

Rewarding Carmen from juvenile cast

Just what is *Carmen* – *The Musical*?

Freely adapted and arranged by Bobbie Field and "with book and lyrics by David Badger," it has reduced orchestration supplemented by a synthesiser and features considerable cuts to the music and the dialogue.

Major arias are present but choruses such as the opening one for the men, the children's chorus and the cigarette-smoking chorus are abbreviated. The smugglers' quintet is missing and Carmen's card scene is sung by her alone, with interjected spoken comments from Frasquita and Mercédès.

It mostly works, but the end of Act III, where Micaela pleads at length with Don José and Carmen has left the stage, and the drastically truncated final duet are badly handled, losing much of their dramatic impact.

As presented late in January by Alexander Productions it provided a thoroughly enjoyable night out at the Sydney Theatre.

The cast was huge, the scenery and the age of the performers minimal, but the entire enterprise was overflowing with the ebullience of youth — everyone was under 25 — and there were at least two exhilaratingly promising individuals in solo roles.

To come as close to perfection with only three weeks' rehearsal of a young and inevitably inexperienced cast, most of whom couldn't presumably have had more than fleeting pre-a great credit to the organisational and entrepreneurial flair of Nicole Alexander, the directorial skill of Nigel



Mid-Summer Opera's production of *Carmen* – *The Musical*: Martin Buckingham as Don José, Lauren Zolezzi as Carmen.

opera in review

sydney

Jamieson and the musical expertise of conductor Christopher Shepard. Everyone on stage was obvi-

ously in all-stops-out enthusiasm mode throughout the performance I attended, the second of a daunting

Lauren Zolezzi's 18-year-old Carmen was strongly sung and as effectively characterised as was

perhaps possible given costing which was at considerable odds with the hot-blooded gypsy employee of a cigarette factory she's supposed to be. Clad throughout in a bright red slinky evening gown and high heels, she looked a good deal more like a night club vamp.

The 16-year-old Escamillo (Michael Valasinni) round to be counted among the best I have ever seen. Skinny as the proverbial rake, appropriately clad in an outfit which could conceivably have been purloined from a convenient bullring, and with plenty of macho charisma, he managed the notoriously awkward tessitura of the torador song with seeming ease and plenty of power to satisfy; though of course, like all the cast, he was significantly amplified courtesy David Betteridge's effective sound design.

Martin Buckingham, at 24 the senior member of the cast, was a Don José of potential who was nevertheless less at home in the role than those two. His passion lacked bite, his singing the final infusion of heart that can make this role such a gripping assignment for performer and audience alike.

Julie Goodwin, the 19-year-old Micaela, made

quite a good fist of the role without managing to radiate enough of that aura of quintessential innocence and warmheartedness that is the hallmark of this role.

The lesser principal roles were all well tenanted and the chorus work was robust and musical under the energetic, clear-cut and obviously heartfelt baton of Christopher Shepard at Sydney Grammar School, who obviously has a talent for working with young per-

formers and communicated his infectious enthusiasm for *Carmen* most meticulously and effectively on this occasion.

From a staging point of view, Andy McDonell's modular set, consisting of a number of tables on wheels, was stupendous, being redeployed by the huge ensemble with ease required. One of the table tops was equipped with a built-in door; occasionally, stood on end, it provided a

convincing entry/exit point to the main focus of the action. And for the final scene, a whole semi-circular wall of upended tables formed a convincing perimeter surrounding the bullring where Don José is to murder Carmen.

More often, deployed and redeployed so as to provide a fluid, ever-changing, easily malleable stage picture with a minimum of expense and muscle power, these tables were used as a conveniently elevated walkway and acting space, naturally focussing the eye of the audience on the dramatic nub of the moment.

Given such a wealth of budding talent under such enthusiastic and committed direction, it was no surprise that *Carmen* was the evening night at the Sydney Theatre.

— DAVID GYGER



Martin Buckingham as Don José, Lauren Zolezzi as Carmen.

