

Carmen:
Literature and Opera
Adapted to Film

by

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Literature, opera and film stem from different domains but are all art forms, however, both opera and film are made for performance whereas the written word is meant to call upon the imagination. And many stories have awakened the inspiration of great artists who have married various forms of arts. But what happens to the written word set to sound? What happens to the sung word when it becomes a narrative? What becomes of opera when it is expressed through dance?

Prosper Mérimée's novel *Carmen* has inspired a number of artists who have tried to capture the soul of the magnetic Gypsy. They have exposed her through different principles and techniques meant to stimulate the public, thus raising controversies every time the story is retold.

Carmen when performed at the *Opéra-Comique* in Paris on March 3rd, 1875, was received harshly by the critics, who were shocked by the realism of the subject matter and its staging: Women were smoking on stage, ordinary people were represented in leading roles, and to top it all, at the end, the soprano was stabbed on stage. In spite of all these elements, *Carmen* is now one of the most often performed operas, and it has inspired the production of more than 30 films. The most recent film directors who have found themselves drawn to Mérimée's novel and Bizet's music are: the Italian director Francesco Rosi, who adapted Bizet's opera to the screen in 1983, and the Spanish director, Carlos Saura, who produced a flamenco version of Mérimée's novel the same year. Both have kept the original name for their productions, *Carmen* (meaning song in Latin). But, in adapting *Carmen* to film, Rosi and Saura opted for different approaches. For the most

part, Rosi took an opera away from one medium, the operatic stage, and dramatized it into an "operatic film" where the primary element remains the voice; Saura on the other hand used Mérimée's novel and Bizet's music as a springboard for a vision of his own based on a physical interpretation of the novel through dance, and both have added elements to their film meant to make the story as realistic as possible and also to cast their version with an element of shock.

Mérimée's novel *Carmen* is based on a Spanish travelogue written by Prosper Mérimée (1803-1870), which begins with an introduction to Gypsy life, thus making the story appear to be an anthropological study, while the narrator witnesses a drama. In the course of his research in Spain, the narrator has made the acquaintance of Don José, an outlaw. Don José relates his tragic relationship with Carmen, a free and sexy Gypsy who worked in a tobacco factory. Don José, a guard, became an outcast, first when he helped Carmen escape from jail (after she had been arrested for fighting and cutting up another worker at the factory), and then again, when he killed his superior and joined Carmen and her smuggler friends. In their company, he killed Carmen's husband, and later, Carmen herself, because she had found another lover in the toreador Escamillo.

Bizet's opera retells Don José's story as an adaptation to the operatic stage. Georges Bizet (composer. 1838-1875) with his librettists, Henri Meilhac (1831-1897) and Ludovic Halévy (1834-1908) rearranged the narration of Don José's series of falls and suffering into four acts. To suit the opera tradition of the *Opéra-Comique*, the librettists had to soften some aspects of Mérimée's characters, and they subdued the personalities of Carmen and Don José. In Carmen, the character was a little less sexually active, and the love-struck Don José committed fewer crimes. In the opera, he does not kill his superior officer, nor does he kill Carmen's husband. He becomes a mere deserter. Then, in order to emphasize José's character and his origins, the librettists brought in a new character, Micaela, a witness to José's honorable background and the values with which he was

raised. Of the smugglers, they created three merry companions, partly as a contrast to the tension offered by the tragedy, and also because they could not deny their own comic background as founders of the French operetta in collaboration with Jacques Offenbach.

In Rosi's Franco-Italian production, the world of Carmen and Don José is preserved much as Bizet, Meilhac and Halévy had envisioned it for the operatic stage, and in the film, the characters sing and converse in French. However, we are no longer in the presence of performers dependent on the conductor's baton, as in a filmed operatic stage production. Here, the characters move in the new dimension of film, and the conductor, Lorin Maazel, and his orchestra are never seen. In fact, the sound was recorded in a studio, before the filming took place, and Maazel explains how this was done:

Most movie directors add the sound after the picture-editing process... They edit the music to fit the picture. In our case, however, the score had to be recorded first. So the director has to use what is called a playback system - the music is played on the set as the actors act and sing along to their pre-recorded voices. This is called synchronization, or lip sync. To do this, one needs a conductor on the set to do nothing but coordinate all this, to watch and listen to every syllable. We hired Rolf Feichtinger, a longtime professional musician, to take charge of this end of it. (Rubinstein 11)

The results of the lip sync in the film are quite accurate and Bizet's music is brilliantly performed by the singers and the Orchestre National de France. The performance exudes the energy expressed by the strong action of the film.

