

By Ron Duvernay for HippoPress.com

"Carmen" by Georges Bizet, presented by Granite State Opera, Philip Lauriat, Artistic Director, Conductor, June 1 and 3 at the Palace Theatre. Directed by Alexander Gelman.

Grand Opera returned to the Palace Theatre last weekend in grand style under the meticulous supervision of artistic director Philip Lauriat and his newly christened Granite State Opera company.

A cast of world-renowned principal vocalists led an ensemble of uncommon professionalism in this three-hour affair, which was first rate from overture to final curtain.

The house was packed to the rafters with enthusiastic opera buffs, wannabes, and the merely curious, who, I can assure you, filing out into the soggy Sunday afternoon, all felt just a bit more cultured and urbane, and grateful for it.

I was very surprised at the number of young children counted among the attendees, and marveled at their captivated attention through the four-act performance. It gives one cause to hope that perhaps we haven't lost an entire generation to Ricky Martin, The Backstreet Boys, and the mesmerizing mind control of MTV.

Bizet's classic "Carmen" premiered in 1875 at the Opera Comique in Paris to dismal reviews, due in no small part to the fact that it is hardly light, comical fare. Attendees of the family-oriented venue, accustomed to their bourgeois melodrama, were shocked and outraged at Bizet's depiction of a harlot and an outlaw at the center of his story. And she smokes on stage! A women smoking in public--imagine that.

(Seventy-five years later, the venerable and no doubt slightly envious Ethel Merman would have a similar reaction to Mary Martin at opening night of South Pacific, announcing to the press "She washed her hair on stage! Disgusting!") Thankfully, both shows outlasted their prudish critics.

Carmen is the original "bad girl," fully in control of her sexuality and the power to wield it to her advantage. She chooses her amours to suit her advantage and whim, leaving behind her a trail of broken and devastated admirers. But fate in the form of the handsome soldier Don Jose (and a haunting musical motif brilliantly employed by the composer) eventually catches up to our heroine, who finds she cannot escape the tragic end predestined by a life of wicked ways.

More than 100 years before Glenn Close scared the pants off any guy who thought casual sex came without consequences, Bizet showed us Don Jose's own Fatal Attraction at the hands of the bewitching, dangerous gypsy girl. It's a morality play where love and lust drive men to self-destruction, and bad people come to a suitably bad end.

Under the direction of Alexander Gelman, the large crowd scenes were clean and well staged, never awkward or congested. I was particularly impressed with the final climactic scene, in which the scorned Don Jose confronts the defiant-to-the-end Carmen, alone outside a bullring. While we hear the crowd inside cheering on the battle in the ring, the lovers are locked in a deadly confrontation of their own, matador and bull, circling their prey. You know one of them will die, and they seem to know it too. Fate has decreed it so, and like the cheering crowd at a bullfight, we simply wait breathlessly for the final blow.

The principal vocalists, culled from a stellar group of international professionals, were remarkable without exception. Ellen Rabiner's startling mezzo brought an intense sensuality to the role of Carmen. Like Dietrich, Tallulah Bankhead and Kathleen Turner, Bizet knew the allure of a deep, smoky woman's voice and took the unusual step of writing the part for a mezzo.

For the sweet embodiment of goodness and virtue, Michaela, he gave it to a soprano, excellently voiced here by Martha Warren. Her first act-duet with Don Jose was enormously moving, and her third-act aria prompted one of the audience's longest ovations. Scott Flaherty was a polished Don Jose, bringing an impressive actor's ability to the role, particularly in the above-mentioned final scene where he loses his fragile grip on reality. And Brian Davis was truly engaging as the pompous toreador, Escamillo.

The cast was fleshed out by a group of highly talented secondary players, and a choral ensemble that looked to be enjoying themselves as much as we were. With crowd scenes featuring factory girls in their underwear smoking cigarettes and flirting with clownish, enraptured soldiers, the audience never lacked something amusing to hold their attention.

Slight problems with the orchestra and ensemble staying together, and some slightly out-of-tune strings were rare and hardly noticeable. On the whole, the large orchestra did a very impressive job with a difficult score. In a perfect world the lower string section would have been fleshed out, but on the whole, it was a pleasing and polished sound emanating from the pit.

Bravo, brava, and bravissimi to Philip Lauriat and his Granite State Opera. He just may be turning this wannabe into a burgeoning opera buff. I can't wait until next season.