

OPERA VILLE

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2016

Opera San Jose's Carmen



Lisa Chavez as Carmen in the tavern scene. All photos by Pat Kirk.

Opera San Jose
Bizet's Carmen
February 13, 2016

If Layna Chianakas intended to prove the difference that a stage director can make, she could not have done better. With a single split-second action, she changed the entire discourse of the story, probably ticked off a few purists, and certainly messed with the idea of Carmen as a feminist icon. (I won't reveal this split-second action here, but if you'd like to know, I'll describe it at the end of this review.) I, for one, enjoyed the move, but then it neatly agrees with my take on the character: that Carmen was so possessed by medieval superstitions and megalomania that she was determined to fulfill the destiny spelled out in her Tarot cards.

A memorable OSJ Carmen herself, Chianakas went a little "method" in researching gypsy culture, and her discoveries about that culture's communal tightness and lack of personal boundaries shows itself here. Most memorable is the opening of the tavern scene, a mass of figures flowing around the stage with the dramatic geometries of a baroque painting, then bursting into flamenco handclaps and footstomps. The frenzy builds during Carmen's tambourined "Les tringles des sistres

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ABOUT ME



 [MICHAEL J. VAUGHN](#)

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of seventeen novels, including *The Popcorn Girl* and *Billy Saddle*. His poetry has appeared in more than 100 journals, and he works as a competitions judge for *Writer's Digest*. He lives in San Jose, and plays drums for the San Francisco

tintaient.”

Eventually, of course, all the direction in the world fails without talent, but San Jose’s lineup is loaded. Lisa Chavez was born to play Carmen, equipped with the classic Carmen look, vocal power and attitude. She does a masterful job of tempering that power, keeping her powder dry for the truly dramatic moments. In the Habanera and other classic passages, she retains a self-assured cool that gives her the bearing of a leader.

rock band Exit Wonderland.

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Lisa Chavez as Carmen, Kirk Dougherty as Don Jose.

Kirk Dougherty sings Don Jose with a spinto tenor and an effective, edgy ring in the top notes. He uses his thin physique to convey a Jose who is unable to stand up to the larger-than-life Carmen. The final phrases of his Flower Song are heart-breakingly tender and fragile. Later, he plays the final stalking scene with a particularly creepy sense of insecurity, the lashing out of a powerless man.

With her big, bright eyes, it’s easy for Jennifer Forni to portray Micaela’s innocence, but she does well to hint at the ferocity of her attachment to Jose. She and Dougherty blend beautifully on the Act 1 theme associated with Jose’s mother, which reappears in Act 3 (followed by a rather lengthy kiss), and she sings the renowned “Je dis que rien nem epouvante” with lovingly crafted crescendos.

Baritone Matthew Hanscom wrestles with the low opening of the Toreador Song, but otherwise delivers a confident, charismatic Escamillo, helped in the tavern scene by the ensemble’s energetic greeting. His voice truly comes alive in the faceoff with Jose in Act 3.

The second tier of singers features some solid voices from OSJ’s past,



including baritone Daniel Cilli in the brief-but-pivotal role of Morales, and the seasoned bass of Kirk Eichelberger as the ill-fated Zuniga. The opera comique smugglers Dancaire and Remendado (baritone Eugene Brancoveanu and tenor Michael Boley) lead the Gypsy Quintet through the smuggling plan with precision vocals and phsyical schtick in the Rossinian “Nous

avons en tete une affaire.” Carmen’s gal-pal Mercedes is yet another former OSJ Carmen, mezzo Cybele Gouverneur. As for gal-pal #2, I have never heard a Frasquita I didn’t like, and soprano Christine Capsuto certainly fits that bill, playing her as a proto-rocker chick with edgy humor. Her victory dance when the cards predict a rich, near-death husband is hilarious.

Giulio Cesare Perrone’s sets are inventive and utile, providing high archways for the plaza scenes and a brooding, stark mountain set for the gypsy hideaway. Carmen’s Act 2 outfit, a blood red skirt with a black spangled corset, is just *hot* (Alyssa Oania, costume coordinator). Fight director Kit Wilder maintains a good balance between compelling scuffles and keeping his singers off the disabled list. Conductor Joseph Marcheso led the orchestra in a sumptuous reading of Bizet’s score, particularly in the delicate interplay of flute and harp (and later, exquisite swells of strings) in the Act 3 entre’acte.



