

## CARMEN

By Georges Bizet

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

Dorothy Danner's lively staging of CARMEN takes place on a cavernous unit set. I kept wondering if this is the set she wanted or if it were a financial compromise brought in from some other production. It doesn't seem "Danneresque" to me.

She opens the first act most effectively with tableaux of entwined bodies in fiery lighting by Donald Thomas. I took it as symbol of the stark violent action that was to follow as the entangled lives of the opera are destroyed and burned up by passion.

Additional light reveals we are in a street on a cloudy day in Seville. Why cloudy, I don't know. It is supposed to be the noon hour teeming with dragoons, gypsies, townspeople or maybe what we would call street people today. It's a busy place. Soon the cigarette girls, on lunch break appear from a nearby factory. Carmen is among them. She sings the famous "Habanera" aria. The first thing we notice is her hair. The attractive Cristina Nassif, whom I feel is destined for a major career, is all but faceless. At times, her features are obliterated by a huge head of hair that is every where at once and makes her top heavy and short looking.

Next one notices what the other people are wearing. The military uniforms are fine. The street people though are in those from-the-catalogue-happy- peasants-in-the-square outfits. Not Danner's doing I don't think. They are dull and drab and everything is neat and clean. Every dirndl looks as if it's fresh from the laundry. In brief, the scene is without atmosphere, mood or local color.

These production choices, especially the lighting, put the opera in a place that does not enhance the action. As Carmen, Cristina Nassif approaches the role with a subtle, gentle demeanor. The program does not give the time of the action but Bizet places it in 1820. Danner seems to be thinking in this time frame as well. Carmen is a 19th century coquette as we see her. We don't see the gypsies in their debauched immorality, or a hedonistic, living-for-the-moment Carmen. If one accepts these choices by the director, Nassif is endearing and believable. She is a soprano singing in a role Bizet intended for a mezzo. Her Carmen is more of a sensual kitten than a wild cat with dangerous claws and sizzling passion. For me, she lacks theatrical bite.

Maestro Mark has assembled a musically strong cast for every role. Tenor Bryan Register, who looks a little clean cut and boyish for Don Jose, has a loose, free sounding emotionally revealing voice with dramatic vigor. Eric Greene finds many levels of the man who is Escamillo and expresses each and every one with fine detail and variety. Catherine Cangiano is without flaw as Micaela. She wins your heart and stops the show with her deeply moving aria in the third act. One hopes this debut performance will be followed by others at Virginia Opera.

The high point of the evening is Act IV which takes place outside the bull ring. There is finally sunlight and color and a festive atmosphere that establishes a forceful and keenly felt irony to the tragic ending.

I thought the orchestra sounded especially fine under Maestro Peter Mark's direction. Joseph Walsh's children's chorus added fun and life. AND, at the end Cristina Nassif's hair is coiffed. She's now a statuesque beauty and transformed from a kitten to gorgeous sexy feline. Such is the power of hair and wardrobe on the stage.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening..