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# Killing Carmen: Brilliant, Genre-Bending Requiem for Bizet

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Seen alongside the Volksoper's already much-discussed Carmen, Killing Carmen feels like the missing piece of the puzzle – a fearless, witty and deeply emotional companion work that dares to ask what happens after one of opera's most famous murders. Conceived by Nils Strunk, Lukas Schrenk and Gabriel Cazes, this new piece picks up the story thirteen years after Bizet's finale.

Don José, long imprisoned, is now on the brink of execution, and the surviving characters gather once more at Lillas Pastia's tavern to re-live, re-argue and re-imagine the past. The dramaturgical premise is brilliant in its simplicity. Rather than retelling Carmen, the creators turn the opera into a shared trauma that refuses to settle into a single narrative. Memories clash, perspectives shift; what was once presented as a "crime of passion" becomes a case study in how society romanticises violence against a woman who insisted on living freely. The text, spoken and sung in German, French and English, has a supple, contemporary rhythm without ever losing respect for the characters we think we know so well.

Visually, the evening is disarmingly modest – and all the more powerful for it. Anne Buffetrille and Lara Regula place the action on the raised orchestra pit, transformed into a down-at-heel version of Lillas Pastia's bar: band and piano to the left, a scattering of tables and chairs to the right, with only a black curtain behind. At first, dark coats and wide-brimmed hats create an almost Western, border-town atmosphere; as the characters sink deeper into recollection, colours flare up: Carmen in a white flamenco-dress silhouette, Escamillo stepping into full toreador glamour, soldiers in bold blue and red jackets.

Shifts in Paul Grilj's lighting – cool, bluish tones for the present, smoky reds and ambers for the remembered past – become a kind of emotional weather system, signalling when we are inside someone's memory, fantasy or confession. The band is not hidden in a pit but placed in full view and full dialogue with the cast. Cazes's musical concept weaves Bizet's familiar themes together with jazz harmonies, flamenco grooves, chanson, pop, musical-theatre idioms and even a hint of country, creating a sound world that is at once playful and intensely dramatic.

When fragments of the Habanera or the Toreador Song surface, they do so like memories themselves – sometimes caressed, sometimes ripped apart, sometimes refracted into something almost unrecognisable. The small ensemble of multi-instrumentalists (percussion, guitar, bass, cello, trumpet and more) plays with

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an electrifying immediacy, responding to the singers' phrasing and presence in real time rather than simply accompanying them. In the title role, Katia Ledoux is nothing short of magnetic. Vocally, she possesses a richly coloured, flexible instrument that moves effortlessly between smoky jazz inflections, full-blooded operatic lines and rough-edged belts when the music tips into rock or funk.

Critics have already singled out her entrance number – a reimagined, jazz-soaked Habanera – as a showstopper, and with good reason: she reclaims the aria as an act of storytelling rather than seduction, a manifesto of radical freedom sung by a woman who knows exactly how high the cost may be. Dramatically, Ledoux's Carmen is neither saint nor cliché; she is funny, furious, wounded, defiant, and always vividly, specifically alive. Opposite her, Anton Zetterholm makes an extraordinary Don José. Best known for his musical-theatre work, he brings the ease of that world – clarity of text, physical spontaneity, fearless use of head-voice and belt – into an operatic context without ever sacrificing musical finesse.

His José is already broken when we meet him, a man trying to retell the story in a way that might justify the unforgivable. As the evening evolves, Zetterholm gradually strips away bravado and self-pity, exposing the banal, terrifying core of his violence. In the climactic confrontations with Carmen, the stage seems to shrink around the two of them; their exchanges are as emotionally raw as anything in traditional Carmen, but reframed so that we can no longer pretend not to see the murder for what it is. Stefan Cerny's Escamillo is a joy – vocally resplendent, theatrically larger-than-life and yet surprisingly nuanced.

His resonant bass cuts easily through the amplified band textures, and he leans into the stylised masculinity of the bullfighter persona with a twinkle that suggests he is slightly amused by his own legend. There is a wonderful moment when the audience joins in a snatch of his big number, turning the Volksoper briefly into a rock concert; it encapsulates one of the production's central insights, that Carmen's world has become part of our collective pop-cultural memory. Julia Edtmeier's double duty as Micaëla and Dancaïro is a feat of versatility. As Micaëla, she captures the character's traditional warmth and sincerity but gives her more backbone than usual, a woman whose faith and moral compass can coexist with sharp intelligence.

As Dancaïro, she switches into a wry, street-wise survivor with seemingly effortless vocal and physical gear-changes. Florian Carove's Morales, meanwhile, has justifiably been described as irresistibly charismatic: he functions as both participant and commentator, his every gesture and line delivery calibrated to draw the audience deeper into this nocturnal gathering of the ghosts of Carmen. What makes Killing Carmen so refreshing is that its irreverence is grounded in an obvious love for Bizet's original. Press reactions have highlighted how the piece manages to feel wild and liberated while, paradoxically, staying truer to the spirit of Carmen than many high-concept Regietheater readings.

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Strunk and Schrenk never mock the opera; instead, they listen attentively to its blind spots – above all, the tendency to aestheticise Carmen's death and to project guilt back onto the victim – and let those blind spots generate new material. Formally, the evening sits somewhere between opera, play with music and concert, but it never feels unsure of its identity. The multilingual text flows organically; surtitles ensure nothing is lost, yet the performers' commitment is such that you could almost follow the story on body language alone.

Scenes of aching intimacy – Carmen and José replaying their history, Micaëla negotiating her own future, Escamillo confronting what it means to be a legend – are intercut with high-energy ensemble numbers that push the band and cast to exhilarating extremes. By the time the evening reaches its final, quietly devastating image, one senses that something more than a clever sequel has taken place. The creators have used the figure of Carmen to ask larger questions about memory, complicity, storytelling and the ways in which we, as audiences, consume tales of violence against women.

"Every person carries a world within them; when a person is killed, that world dies too," the Volksoper's description reminds us, and Killing Carmen makes that loss almost physically tangible. t is no surprise that the premiere drew rapturous applause and that local critics have praised the production's intelligence, humour and emotional punch. For newcomers, this show is an accessible, thrilling way into the Carmen universe; for seasoned opera lovers, it offers the rare pleasure of hearing a familiar classic with genuinely fresh ears. Far from "killing" Carmen, this inventive Volksoper evening brings her, and the questions she embodies, vividly back to life.

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