

DIRECTOR'S NOTE



When certain operas become so familiar as to automatically blend into our culture, a curious thing happens: we assume a knowledge of them that is far from accurate. Directors are not immune to this syndrome. The plots of the handful of operas that form our main canon, through overexposure and indiscriminate production habits, become blurred and we end up with approximations of a story we actually don't know all that well.

Which brings us to our *Carmen*, based on Prosper Mérimée's 1845 novella. Sold at 13 by her father to another Roma by the name of Garcia, who took her as wife, she would have joined the fate all other Roma women bought and sold as was the custom in that specific 19th century culture. Only that this one is different. Unwilling to become anyone's property, she declares herself free from all ties and joins a band of thieves and smugglers, at first sight causing minimum damage and maximum fun, all while stamping out vague approximations of flamenco. And then she gets killed. Now this story clearly cannot be the one that created the scandal of its opening night. Mérimée's troubling woman who runs about in ripped stockings and dirty red shoes in a black shabby dress (in Spain at that time, a daytime color reserved for prostitutes or women in mourning) is actually lethal—as Micaëla aptly notes—and anything but harmless.

Now: why should we give our attention to this dismal story of Roma and "payos" (Romani for white folks)? Well, the music is fantastic. It has been called the perfect opera, and to many of us, it is. But there is also a very good yarn to hold it up. A volatile young man of good family (it's Don José, after all) finds himself at a dilapidated garrison in a bad neighborhood of Seville, with a rank (equivalent to corporal) unworthy of his birth and station. There is a tobacco factory there and the *brunes cigarières* (so, mostly Roma) have means of income other than the making of cigars and cigarettes during factory breaks. What is this young man doing in an old military outpost so far from home in Navarre, across country up in beautiful Basque land? It turns out he's run into trouble with the law already and has been presumably whisked away by his family in order to avoid incarceration or worse. His mother extends her forgiveness and a lifeline in the form of the lovely Micaëla, but there remains no doubt that José Lizarrabengoa is a violent man who, true to character, ends up hopelessly entangled with a woman on the criminal fringes of society. A typical story of sexual obsession and murder such as we see every night on tabloid TV. What's so special about this one?

Well...Carmen herself. At the last possible moment, and just like Don Giovanni, this basically unpalatable protagonist (with the great music) attains enormous stature by throwing down the gauntlet at Death's feet, daring it to take her. Of course Death does. It always wins. But there is something about Carmen and Don Giovanni, in their final stands, that makes them impressive and complete and sums up their claims to total freedom (an impossibility in society and to no good end in either case) and touches on that very human demand for "more life"—or, as Philip Larkin puts it, "this multipetaled flower of being here." Somehow, the naked recall of the Impossible battle we all ultimately lose rings true for us in all its futility. We love *Cyrano* and *Quixote* especially because they are doomed to lose, and perhaps the battle cry of the Romantics in the century that separates Don Giovanni and Carmen is as alive in the Romani street girl as in the libertine aristocrat, both of whom wanted the world to belong to them. They were wrong, of course, but aren't they rather grand on their final face-off with the ultimate Enemy, *mano a mano*, in the empty space of that dusty Plaza de Toros or in the sumptuous dining room everyone else has fled, making a great big fuss, refusing to give an inch and going down fighting?

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