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# Bullfighting & Breakdancing

by Armond White

Francesco Rosi's new film—*Bizet's Carmen*—couldn't have arrived at a better time than now, as Hollywood filmmakers learn to exploit breakdancing and rap music. Such movies as *Breakin'*, *Beat Street* and the new *Body Rock* all represent the usurpation of cultural particulars and ethnic vivacity to produce lively "theater;" the opera *Carmen* is but a high-class example of this demeaning process.

Rosi has created an intelligent, audacious investigation of Spanish culture. This is an extraordinary case of cultural revision in which Rosi, an Italian leftist, imbues Latin spirit and true national character to a world famous work where such essences had always been apocryphal and suspect.

The intention is twofold: to honor the glory of the music and still be faithful to, and respectful of, the culture it depicted—the culture which, through the strange convoluted progression of Western civilization, has come to be the foremost stereotype of Spain.

*Carmen* is actually twice removed from its subject: It is a French opera based on the French writer Prosper Merimee's short novel. What Merimee, a conscientious historian, imagined about Spanish life and romance furnished composer Georges Bizet with the source of an enduring erotic myth: the wild gypsy Carmen seduces the proper soldier Don Jose out of his responsibilities and self-control.

This classic femme fatale story is what inspired the recent interpretations by Carlos Saura, Peter Brook and Jean-Luc Godard. But Francesco Rosi (through his Marxist sensibility?) is the first major artist to recognize the incongruities of *Carmen*, which is Spanish only superficially (in its setting) but French in its music, language and tone.

Rosi, his cinematographer Pasqualino DeSantis, and set designer Enrico Job, went to Spain and sustained a visually authentic environment. The location and its details are seen with a richness and exactitude like Peckinpah brings to Mexico and the Old West but with Rosi's own sense of scale and atmosphere.

The opera isn't merely performed outdoors: Rosi films the ancient forts, mountain ranges, the sunny and dusty streets so that the settings containing the opera and the music at least re-

verberate believably. The bullfighting ritual comes first and Rosi shoots this with a close-up, intimate genius similar to his 1965 Spanish bullfighting film *The Moment of Truth*. This emphasis, including a local religious procession, even a street dance joined in by an old couple, gives Spain and its customs priority.

For Rosi the opera comes second. His use of ethnic culture bolsters the opera and when the opera falters (as in the tiresome segments of a young girl begging Don Jose to return to his mother) such details as a man with a guitar riding by on a horse carrying bales of grain redeems it by alerting our sense of custom and history.

The faults of the movie are the insurmountable faults of casting in which Placido Domingo as Don Jose, Julia Migenes-Johnson as Carmen and Ruggero Raimundi as the matador Escamillo don't fit the veracity of Rosi's visual concept.

He hasn't tried to make *Carmen* totally realistic—that might have been impossible—he attempts a balancing act. It's as if an ethnomusicologist-filmmaker like Les Blank remade *Porgy and Bess* in actual Black American ghettos. Rosi tries to capture something beyond the opera. He understands *Carmen* does not misrepresent Spanish music, that its offense is more like body snatching. In *Bizet's Carmen* Rosi reasserts an entire nation's dignity.

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Body snatching is the real subject of *Body Rock*. Lorenzo Lamas (How do you say Oreo in Spanish?) fakes his way through the role of a young New York Latino named Chester who, infatuated with the hip-hop culture of breakdancing and subway graffiti, calls himself Chilly.

His presence does not pay tribute to the young people who forged a crude but lively folk art that only independent record producers would first use—it denies their efforts.

The role brings out less of Lamas' desire to be hip than his desire to be John Travolta. *Body Rock* presents him in sidewalk strutting (Chilly turns to the camera and says "What up," or "I like to look fresh" or "I'm moving out of this neighborhood") and terrible specialty dance routines (although he's too stiff and pumped up to do the moves).

The obvious intention is to win movie stardom for Lamas by co-opting an

ethnic subculture and exploiting it in white face as *Saturday Night Fever* did with Travolta. (Chilly's full-length black jersey replaces Tony Manero's white disco suit.)

But the crudeness of *Body Rock*, directed by rock video hack Marcello Epstein, inadvertently exposes the cultural colonialism at the heart of the breakdance movies.

None have tried to translate the political frustration and social awareness of rap music, none venture very far beyond Charlie Ahearn's discovery of the scene in *Wild Style*.

*Body Rock*, written by Desmond Nakano, merely expands on the most lurid, predictable aspect of *Wild Style* where the naive Uptown street artist confronts the wicked temptations of downtown society.

When Rosi explored the degradations of bullfighting in the *Moment of Truth*, criticizing it as a young Spanish male's only way out of poverty, his innocence-meets-decadence scene was just a feature of the entire exploitation complex he surveyed. It was not given to us as the ultimate meaning.

*Body Rock* takes this way out (offering the "thrills" of Lama's being teased with a recording contract, stripped by a rapacious blonde and kissed in a gay bar) to disguise the simpler but more venal deprecation in progress.

La Ron A. Smith plays Magick, a little boy who does the Space Walk, Pop, Shake and other Break moves and then



sits like Cheetah on Lamas' shoulders. Through him the filmmakers condone the idiocy of young Black boys dancing on street corners for pennies without pointing out the depressing parallels to the tap-dancing street urchins of 50 years ago.

In the plot, Magick teaches his moves to Chilly, the more presentable white. ("You get in there skintight, then you pull the rest of us in one by one" is the success strategy Chilly buys).

But while Smith sinks to obscurity, Lamas stumbles to the bank as the Prometheus who steals hip-hop from the kids to make it safe for the white world. If that's not shameful enough, wait'll you hear Lamas rap. This guy couldn't properly recite *The Song of Hiawatha*.