

By Jeff Rapsis for Hippo Press

It's a big time for local opera buffs. Last week's Granite State Opera production of "Carmen" nearly sold out Concord's Capitol Center for the Arts, and this weekend brings "The Merry Widow" to the Palace Theatre in Manchester.

A smart, compact Carmen: Scale and approach were the issues with Granite State Opera's "Carmen." As performed Sunday, Oct. 22, the production was effective overall, but also notable for differences from the company's earlier version (in 2001) and from expectations that accompany this familiar, popular work.

Presented by artistic director Phil Lauriat, this was a smart, compact "Carmen."

A minimalist set design and relatively small ensemble meant the focus seemed sharpened on the leads, which made for a continually interesting production.

Rather than go for an overabundance of opulence, Lauriat (who also stage-directed) was clearly aiming for something simpler, stripping away layers of excess that sometimes accumulate on old favorites.

Take the set: rather than heavy set pieces filling up the stage, this "Carmen" took place on a minimally furnished stage space, with the action nearly always circumscribed by a raised oval platform dominating the already-small stage. This forced everyone to play close and limit the grand gestures. The metaphor of a bullring seemed clear enough, but the set also helped tighten the staging throughout the production. In this "Carmen," every move counted.

Performances seemed calibrated for ensemble effect, a gamble that paid off. Simply put, nobody was trying to show off. Some of the power of this "Carmen" was the sense that there was always something being held in reserve. This not only kept your ears on the edge of their seat, so to speak, but also helped the slam-bang ending, when it came, pack more punch than if everyone had started out of the gate full blast three hours earlier.

Individually, the voices were top-notch. As Carmen, mezzo-soprano Fenlon Lamb brought a bright, almost cheerful quality to a part that is often sung much more darkly. Tenor Stephen Mark Brown brought Don Jose to life with a powerhouse voice that filled the Capitol Center whenever he sang.

Escamillo, as sung by bass-baritone Tom O'Toole, and soprano Heather Parker's Micaela both came across less prominent, a good thing in terms of ensemble and effect. Neither turned their roles into showstopping tours de force, but seemed focused on character first.

Minor parts and chorus roles were well sung; musically and dramatically, the skittering smuggler's quintet in Act II was wonderful stuff.

The minimalist keep-it-in-reserve approach, though refreshing, also laid bare some inadequacies. Blending of the leads was a problem; with his ringing voice, Brown as Don Jose tended to overpower anyone else he was singing with, to the point where some passages with female leads seemed more like solos for him.

O'Toole made for a curious Escamillo; he seemed to be trying to project power through stillness, but the effect was one of flat-footedness, surely the wrong impression for a light-on-his-feet bullfighter. And maybe it's too close to Halloween, but he wasn't helped by a costume that made him look more like Count Dracula than a flashy matador.

Most curious of all was Lamb's portrayal of Carmen as sincere and even a bit elegant, rather than the earthy and angry way the part is sometimes done. It wasn't wholly to my taste—I prefer a calculating Carmen who plans Don Jose's downfall all along, which I think heightens the drama and inevitability of the final sequence. But Lamb made it work on her own terms, adding another element of freshness.