In their screen play, Rosi and Tonino Guerra preserved the visions of the opera's libretto, in action and passion. Every character of the film, every duet and aria line can be found in the operatic source. For the role of Carmen, Rosi selected Julia Migenes-

Johnson, and for the role of Don José, he called on Plácido Domingo. In the film, Carmen remains a bewitching amoral woman who exudes sensuality and likes to get what she wants without worrying much about consequences, whereas the handsome Don José lives only through his love for Carmen. The change from the usual operatic interpretation is found in Micaela. She is no longer depicted as a simple, naïve girl in love, but a brave dignified character who dares struggle alone through the mountains to deliver her message.

Rosi adapted *Carmen* to the format of a motion picture, giving it a new visual dimension by recreating a Spanish mid-nineteenth century atmosphere. On stage, the opera is performed in four settings: The first act takes place in a square in Seville; The second act is set at Lillas Pastia's tavern; the third act develops at the smugglers' mountain hideout, and in the fourth, the tragedy unfolds in Seville's Plaza de Toros, where everyone is gathered for a bullfight. With his film, Rosi was able to extend the visual narration and break away from the limitation of division into acts, and he was better able to illustrate the descriptions found in the novel. The only alterations to the staged opera are visual. The film becomes a presentation of experiences which are emphasized by its Spanish background. Rosi brought *Carmen* to Mérimée's setting by shooting the film in Spain, a country where he had already been inspired by bullfighting and bullfighters when filming *Il momento della verità* in 1965. He has succeeded in setting *Carmen* into tableaux which blend harmoniously with the Spanish scenery and include an arena and a bullfight - visual dimensions which make the film more explicit and realistic.

Rosi filmed the opera in Ronda, a small old mountain town in Spain: The town is "arid, rugged and mountainous, its sunflowers barely alive, its landscape studded with cows grazing on the winding roads and sharp cliffs...Its houses are white-washed and edged in green and brown" (Rubinstein 13); and he filmed also in Carmona, a fortified

town, thirty-three kilometers from Seville. In these locations, Rosi added movement to the plot of the libretto and expanded the visual effects. The film starts with the violent production of a bullfight while the credits are shown, and the music of the prelude begins when Escamillo (Ruggero Raimondi) kills the bull. While the music fills the background, as a contrast to the bullfight and also to give emphasis to the strong and contrasting expressions of emotion in Spain, Rosi presents a religious procession during which a statue of the Madonna is carried through the streets of Seville. This is followed by a changing of the guard at the walls of Seville - an elaborate event where soldiers, horses, and children mingle. As the ceremony takes place, the children's chorus is heard in the background (Here, the children are not seen singing as they would be on stage). Then, Carmen is introduced in a charming dance scene taking place in the streets of Seville, one of several dances choreographed for the film by none other than Antonio Gades, the choreographer for Saura's production of Carmen. Through dance, Gades adds to the action of the film by adding more physical expression and movement. The fight at the tobacco factory is filmed with a large active and noisy crowd, over which the camera moves rapidly. To emphasize the unrest, Rosi switches to several settings, going from the factory's interior, where Carmen is found, to the outdoors, where the angry tobacco workers have gathered. As Carmen is taken to jail by Don José, a seduction scene ensues; the filming stresses the sensuality of movements with slow paced full shots of Carmen and alternating reaction shots of the smoking Don José watching her. Additional drama emerges with Carmen's escape when she is seen running into side streets and the whole scene ends with an effective freeze on a tableau depicting turmoil. Then, while Don José is in jail, in order to fill a visual gap made by the prelude played before the second act of the opera, Rosi adds a section with a refined performance of Spanish dancing at Escamillo's mansion. This is filmed with long-shots of the dancers. Panoramic shots of Seville and its cathedral follow. Then, at Lillas Pastia's tavern, a little girl, Carmen and her friend sing and perform a lively Gypsy dance. This scene is

followed by the appearance of Escamillo, at dusk, who arrives with his friends in several horse-drawn coaches. In that lavish scene, Escamillo meets Carmen, who was reflecting the light of the Gypsy's fire into his eyes with the help of a mirror. Back at Lillas Pastia's, Carmen, in a memorable performance by Julia Migenes-Johnson, seduces Don José with a sensual dance never seen on the operatic stage. Later, the mountains are introduced with panoramic shots, and their ruggedness transforms Micaela (Faith Esham) into a heroic character when she is seen struggling to climb up the treacherous path. Back in Seville, a bullfight brings back Escamillo. Here, the filming provides insight into the rituals of bullfighting, as Escamillo is being dressed in the full regalia of a toreador and praying before entering the arena. Under Rosi's direction, the camera moves from the gates of the arena to the arena itself, and gives close up reactions of characters whose emotions are reaching a climax. Here, the camera reveals the drama of life and death through emotional portraits as we see the passion in Carmen and Don José's eyes, the love shared by Escamillo and Carmen, the contempt on Carmen's face, and Don José's final expression of madness as he kills Carmen.