Jennifer Forni as Micaela.



Christine Capsuto and Katherine Trimble as Frasquita and Lillas Pastia.

The mystery figure of the teenage toreador adds nicely to the intrigue. The two dancers (Gabriel Mata and April Shippen), added a vigorous, athletic element to the proceedings. And the children's chorus was just superb. In a completely selfish mode, I'd like to thank PR man Bryan Ferraro for the new press kit, basically a standard program with blank pages for critic's notes. Brilliant!

Through February 28, the California Theater, 345 South First Street, San Jose. \$51-\$151, www.operasj.org, 408/437-4450.

SPOILER: Carmen, impatient with Jose's inability to make good on his threats, grabs his hand and forces him to stab her.

Michael J. Vaughn is a long-time opera critic and the author of 17 novels, including Operaville and Gabriella's Voice.

POSTED BY MICHAEL J. VAUGHN AT 12:27 PM 1 COMMENT:

TUESDAY, JANUARY 12, 2016

Bowie



On the night of his death, there was some serious moonlight, but perhaps it was a space oddity, a bit of ziggy stardust. I was but a young American when he came to fame, a rebel rebel from Suffragette City who sang songs of modern love and always delivered under pressure. In his golden years he was a true starman, going through so many changes, giving us so many heroes. So what do we do, now that we have lost the man who sold the world? Get out the China, girl. Let's dance.

POSTED BY [MICHAEL J. VAUGHN](#) AT 11:57 AM NO COMMENTS:

SATURDAY, JANUARY 2, 2016

Daughters of Cecilia



Daughters of Cecilia

Antonina Milyukova

No, no, I'll not on this earth give my love to another. Whatever part fate may decree, I am yours!

--Tatiana, *Eugene Onegin*

Terrified, man-mad Tchaikovsky. You send him a crush note as he composes *Onegin*. He instructs you to quell your feelings.

He writes Tatiana's world-lifting Letter Scene, followed by Onegin's cruel dismissal, and feels guilty. So he marries you.

The honeymoon inspires Tchaikovsky to throw himself into the Moscow River. The desired pneumonia fails to arrive.

He pays you off, at 6,000 rubles a year. You bear three children by another man. Still, you refuse a divorce.

Sixteen years later, Tchaikovsky flirts with a duke's nephew. A court of colleagues orders him to kill himself. He does so.

You outlive him by twenty-four years, condemned by a court of your own to hold on to the ancient tether, as it pulls you from one asylum to the next.

I picture your face at the barred window, tracking the silversnail path of the moon. Listening to the *Pathetique*, over and over.

Doria Manfredi

Continue to work at your picture till nightfall, and you must promise that no pious lady, no fair or dusky beauty, shall be admitted here on any pretext!

--Tosca

Summers in Torre del Lago, you wait to do your ironing in the cool of night. This is also when the Maestro works, his cowboy opera ringing through the villa.

At break time, you find him in the garden, puffing on a cigar, and share a brief talk. The Maestro is elegant, soft-spoken. It could be that you look on him as a father (how you long for a father).

Elvira Puccini hears the voices beneath her window. *Doria stays late to be near my husband. She meets him in the garden for lovemaking.* She fires you, spends the autumn denouncing you as a slut. What's worse, everyone believes her.

The Maestro sends a note, lamenting his wife's behavior, but seems incapable of stopping her. She finds you at Christmas day mass and threatens to kill you.

Haunted and sick, you purchase a bottle of mercuric chloride, a corrosive disinfectant, and swallow three tablets. The stomach cramps begin immediately, followed by five days of riveting pain.

In your note, you ask for revenge on Elvira, and clemency for Puccini, who has done nothing.

The gossips conclude that Doria has died of a botched abortion. The authorities order an autopsy, to be conducted in the presence of witnesses. The autopsy reveals that Doria was a virgin.

Renata Tebaldi

I'll go alone and far as the echo from the churchbell. There, amid the white snow; there, amid the clouds of gold – there where the earth appears as but a recollection.

