

Review: Mill City Summer Opera's 'Carmen' seduces, sizzles and stomps



Audrey Babcock as Carmen dances on the table in Mill City Summer Opera's "Carmen."
(Photo by Dan Norman)

By **ROB HUBBARD** | Special to the Pioneer Press

PUBLISHED: July 14, 2018 at 4:17 pm | UPDATED: July 14, 2018 at 9:27 pm

Things can get steamy in Seville. In summer, that city in southern Spain sizzles, with daytime temps regularly hitting the 90s. So this weekend's Twin Cities weather did its part in setting the scene for an outdoor production of "Carmen," Georges Bizet's opera about passions and tempers coming to a boil in Seville.

Mill City Summer Opera has returned to the venue that inspired the company's founding: The ruins of the Washburn A Mill that burned in 1991, leaving a rocky ruin with an open sky overhead. Closed since 2016, the old mill has undergone some reinforcements, but it's lost little of its ghostly gray granite grandeur. And it does a fine imitation of an old European city in a production spiced with Spanish flavors. Flamenco dancers twirl, castanets click and cast members flutter ornate hand fans while audience members use their programs for the same purpose.

"Carmen" is all about seduction and obsession, and this production sent all of the requisite heat wafting outward from the stage at Friday's opening performance. With a staging that emphasizes sensuality and flirtation, it packs a lot more passion than many interpretations I've experienced. The characterizations were well-shaped, the leads bearing powerful voices and plenty of charisma. Despite losing some of its early energy and imagination in the considerably-more-depressing second half, it's a strong "Carmen" that doesn't try to do anything revolutionary with one of the world's most popular operas. It lets Bizet's marvelous music soar and offers clever enhancements true to the story's setting and spirit.

Even if you're very familiar with "Carmen," director Fenlon Lamb has freshened up the opera with all sorts of interesting staging ideas. Inspired was the invitation to choreographer/dancer Susana di Palma and her Zorongo Flamenco Dance Theatre to swirl and stomp forth, setting scenes and bringing stories to life, as during a matador's description of a bullfight. Another was casting Audrey Babcock in the title role and also letting her coordinate the dances. A very experienced Carmen who wears the role convincingly and also knows flamenco? This is a rare pleasure.

Complementing Babcock's spicy portrayal is the sweetness of Karen Slack's Micaela, the innocent hometown girl who acts as angel to Carmen's devil in a battle for the affections of soldier Don Jose. Seldom will you hear Micaela's arias delivered with such a combination of force and subtlety. Adam Diegel lent his rich Italianate tenor to a transfixing duet with her and made a second-act aria of desperate love deeply involving. Alas, illness forced his voice to the sidelines in the final two acts: While Diegel acted the part, tenor Adam Lowe (also bearing an exceptional voice) sang Don Jose's lines from the orchestra at stage's edge.

That orchestra impressed throughout under Brian DeMaris' direction, never more memorably than during the sweet opening of Act Three, when Claudia White's sonorous flute was joined by a songbird responding from the roof. And the quartet of leads was completed by Luis Alejandro Orozco as a fetchingly confident Escamillo, the only character onstage who can match Carmen in seduction skills. All were admirably supported by the vibrant voices of Benjamin Sieverding as Don Jose's commanding officer and Siena Forest and Nadia Fayad as Carmen's dream-driven partners in crime.

While the production is colorfully costumed by Sarah Bahr, it starts running out of energy in Act Three and never surmounts the barriers presented by an increasingly icky story that basically becomes about a violent stalker. A friend said that he felt like taking a shower at evening's end, and I don't think it was only because of the muggy weather. But that's a problem with the opera. As productions of it go, this is a good one.

If You Go

What: Mill City Summer Opera's "Carmen"

When: 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and July 22 and 24 ("Carmen for Young Audiences," 10:30 a.m. Wednesday)

Where: Mill City Museum, 704 Second St. S., Mpls.

Tickets: \$125-\$50, available at 612-875-5544 or millcitysummeropera.org

Capsule: Sizzling and seductive, it's a fine "Carmen" for a steamy summer night.

Tags: [Opera](#) [Theater](#) [Things to do](#)



Rob Hubbard

As you comment, please be respectful of other commenters and other viewpoints. Our goal with article comments is to provide a space for civil, informative and constructive conversations. We reserve the right to remove any comment we deem to be defamatory, rude, insulting to others, hateful, off-topic or reckless to the community. See our full terms of use