

**BW Opera: Peter Brook's
The Tragedy of Carmen (Feb. 25)**

by Daniel Hathaway



British director Peter Brook's re-imagining of George Bizet's ever-popular opera *Carmen* caused a stir when it debuted in New York in 1981. Pared down to 85 minutes in length and divested of choruses and much of its connective music, it rankled die-hard opera fans and critics. But as director Victoria Bussert and Baldwin Wallace Opera proved on opening night, Thursday, February 25, *The Tragedy of Carmen* can be a

stunning piece of theater in its own right.

BW's six-performance run in the William Allman black box theater mixed opera and musical theater students in its two alternating casts, much as Brooks combined opera singers with actors in his production. Thursday's roster brought to the task a strong collection of personalities whose acting was as riveting as their singing.

Alexis Gill, a voice performance major, was Carmen down to her fingernails: seductive and inconstant, with a sultry voice to match. Music theatre major Jon Loya created a strapping, vulnerable Don José, his ringing voice both the perfect match and foil for Gill's Carmen.





As the ill-fated Escamillo, Dominic Aragon — a cello major — deepened the texture of the drama with fine acting and singing. Elizabeth Rosenberg played up Micaëla’s innocence from the opening scene onward. Gabe Brown was a threatening physical presence as José’s superior, Zuniga, and Colton Ryan provided comic relief as the

innkeeper Lillas Pastias. Supporting roles were ably filled by Maria De Conzo (Mercédès), Paige Heidrich (Frasquita), Matthew Case (El Dancairo), James Hevel (El Remendado), and Eric Klickman (Garcia, Carmen’s husband, who is killed by José shortly after he appears).

The setting was stark — and dark. The audience surrounded a huge sand pit on three sides, the back wall of the theater decorated with an ominous image of two skeletons kissing (“Les Amadores” stencilled underneath). Lillas Pastias lugged a table on to create the inn scene, but otherwise most of the action was carried out without furniture on the sand.

That sand! BW carted in tons of it, lacing it with cinnamon to discourage insects, and it seemed suggestive of more than just the floor of a bull ring. Characters waded around in it, slipping and sliding on its surface, perhaps symbolizing the unsure footing of their shifting relationships. It was a handy place to stick swords on end. Carmen and José



flicked handfuls of it at one another, first playfully, later spitefully. It soaked up the blood both of Garcia and Escamilla (though the latter died offstage: the back wall



opened up to become the arena for the bullfight with the spectators on bleachers, their backs to the audience). Against the show's predominantly dark costumery, a rose tossed on the sand provided a startling burst of color.

With the singers and actors at arm's length from the audience, drunken scuffles, fights, and stabbings produced immediate, visceral reactions. Clever use of

simple props included the rope Don José used to restrain Carmen, which the two then turned into an erotic dance.

But what about Bizet's famous music? The ominous prelude was omitted, along with a lot of the popular interludes between scenes, but the most important songs were intact and brilliantly sung, especially by Carmen and Don José. Gill's *habañera* was positively steamy. Conductor Octavio Más-Arocas and his 15-piece orchestra were situated on the second level above the back wall, virtually out of sight, which caused only a few coordination problems with the singers downstairs.



Perhaps fans of *Carmen* the opera missed the cigarette girls, the children's chorus, and the orchestral interludes in *Carmen* the tragedy, but Bussert and her BW students told a gripping tale in the space of an hour and a half, far more dramatic and immediate than what you're likely to see in an opera house.

Photos by William Bradford courtesy of Baldwin Wallace University.

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