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'Carmen': great music, setting but if only the cast could act

By Sy Syna
NEW YORK TRIBUNE STAFF

Francesco Rosi's *Carmen*, about the 40th version of Prosper Merimée's freedom-loving heroine and Bizet's opera to be committed to film, is a bit silly and more than a bit boring, despite stellar singing by Placido Domingo as the love-smitten Don Jose, Julia Migenes-Johnson in the title role, Faith Esham as Micaela and Ruggero Raimondi as Escamillo, the torero.

It may not be entirely Rosi's fault. There's a school of thought which avers that opera, which is an artificial medium, is untranslatable to the screen, which is an essentially realistic art form. But to my mind, this is spurious reasoning on several counts. First off, all art forms are artificial because they involve some sort of transformation under imaginative circumstances, usually resulting in a form to contain the art experience. A film, which deliberately places a series of images, movements and sounds in a sequence on a strip of celluloid, is just as artificial as an opera which demands that all the human behavior within it be expressed in musical form.

Setting effective

It is also a false shibboleth to label film "realistic," though this is its usual mode. However, there have been notable abstract, Expressionistic, Surrealistic, Constructivist and Naturalistic motion pictures too. Rosi had the option of adopting other filmic modes. He chose to plant his story in the actual locale Merimée specifies in his famed novella, which Bizet and his two librettists, Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halevy, adapted. The entire film was shot in Andalusia in and around Seville. It is the stark, sun-drenched, dusty environment that is the most successful aspect of the entire project.

I understand Rosi's yen to cast international-caliber opera stars in the leads, but since all the singing was dubbed by them, why not cast young and passionate actors, supplying them with these same stars' voices? It seemed to work pretty well for the film version of *Carmen Jones* and *Porgy and Bess*. (Actually, the lip-sync in this film is not all that good.)

Adopting this strategy would have spared us Domingo's stolid,



Placido Domingo is Don José and Julia Migenes-Johnson is Carmen in "Bizet's *Carmen*."

stick-like acting, Raimondi's superannuated bullfighter and Migenes-Johnson's work, which, while tempestuous enough, was hardly sexy. Nor is she the kind of female animal Sophia Loren is or was, who could believably attract a crush of would-be lovers willing to fight it out with knives for possession of her charms. Esham's Micaela was vapid.

Though it had faults of its own, Peter Brooks' pared-down stage version was a lot more muscular and passionate than this tepid, full-length treatment in French, conducted by Lorin Maazel with the Orchestre National de France and Children's Chorus of Radio-France. Rosi and Tonino Guerra's screenplay even restored some of Bizet's dialogue sequences, introduced a bullfight sequence with the over-

ture and in the Fourth Act, as well as showing us shots within the tobacco factory in which Carmen worked.

Commendable as all this was, Rosi never realistically elicits from his leads a sense that Don Jose becomes progressively more obsessed with his desire to possess Carmen, nor that she is the bird of love of which she sings, that must remain free.

To the argument that in an opera it is the music that's most important, not the acting, I answer, then why bother committing *Carmen* to film? Just listen to a recording. Obviously, it's the "drama in music," specified by its Italian creators, that makes opera a unique art form.

Rosi has the music and superb settings. He never got the drama.