

Actress' fiery performance heats up Bizet's classic opera

Compelling 'Carmen'

By Rita Moran

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Opera Santa Barbara's "Carmen" demonstrates that it takes more than a bit of hip-swaying and a flirtatious glance or two to really embody the wickedly passionate woman Bizet characterized in what has become his most popular opera.

Emily Langford Johnson is as languid as a sated cat and as vicious as a wildly hungry one. Either way, she fleshes out the role with a range of emotions and growing self-awareness that makes her compelling to watch. She toys with men, even when the game is just to allay boredom.

Her Carmen is about raw sexual power lit and stoked by an adventurous nature. It's the Carmen that French writer Prosper Mérimée, who introduced the character in 1845, described and Bizet brought to the stage 30 years later with a challenge to Paris' Opera-Comique conventions that had many regulars up in arms, and a few bounding to their feet in enthusiasm.

Opera Santa Barbara opened its 2009 festival Saturday night with "Carmen," which repeats at a 2:30 matinee Sunday. Also on the festival schedule is "The Merry Widow," which will be presented at 7:30 p.m. Saturday and 2:30 p.m. March 22. While the operas are standards, there is a lot that is new about this festival. It takes place in The Granada, a handsomely renovated historic theater ensconced on State Street.

The Granada offers a considerably larger stage than the previous venue, the Lobero Theatre, and requires larger sets and expanded technical support, all of which seemed confidently in place at the opening. **New as well was the conductor, Nir Kabaretti, who also is music director of the Santa Barbara Symphony. The Israeli native, who lives in Florence, Italy, galvanized the orchestra in a performance that brought out appropriate bravado in the "Toreador" song and the "March of the Toreadors," while finessing the seductive rhythms of "Habanera" and "Seguidilla" and the gentle sweetness of romance that pulls against the sweep of Carmen's hold on the fatally smitten corporal, Don Jose.**

Lanford Johnson's triumph as Carmen is in the depth of her acting skills, though she also brings an effective mezzo-soprano voice to the task. Opposite her as the hapless Don Jose is Michael Hayes, whose acting is also commendable, though more on the conventional side. About the quality of his full-bodied but supple tenor, there is no question. It's a joy to hear.

Rena Harms as Micaela, the country girl who tries to remind Don Jose of his mother and the simple pleasures of their rural home, adds a lovely soprano voice to the mix. Bass-baritone Derrick Parker bolsters his powerful voice with the swagger of the popular bullfighter Escamillo, who attracts Carmen as another likely notch on her sash.

Smaller roles also get their due, with Jamie Offenbach making the most of his role as Zuniga, captain of the dragoons. The opera company also makes good use of its Young Artists Program, with up-and-coming singers adding color and vocal strength to the chorus and in featured moments.