--La Wally

I drive the length of Oregon. The radio slaps me with a four-word sentence. I stop at the Shakespeare festival, trekking the Christmas-lit streets for a latte, rubbing a jigsaw piece between my fingers.

This grieving makes no sense. I don't know you. Everything you've given me is locked away on vinyl and aluminum. My loss is precisely nothing.

But once, you took hold of my tangled hearing, and untied the knots.

Jenny sits at the kitchen table, her eyes growing wide. *You've never heard Tebaldi?* She reaches for the stereo: an impossibly broad soprano voice, constructed of butter, an aircraft carrier tracing cadenzas like a speedboat.

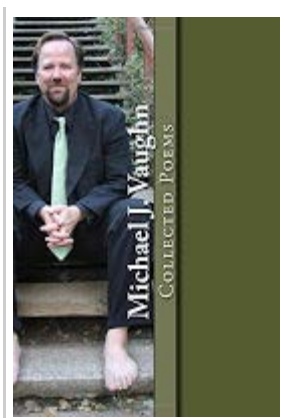
She tells me you're alive, residing in Italy. This does not seem possible.

I have made no secret of my fixation. My friends will send me condolences, as if I have lost a favorite aunt. I will read reports of you at San Marino, breathing your last, one eye on the hills.

On the night of four words, I scale the Siskiyou, strangely energized, the roadsides patching with snow. My head fills with Catalani, Renata loosing her dovish triplets as she climbs the white mountains, untethered.

From Michael J. Vaughn: Collected Poems

Notes: I discovered these stories of Puccini and Tchaikovsky almost simultaneously - the first in a biography, the second while researching a story on The Nutcracker. This was followed by the passing of Tebaldi, and my trilogy was complete. The stories are so astounding I found that the best way to their poetic hearts was by stripping everything else away, and using the prose poem style. Thanks to Terrain.org for printing these. Oh, and Cecilia is the patron saint of music.



POSTED BY [MICHAEL J. VAUGHN](#) AT 1:12 PM NO COMMENTS:

MONDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2015

Mimi at Nepenthe



Mimi at Nepenthe
(For Kirsten)

They drive to Big Sur and
pull into a lot hovered by
witchcraft oaks

Says Rodolfo:

It's named for an elixir,
one that takes away all sorrows

Says Mimi:
In that case,
let's drink all that we can!

Scrubby hillsides sprayed with
copper sunset, a single
cloud in the shape of a boomerang

The Pacific far below,
a shade of forever night sky that wraps the
continental rift like a fitted sheet

A fresh fire over
Mimi's left shoulder

Rodolfo takes a rhapsodic breath,
brings the fork to his mouth and
chews on a glazed duck that could
bring La Scala to tears

Even in Puccini,
such moments should not be possible

POSTED BY [MICHAEL J. VAUGHN](#) AT 3:27 PM NO COMMENTS:

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2015

Cecily



Cecily

Caribbean moxie on a dolly face,
the tone pours out like
pecan praline expressed as an
algebraic formula

If the hands get any
where near the hips,
pull up a chair.
You are due for an
hour of unfiltered standup

Three hours later a lil-ol-me smile,
naughty niña from Juarez,
a range bigger than Wyoming

I wish she loved her
self as much as I do

One night she drove into a
parked car and removed every
inch of interior except the
part containing her

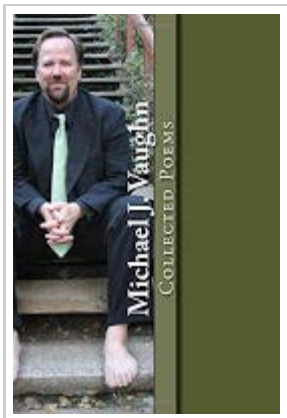
This is what some people need.
Some seeds do not
blossom until they
pass through fire

I am eager to see what she
becomes, and till then will
enjoy the liberties of a duet:

to look someone square in the face,
to sing and smile and match words,
our voices mixing in the ether as
the lights guide us home

From Michael J. Vaughn: Collected Poems

Notes: The last line is a quote from the Coldplay song "Fix You," one of
the many tunes we do together.



