looked genuine and effective and the litter of orange peel, paper etc exactly right for the outside of any stadium. Altering the lyric from 'Come and buy' to 'Let us buy' was sensible. What a magnificent procession leading up to the Bull Fight - some very distinguished looking members of the society not normally seen on stage - their costumes F.O.H. would have set the scene far better than their DJ's!

Both Escamillo and Carmen looked stunning when they made their entrance, making the contrast with the broken Don Jose' even more effective. The

Carmen/Don Jose fight, however, was the only fight sequence which did not convince me. The final scene can sometimes look awkward and contrived if the chorus, or some of them, return. The picture of the tragic pair alone on the stage was much more poignant.

That man of many parts, John Heath did you proud as Director, Choreographer and Set Designer.

Congratulations and thank you for a very good evening's entertainment which I hope has converted some of your audience whose preference is for musicals to enjoying opera as well. Keep up the good work.

Thank you also to the F.O.H. staff who, as we have come to expect at St Albans, look after us so well.