

Review: 'Carmen' by Annapolis Opera

By **William Powell** - March 17, 2019

There was a moment in the first act of Annapolis Opera's *Carmen* in which Director Fenlon Lamb assembled her cast in a colorful tableau that enthralled me and impressed itself on my mind. This *Carmen* brought to mind one of its songs' lyrics: "Love...when you are not looking for it, there it is."

Cassandra Velasco and Richard Ollarsaba in Annapolis Opera's production of 'Carmen.' Photo courtesy of Annapolis Opera.

Based on a novella by 19th Century French writer Prosper Mérimée, *Carmen* follows the tragic love between a steadfast Spanish soldier, Don José, and a fiery gypsy girl, Carmencita. This opera, by Georges Bizet, has hypnotized audiences since 1875.

Lamb's memorable tableau was enhanced by superior lighting work, which brightened the colors, especially the cheery colors in the Plaza de Toros scene. The set, in proscenium, gave the illusion of depth and featured scenery wagons, which gave life to various scenes depicting 1820s Seville, Spain, including a cigarette factory and a jail. Jefferson Ridenour provided the spectacular set design and Michael Klima created the lighting design. Lorraine vom Saal's costumes, which ranged from Napoleonic-era military uniforms to gypsy-girl dresses, roused the senses.

How many superlatives can I come with to describe the work of Robert Wood, Artistic Director and Conductor? Wood ensured that the music was executed flawlessly—every note pleased the ears with exceeding joy.

Mexico City hometown girl and mezzo-soprano Cassandra Velasco played the titular Carmen as the ultimate honey trap for Don José and Escamillo, the bullfighter. Velasco was the definition of sultry. During the world-famous "Habanera," Velasco's Carmen sang: "If I love you, watch out...here it is, the end of the week, who wants to love me?"

Norfolk, Virginia native Frederick Ballentine, who has previously played in such shows as the musical *Porgy and Bess* with Glimmerglass Opera, used his tenor skills as Don José to great effect in his scenes with Velasco. Ballentine also had impressive interplay with the lovely soprano, Shannon Jennings, who played Don José's betrothed, Micäela. Jennings' strongest scene came as Micäela begged Don José to leave his life of banditry and return home to his dying mother.

Frederick Ballentine and Cassandra Velasco in Annapolis Opera's production of 'Carmen.' Photo courtesy of Annapolis Opera.

Two commanding bass-baritones, Richard Ollarsaba, who played Escamillo the bullfighter, and Andrew Simpson, who played Don José's superior officer, Zuniga, dominated many of the songs. Ollarsaba's Latin swagger and intensity was without rival; he made Escamillo a swaggering statue of sinew and flame as he sang "remember as you fight, two dark eyes are watching."

I enjoyed watching Meroe Adeeb as Frasquita (soprano) and Kate Jackman as Mercédès (mezzo-soprano), both friends of Carmen. Mark Wanich added another baritone to the amazing amalgam of voices.

Many of the singing voices were provided by the Annapolis Opera Chorus, and the Children's Chorus of

Maryland, led by that chorus' Artistic Director Susan Bialek. A team of three gypsy girls (Ashlyn Odenwald, Fern Holt, and Elizabeth Zarilli), who danced during at least one scene break, were from the Academy Ballet School of Annapolis Dancers. Supernumerary roles were filled out by Thomas DeKornfeld, Steve Mangum, Nicholas Mudd, Andy Noel, and Robert vom Saal.

Guest Director Lamb, in her Annapolis Opera debut, has directed an astoundingly good evening of musical entertainment.

Running Time: Three hours, with one 15-minute intermission.

Carmen, presented by Annapolis Opera, played through March 17, 2019, at Maryland Hall for the Creative Arts – 801 Chase Street, Annapolis, MD. For tickets for future Annapolis Opera shows, call the box office at 410-280-5640 or purchase them **online**.

William Powell

William Powell, an accomplished DC-area actor and Ruby Griffith Award Winner for Assistant Directing, has appeared in principal roles in the independent films "Angels Within," "The Red Effect," "Recession Proof," and "Conscious Imprisonment." William has appeared in commercials for the likes of Car Max, T. Rowe Price, and GEICO; appeared in TV shows like HBO's "VEEP," and appeared in the stage plays "A Raisin in the Sun," "Barefoot in the Park," and "Bye Bye Birdie." He is also the host of the "Inside Acting!" radio show, heard World-Wide.

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