POSTED BY [MICHAEL J. VAUGHN](#) AT 4:00 PM NO COMMENTS:

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2015

Butterfly



Butterfly

Each night, the picture comes to kill me:
you and the baby, walking to the bedroom.

You tie an American flag around his eyes,
then sit in the kitchen and study your final option,
silver and cold to the touch.

When did the math arrive at this?
How many drunks, flare-ups, divorces,
pregnancies, bad dreams?

Hold an invisible gun in your hand.
Pull the trigger.
Feel how it flexes a muscle all the

way back to the elbow.
The finger cannot do this work alone.

Each night, I stand next to you in a
field in Atlanta as you bring the
metal to your chest, and I ask,
What was your last thought?
Why didn't you think of calling me?

From Michael J. Vaughn: Collected Poems

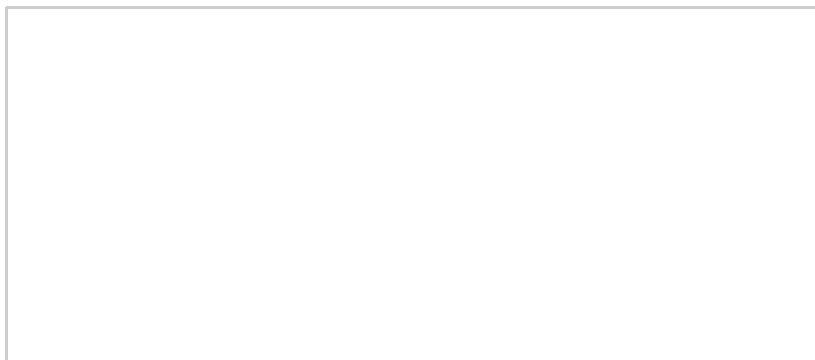
Notes: about my dear friend Sharona, who committed suicide ten years ago, along with the kind of random thoughts that go through a grieving mind looking for reasons: the similarity to the final scene from Madama Butterfly, and, oddly enough, an interview with a pitching coach on how throwing a forkball causes wear and tear on the elbow.



POSTED BY [MICHAEL J. VAUGHN](#) AT 2:50 PM NO COMMENTS:

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 2015

Opera San Jose's The Marriage of Figaro





Matthew Hanscom as the Count, Karin Mushegain as Cherubino.

All photos by Pat Kirk.

Opera San Jose

Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*

November 15, 2015

Stage director Lillian Groag and her opening-night cast left no gag unturned in possibly the funniest *Figaro* I've ever seen. It was one of those nights where the diaphragm muscles in the audience got as much exercise as the ones onstage.

A mysterious walk-through mirror. A lonely hunter wandering onstage to offer his ducks to passing nobles. A veritable offensive line of servants tumbling through an opened door. A hat magically held aloft by an excited appendage. And feathers falling from the freaking flies. The barely controlled chaos resembled nothing more than a Marx Bros. movie.

Credit the cast with squeezing some beautiful singing into this wacky choreography. It helps that they were perfectly cast; to a *Figaro* aficionado, it was as if OSJ scoured the world over for perfect archetypes.

The most reassuring sound was the first line of bed measurements from bass Ben Wager – solid tone, easy delivery – because if you've got a good *Figaro*, you're halfway home. Wager had a terrific, sadistic time toying with Cherubino in “Non piu andrai” and enthusiastically ripping

up the female gender in “Aprite un po quegl’occhi.”

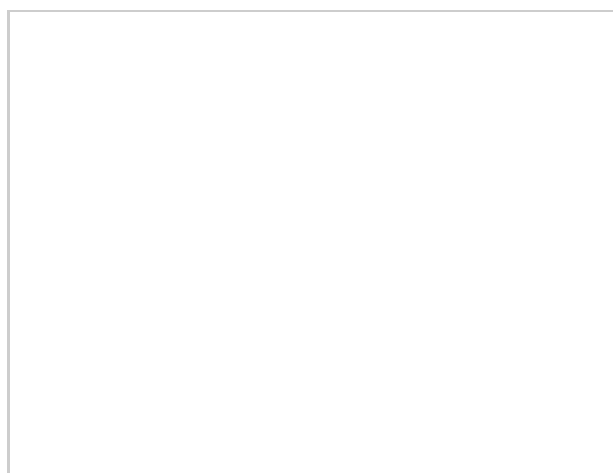
Taking on the thankless job of playing the Count (who fails and fails and fails for three hours straight), baritone Matthew Hanscom did beautifully, thanks largely to a fit of flying arms and legs you might call the Dammit Dance. He also lent real menace to the Count’s pledge of vengeance, “Vedro, mentre io sospiro” (helped by Sean A Russell’s spooky lighting).



