



The Guide to Musical Theatre

CARMEN

Opera in 4 acts; Music by Georges Bizet : Book and lyrics by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, based on the novel by Prosper Mérimée.

Opéra-Comique, Paris - March 3, 1875
Her Majesty's Theatre, London - 5 February, 1879

THE STORY of "Carmen"

CARMEN works in a cigarette factory in Seville. Of gypsy blood, she is passionate, wayward, fickle, courageous, reckless, and dazzlingly beautiful. Men, of no matter what condition, find it hard to resist her; but she is as capricious as fair, and none of her many amours has lasted long. The girls, her fellow-workers, love and admire her, and if some are jealous, they must perforce hide their jealousy, since none has a chance when bewitching Carmen is in question.

Her latest affair is with handsome Don José, of the Spanish army, who, for her sake, has deserted his own intended, mild, patient, loving, blue-eyed Micaela. His conscience smites him, for until he came under the gypsy's spell he had dearly loved the girl whom he had asked to be his wife; but, even though Carmen treats his passion lightly, and by her daring coquetries gives him frequent cause for jealousy, he is so deeply enamoured by her wild, uncommon charms, that daily he grows more completely her slave.

Micaela's Unavailing Effort.

Micaela, in a despairing attempt to bring her truant lover back to reason - and to herself - leaves her home and seeks him out in Seville, where he is stationed. To aid her case she brings with her the portrait of his mother whom, in his heart of hearts, he adores, and timidly she gives him the kiss his mother sent him. For a little while Don José hesitates. Micaela's affection is so pure, so strong, that it appeals to his better self, and he resolves to be true to his promise and have no more to do with Carmen and her dangerous black eyes.

But Fate throws them together almost immediately. There has been trouble in the factory. The gypsy has teased unmercifully one of the girls in the workshop, and they have come to blows. In the end Carmen has stabbed her, though not seriously, and she is taken off by the guard under arrest.

In the guard-house Carmen comes across Don José, and, laughing at her custodians, she loses no time in captivating the young soldier with a dance and a song, in which she makes love to him with all the arch boldness of her warm-blooded nature. In the end, Don José, risking his military career, contrives that she shall escape, and the very same evening we find him with her at Lillas Pastia's inn, amidst a crowd of her gypsy friends. Some of them are smugglers, and as Don José is now practically a deserter, he makes up his mind to join the band, caring little what befalls him so long as he may be near the charmer, herself a fugitive and an outcast since slipping from the clutches of the authorities.

Carmen Tires

But having achieved her conquest, Carmen, as is her wont, soon begins to tire of Don José's devotion. As her frank friends remark, with a laugh, in six weeks she has usually had enough of any man, and is ready to find another victim. Nor is she long in marking him down. He is the bullfighter, Escamillo, of Granada, whom she might have had on her list long ago, had she cared.



Meanwhile, Don José torn between love and duty, breaks away, from Carmen and the gypsy smugglers, to go, at Micaela's entreaties, to see his old mother, who is dying and asks incessantly for her soldier son. Already he has discovered Carmen's perfidy, and the passion he had for her has turned to hate. He swears to be revenged on her and on her torero. On his way home Don José is arrested, and has to undergo two months' imprisonment for desertion and neglect of duty, the field all this time being left clear for his rival.

Soon the two men meet and the inevitable quarrel ensues. They fight with knives, and, as they are evenly matched, the result hangs in the balance until Escamillo's weapon breaks. So great is Don José's fury that he would undoubtedly have slain the bullfighter had not Carmen stayed his hand. The rivals part on terms of deadly enmity, promising to meet again and fight out their quarrel to the death.

The last words tauntingly uttered by Escamillo as he departs are to invite all who care to see him at the coming bullfight, where he will play the chief part as Espada.

Outside the arena on the great day we find Carmen, who, disdainful of the warning uttered by a fellow gypsy, Frasquita, is resolved to see the fight. Reckless as ever, she has no fear of Don José, though he has threatened her. Besides, has she not read her fate in the cards, the verdict being death!

As she lingers at the entrance Don José arrives. He has come to make a last appeal to Carmen to give up the bullfight in his favour. The love-tortured soldier will do anything she asks - renounce his family, join the gypsy band, go with her to the ends of the earth, if only she will love him as before.

In His Hour of Triumph

Carmen will have none of him. At present she is Escamillo's, body and soul, and she will give Don José no sort of hope. From the ring inside come shouts of triumph. The torero has vanquished his bull, and the people are frantic with delight. Carmen, all eager to see her new hero in his hour of triumph, tears herself away from her old love, who by now is on his knees beside her, imploring her to stay. Fiercely she throws at his feet the ring he once gave her, and rushes to the arena door.

Mad with rage and disappointment, Don José springs to his feet, overtakes Carmen as she hammers at the woodwork, and, taking a dagger from his belt, stabs her to the heart, with a bitter curse.

The arena doors are thrown open. Escamillo, escorted by a jubilant crowd, comes out, to find Carmen lying dead before him.