

By Jeanné McCartin for Seacoastonline.com

The Granite State Opera presentation of "Carmen" is a done deal. Yes, you've missed another one. This latest production was lovely, the vocals quite wonderful. But it never pushed the passion the piece calls for. This after all is "Carmen." It's about passion. It's a bubbling cauldron of greed, seduction, infatuation, betrayal and lust. There's an expectation it will dazzle beyond the vocals. The performance at The Music Hall did have the voices. All the principles had the power of the pipes. The drawback was in the acting.

The story is simple, and sung in simple language, (spelled out in English above the stage, as are all the GSO productions. So don't let that stop you from future productions). Set in 19th century Seville, Spain, it focuses on Carmen, the gypsy beauty who seduces lovers only to use and discard them like tissues, and in about the same period of time.

Her latest, successful target is Don Jose, a soldier engaged to the sweet Micaela. But alas, he forsakes all, girl, mother and country, to follow Carmen into her free-spirited, outlaw life. He even does prison time for setting her free after Carmen was arrested for fighting with another factory worker.

His lover's expiration date comes quickly after Don Jose is released from prison. In short order Carmen sets her eyes on the bullfighter. This doesn't go over well with Jose. And it proves to have deadly consequences.

The performances were fine, but that's not enough. The earliest moments were given a lift thanks to Brian Ballard, as Morales the soldier. He's got it all -- vocals and presence. The same can be said for Heather Parker as Micaela, the sweet fiancée. Parker was impeccable, both vocally and as an actress. She also offered one of the show's most stunning solos in Act Three.

Staging by Philip Lauriat, who performed as both music and stage director, was adequate, but didn't bring any energy to the tale. The production definitely had its moving scenes; it just wasn't consistent enough. Unlike the musical direction, which was impeccable, the production remained mixed throughout.

Fenlon Lamb played Carmen. The voice was lovely, clear and full. But as the character she appeared to hold back, something Carmen would never do. A fine example is the private dance Carmen does for Don Jose. The choreography itself was tepid. That's OK. An opera singer shouldn't be expected to take on a complex dance. But the dance lacked life, and sensuality -- something we had the right to expect.

Stephen Mark Brown was Don Jose. Again we're talking, impressive, moving vocals. His love for Carmen was less convincing, wavering scene by scene.

Tom O'Toole was the matador Escamillo; the character that sings "Toreador Song," one of the opera's most widely recognized arias. O'Toole made it his own with his wonderful voice. He also gave a smashing acting performance -- smooth and believable.

Brent Wilson and Charles Stanton handed in two additional top performances as the smugglers Remendado and Dancairo respectfully. They had the whole package: voices and convincing portrayals. They brought a lot of energy to every scene they entered. John D. Adams as Zuniga also handed in a strong overall performance.

The dancers, Doreen Cafarella, Tina Cassidy and Katie Proulx appeared under-rehearsed, out of step with one another. To their credit they performed on a racked (slanted) stage, a difficult task.

The 15-member Granite State Opera Orchestra was absolutely marvelous. The lighting and Spartan set design by Quentin Stockwell were quite lovely, artful and successful. It's over. You missed it. And despite all its faults it really was a treat, the voices and music worth the ticket price. The Granite State Opera consistently hands in good to exceptional work, making it a top candidate for your future "To Do" list.