Ben Wager as Figaro

Mezzo Karin Mushegain comes to Cherubino with the dual advantages of height challenge (okay, she’s short) and a fantastically expressive stageface. She plays the slapstick with aplomb, at one point crawling across the room under a blanket like some kind of alien worm. My only complaint was that her “Voi che sapete” seemed to be constantly pushing upward, losing a little quality in the treble.

Isabella Ivy simply *is* The Countess, height advantaged (okay, tall), with a soprano that continues to grow in its richness. The only flaw came in the opening “Porgi, Amor,” where she had a couple of hiccups along her passaggio, but her “Dove sono” was gorgeous, played with a defeated melancholy even sadder than the usual Countess. Her final forgiveness of the Count was elegant and heartbreaking.



Soprano Amina Edris brings a genuine *ohmagawd* teenage quality to the expected Susanna sauciness, hurling cohorts here and there as she wades



Matthew Hanscom as the Count, Isabella Ivy as The Countess.

through the
non-stop
fiascos. Her
voice came to
the fore in the
chill-inducing
Letter Duet
with Ivy, “Che
soave
zeffiretto,” and
then “Deh
vieni, non

tardar,” sung to a faux lover for the purpose of torturing her eavesdropping husband. Her vocal lines in the latter were sensual and divinely shaped, delivered with a wonderful sense of dynamic play.

Being a good-looking dude, tenor Michael Dailey plays a lot of ingenues, but I’m beginning to think his future lies in comedy. His Don Basilio, a busybody goof, is the operatic incarnation of Jerry Lewis. Having offended his boss, the Count, he breaks into a high-speed jitter worthy of a meth-head in a Vibra-bed, and his hugely loud stamping of the Count’s official papers is a brilliant bit.

Groag’s direction brings in some noteworthy innovations. She completely halts the score for extended gags: skinflint Bartolo (Silas Elash), for instance, taking an eternity to fish a single coin from his purse. She brings in some extra-curricular characters: Arlecchino (Harlequin, played by Ryan Sammonds), inserting himself in scenes as the commedia dell’arte prototype for Figaro, and carrying on a musical argument with harpsichordist Veronika Agronov-Dafoe over the proper march for his entrance. Another theme was the constant presence of eavesdropping servants, which accentuated the idea that all behaviors in a noble house have political ramifications.



Amina Edris as Susanna, Michael Dailey as Don Basilio.

Conductor Andrew Bisantz seemed to be having an enormous amount of fun. A particularly stunning effect was the string subito pianos in Figaro's "Se vuol ballare." Bisantz and baritone Silas Elash had a bit of a tempo disagreement in Bartolo's "La vendetta." Steven Kemp's set designs seem a little worn, but do possess some nice touches. The Spanish doors in the Countess's apartment go well with the California Theatre ceiling, and the blooming wisteria of the garden scene tok me straight to Villa Montalvo in May. The costume prize goes to the Count's gorgeous purple paisley coat in Act I.

Through Nov. 29, California Theatre, 345 S. First Street, San Jose.
\$51-\$151. operasj.org, 408/437-4450.

A side note: Much as I loved Groag's direction, her program notes make a convoluted, bizarre claim that Beaumarchais' play, one of the most censored works in history, was *not* anti-aristocracy. Much of her argument hinges on the Count's final apology to the Countess. And if you believed *that* apology, I've got a bridge in San Francisco I can sell ya.

Michael J. Vaughn is an opera critic, poet and author of the opera novels [Gabiella's Voice](#) and [Operaville](#).

POSTED BY [MICHAEL J. VAUGHN](#) AT 4:41 PM NO COMMENTS:

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