

IRRESISTIBLE CARMEN

BY FRANCESCA ZAMBELLO

Carmen is one of my favorite characters, even after all these years. I directed my first production of Bizet's opera more than three decades ago, and it's been fascinating to keep revisiting her character, especially as the larger cultural conversation around gender, sexuality, and power continues to evolve. The #MeToo movement, which shines a spotlight on the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault, has been a call to reconsider the implicit messages around sexuality and consent in the standard repertory, which is full of predators and victims.

I find it fascinating that Carmen—who is neither predator nor victim—has been such a controversial figure. I would say that Carmen is a truly modern woman. She embraces her sexuality, she pursues her desires, and she achieves her ends using charm and wit alone. Unlike some of the more notorious #MeToo stories that have come to light, Carmen is not in a position of power over the men she pursues. In fact, the opposite is true.

Carmen is an outsider's outsider. She's affiliated with a band of roving thieves, which puts her outside the bounds of an ordered society. Outlaw societies operate by their own set of rules, yet Carmen refuses to play by these rules, as well. And to top it all off, she's a woman, which theoretically puts her in a disadvantage in any social hierarchy, "civilized" or not. However, other people's ideas about hierarchy are irrelevant to Carmen.

Carmen's relationship with Don José is complicated. Yes, to a certain extent she uses her sexuality to get him to do what she wants, but she is also guided by sheer intelligence and genuine—albeit shifting—feelings for José. I believe she does love him, at least for a while—enough to refuse an important job.

Another thing I find refreshing about Carmen is her honesty. If men are deceived by her, it's because they



*The original
Carmen (1875).
Célestine Galli-Marié.*
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choose to be. In public and in private, she tells everyone exactly who she is and what they can expect. She does not set out to destroy Don José; in fact, she does her best to use the truth to free him from his obsession.

Carmen lives life on her own terms, even when she knows it will be her undoing. In this way, she is different from all those other female characters who die at the end of their operas. Carmen is not consumptive or kept or backed into a corner, physically or metaphorically. As the opera draws to a close in Act Four, a different kind of character might have heeded Frasquita's warning and fled to safety. Or perhaps she might have called on Escamillo, who would undoubtedly have delighted in confronting José.

But not Carmen. For every choice she makes, she is aware of the consequences, and she is fully prepared to face them on her own. "I was born free and I will die free," she says—and that's exactly what she does. I think she is the ultimate feminist. When you study the score, you see her strength, and it's her strength, her intelligence, her will, her honesty that I want to put center stage in this production.

In telling Carmen's story, I think it's important to land in a period where we can see the aspects of class and social hierarchy that are so important to Mérimée's novella. A setting with a certain elegance really puts the world of the Gypsies into relief and immediately establishes the "outsider" status of Carmen and the rest of her band. Certainly, Bizet does that in his music, with the children's military drills setting up a stark contrast to Carmen's "Habanera."

"Love is a wild bird that no one can tame," Carmen sings. "No use to call him if he doesn't want to come." Her description of love could just as well be a description of herself—maddening, powerful, and utterly irresistible. ❀