

Carmen with a twist: From toreador to city boy

Simon Stephens' modern take on Bizet's opera makes Carmen a man and Escamillo a hedge-funder

by Jessica Duchon

Tuesday 07 April 2015

When does an expertise become a straitjacket? It is not only actors playing a long-running role in a soap or a detective series who can find themselves "stuck" with a character: pity the opera singer who happens to be good at Carmen. Playing Bizet's seductive, fate-obsessed gypsy over and over again, in city after city – not just recreating her personality, but reliving her murder by her lover at the end of the opera – could drive anyone towards insanity. The playwright Simon Stephens has been taking a fresh look at the strange existence of the serial Carmen. Commissioned by the German director Sebastian Nübling to write a new work for the Deutsche Schauspielhaus Hamburg, he was inspired by Nübling's acquaintance with the Israeli mezzo-soprano Rinat Shaham, famed internationally for her performances as Carmen. The result is Carmen Disruption, which was performed first in German last spring and is now coming to the UK for the first time. It opens on Friday at the Almeida Theatre.

"Two things were fascinating," says Stephens. "First, the relationship between Rinat's working life singing Carmen and her own sense of self. When you pursue a character to that degree, the blurring between where the character starts and where the performer starts is exacerbated and complicated. But when you've performed it 43 times, as she has now, it becomes dislocating. "Secondly, she's constantly on the move, an international nomad. She's taken solace in the virtual world – she was the third person in a fortnight who told me that she felt more at home on her laptop than in her actual home. Her life is emblematic of a larger cultural shift."

Stephens takes as protagonists five figures – four of them modelled upon Bizet's protagonists and one called simply the Singer – who drift through an unidentified European city; their lives brush against one another, the same incidents touch them, they observe one another unwittingly, yet the

connection between them is never quite made. Each lives more in a virtual world than a real one, connected to themselves and to others via an online existence.

None of the characters, though, are quite what you might expect. Stephens has overturned the opera's stereotypes, delving deeper into the essence of the characters' motivations. "I was talking to a friend about my anxiety that Carmen would be yet another case of a woman being defined only by her sexuality, and I was just saying, 'Well, I can't change Carmen, I can't make her a male prostitute...' – when I realised that that would be much more interesting!" he declares.

Therefore Carmen is defined by her – or in this case, his – capacity to love and his fearlessness of death. Don José is a fighter who has held emotional vulnerability at bay, but when confronted by it he gives everything – becoming, in Stephens' reinterpretation, a mother craving to be reunited with her estranged son. Micaela – in the opera, Don José's abandoned sweetheart – is a lost girl, a lonely student in crisis over an ill-advised romantic entanglement. Escamillo, the toreador, is a modern equivalent: a hedge-fund manager whose extreme panache is matched by the danger to which his risk-taking exposes him.

Binding everything together is music – by Simon Slater, with nods at Bizet – including a sung "Chorus" in the form of the Hungarian mezzo-soprano Viktoria Vizin, to whom the scenario is all too familiar. "I have lived every single moment of it," she says. "A few years ago I sang my 100th Carmen. That role can hurt. I got to the point where I seriously considered quitting. I decided that if nothing happens, if I am only going to play Carmen or Carmen-like characters, then it's not worth it." Eventually she chose not to take on the role any longer – unlike the Singer in the play, who reaches crisis as she is about to go on stage.

"She crumbles," says the director, Michael Longhurst. "And on the bigger scale, that represents not only perhaps the crumbling of an art, but the crumbling of Europe." Indeed, in a world where all hotels in a chain look the same, Stephens reflects, "How can you ever know where you are?" Stephens says he has written obsessively about what it is to leave home or to return there: "It's a central theme running through my plays like a vein," he says. Besides informing his original work, which includes plays such as *Three Kingdoms* and *Birdland*, it is also a thread in his adaptations of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, *The Cherry Orchard* and *A Doll's House*, among many others. "It's an obsession," he admits. "And *Carmen Disruption* is a fascinating interrogation about what happens when your home is a virtual place rather than a concrete one." Why the obsession? "If I could answer that," he laughs, "I probably wouldn't be able to write."

Carmen Disruption, Almeida Theatre, from 10 April. Box office: 020 7359 4404