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Review: 'Carmen' a triumph Opera San Jose

By Georgia Rowe | Correspondent

POSTED: 02/15/2016 11:44:39 AM PST
| UPDATED: ABOUT 14 HOURS AGO

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PAT KIRK Kirk Dougherty as the impassioned Don Jose pleads with the implacable Carmen, sung by Lisa Chavev, in Opera San Jose's production of Bizet's "Carmen." (Sue Gilmore)

Audiences never seem to tire of "Carmen," and judging by the response at Opera San Jose's opening night performance Saturday at the California Theatre, they likely never will. Bizet's 1875 score is a perennial favorite, one that retains its power to quicken the pulse and touch the heart, and the standing ovation and lusty cheers that greeted the cast at the end of the

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company's three-hour performance were sufficient evidence of this opera's enduring place in the repertoire.

Of course, it helps to have strong singer in the title role, and this "Carmen" has an excellent one in mezzo-soprano Lisa Chavez.

Chavez, a former member of OSJ's resident ensemble, has appeared in a variety of roles for the company. From Humperdinck's Hansel to Rossini's Isabella, she's established herself as a versatile artist. But Carmen seems tailor-made for her. From her first appearance as the seductive gypsy who prizes freedom above all else, Chavez sounded terrific. Singing her mesmerizing entrance piece, the "Habanera," her smoky, richly colored voice shaped the music in expressive, voluptuous phrases.


Chavez may surprise operagoers expecting stock gestures and poses. This Carmen avoids the hip-swinging clichés that have become synonymous with the character. Haughty and intense, she radiates sensuality with a minimum of schtick. And her singing is secure, unfettered and beautiful right up to the opera's tragic final scene.

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Chavez was the center of Saturday's opening, capably conducted by music director Joseph Marcheso, and despite mostly fine performances, no one else quite came up to her level. As Don Jose, the soldier who loves Carmen, tenor Kirk Dougherty gave a handsomely sung, if sometimes dramatically indistinct, performance; his finest moments came in an impassioned and tonally secure Flower Song. (Tenor John Lindsey will assume the role on Feb. 26 and 28.) As the bullfighter Escamillo, baritone Matthew Hanscom swaggered convincingly but lacked the robust low notes for the role. Soprano Jennifer Forni was an ardent, occasionally vocally imprecise Micaela.

Some of the evening's most engaging moments came in the gypsy camp, with tenor Michael Boley and baritone Eugene Brancoveanu giving vibrant, dramatically alert performances as the smugglers Remendado and Dancaire. Matched with Chavez's Carmen and her pals Frasquita (soprano Christine Capsuto) and Mercedes (mezzo Cybele Gouverneur), they made the quintet "Nous avons en tete une affaire" a radiant highlight.

There were fine contributions in subsidiary roles, including Daniel Cilli's articulate Morales, Kirk Eichelberger's robust Zuniga, and Katherine Trimble's agile Lillas Pastia. The adult and children's choruses sounded well-prepared.

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This "Carmen" unfolds in a traditional production. Giulio Cesare Perrone's terraced set, enhanced by York Kennedy's atmospheric lighting, features a brick facade with keyhole arches. The addition of various pieces moves the action from the Seville cigarette factory to Lillas Pastia's tavern, the surrounding mountains, and the entrance to the bullring where Carmen and Don Jose come together in their devastating fatal encounter.

For the most part, director Layna Chianakas keeps the action focused and fluid, and her staging yields a series of attractive tableaux. Choreographer Raphael Boumaila and fight director Kit Wilder supply effective movement sequences. Marcheso drew fine playing from the orchestra in the big numbers and the lovely entr'acte preceding Act III (Andrew Whitfield will conduct the performances of Feb. 26 and 28).

When it comes down to it, though, "Carmen" is about the gypsy in the title role. There's a lot to enjoy in this production, but Chavez's performance is something special.

'CARMEN'

By Georges Bizet, presented by Opera San Jose

When: 8 p.m. Feb. 18 and 26, 3 p.m. Feb. 21 and 28Where: California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose

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