Reggioli's strong Turandot

(From Page 351.18) lane replacing Henry Choo as Pang. Having played the role during the intervening Melbourne season, he predictably slotted as seamlessly into partnership with John Pringle's Ping and Kanen Breen's Pong as one could wish; not only their song but their meticulously co-ordinated stage movements were a pleasure more than sufficient to banish the tedium their rather long-winded utter-

ances tends to provoke in less than admirable performance.

Seated on one side of the stage, the Opera Australia Chorus fulfilled its important place in the *Turandot* proceedings with exemplary power and vocal commitment; wisely, the limited space available for stage action was left free for the principal players in the drama.

For Act III, I deserted my favored spot in the near

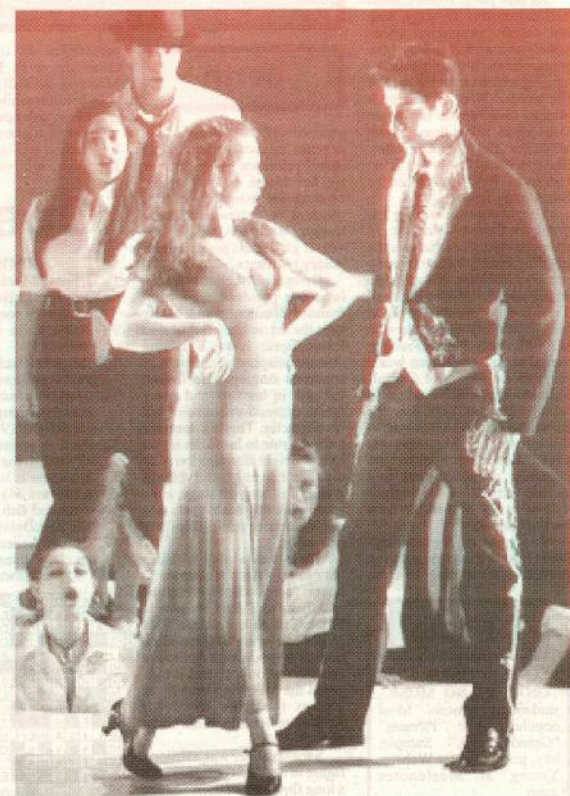
proximity of the stage in favor of my more usual parks concert vantage point at the rear of the crowd. The wash of amplified sound was still satisfying even if the surtitles were illegible and much of the detail of the stage action could not be seen.

Somewhat perplexingly, the crowd was noticeably smaller than at most Domain operas I've attended over the years, not quite reaching to the paved

northern walkway whose outer perimeter is lined by food and drink stalls and serrated ranks of portaloos.

One would have thought the nature of the offering and the quality track record of previous Domain opera performance, combined with the appeal of one of the highest profile operatic pops around, Nessun dorma, would have ensured a record turnout.

— DAVID GYGER



Lauren Zolezzi as Carmen, Michael Valasinni as Escamillo.

CARMEN – THE MUSICAL
(Book by Bobbie Field)
In English, without surtitles
Alexander Productions
Carmen Lauren Zolezzi
Don José Martin Buckingham
Escamillo Michael Valasinni
Moulinet Claudio Sgarbi
Micaela Julie Goodwin
Zaniga Marc Stagg
Mercédès Eloise Evans
Frasquita Sam Fiddes
Lillas Pella Alex Sefton
Dancino Ben Marshall
Remendado Sacha Krijtjan
Gaiete Adam Wilson
Micaelita Sabrina Bushon
Featured artist of smugglers:
Claudio Sgarbi, Morgan Fraser,
Lincoln Hall, Alex Sefton,
Emily Edmonds, Phoebe Humphreys,
Sarah Gual
Carmen Chorus,
Dancers and Orchestra
Conductor Christopher Shepard
Director Nigel Jamieson
Movement director Gavin Robins
Set designer Andy McDonell
Costume designer Alexandra Sommer
Lighting designer Chris Twyman
Sound design David Betteridge
Sydney Theatre
Thursday, January 18