In his film, Rosi created a visual excitement, which is not possible with a staged performance. The photography of the Spanish backgrounds is lavish, the filming preserves the dust and flies which increase the realism of the film, and the camera adds not only movement to the beautifully sung drama, but also expands the space of the action.

In Carlos Saura's adaptation, *Carmen* represents a complex interpretive task, with a repeat of the excellent Flamenco performances found in Saura's *Bodas de Sangre* and in *El Amor Brujo* (1987). The screenplay was written as an adaptation of Mérimée's novel and draws from the music of Bizet's opera, which recurs in nostalgic leitmotifs. Antonio Gades' choreography for the film focuses on the intense interaction between two people: the Flamenco stars, Antonio (Gades) and Carmen (Laura Del Sol). Saura related

that: "it was difficult to make *Carmen* without doing the opera, without doing a pastiche," (Besas 236) and in order to avoid falling into this pattern, he researched thoroughly Mérimée's novel and divided the plot into a story-within-a-story.

As with John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, directed by Karel Reisz, and filmed in 1981, Saura's *Carmen* offers dual plots. The fictional intrigue, introduced as a desire to adapt Mérimée's story to dance, is intertwined with the relationship of the film's characters, Antonio and Carmen. The action gives two points of view, the first one, a reflection on *Carmen* narrated by Antonio who explains the novel's plot to his dancers before staging it (he even gives a copy of the fiction to Carmen, the flamenco dancer), and the second one, the development of a sexual relationship between Carmen and Antonio, which parallels that of Mérimée's characters, presenting the same problem of jealousy and developing further the one of sexuality. All details superfluous to the romance, which takes place between Carmen and Don José are eliminated. As a result, Saura makes no use of the outdoor scenes described by Merimée, and instead, he develops the eroticism of the bedroom scene. In his film, which becomes a Spanish film with Spanish dialogues and songs, Saura presents the duality of his plot through dance and settings which are always uncluttered and stripped to a minimum. At one level of the plot, a producer named Antonio and his manager are in search of a dancer who will be the star performer in a Flamenco production of *Carmen*. Antonio himself becomes attracted to a dancer whose name is Carmen, and becomes her lover only to find out that she is already married, and that her husband (a drug smuggler) is coming out of jail. As was the case with Mérimée's *Carmen*, the "Flamenco" Carmen is attracted to many men, and after the two performers dance their last steps together, Antonio, crazy with jealousy, murders her. In a parallel to Micaela of the operatic plot, Saura creates Christina, Antonio's assistant and a very gifted dancer who lacks Carmen's savage beauty. She is the

character who represents the qualities of dedication and loyalty which are lacking in Carmen.

In Saura's film, Antonio is first seen in search of the musical elements of Bizet's opera which will contribute to his choreography of Mérimée's drama. Then, we find him staging various sections of the novel which relate Carmen and Don José's story: the factory and the scene leading to Carmen's arrest; a fight with a worker which parallels a growing feeling of competition between Carmen and Christina; Carmen's arrest, with male dancers representing the soldiers; a "pas de deux" symbolizing Don José falling in love with Carmen and during which Antonio does fall in love with his star, Carmen; the room where Carmen was to have taken Don José, a staged scene which precedes an actual "bedroom scene," a staging of the entrance of Escamillo and his friends which follows a scene of jealousy involving Antonio and Carmen and leads to a fight and Carmen's death.

Saura's filming blends a guitar interpretation of Bizet's music which lends itself well to the strong rhythms necessary for Gades' choreography. The camera itself joins the dancing from extreme close-ups focused on feet tapping, to vertiginous panning shots which seem to join in the ensembles. This dynamic editing creates a spell-binding dance, and the film explodes with the energy of the performers. With the camera, Saura emphasizes also the theme of duality and confrontation. With alternating shots, which juxtapose the performance of the narrated plot and the events actually taking place between Carmen and Antonio, Saura transports the viewer to a dimension of illusion. This effect begins when the dancers are seen through a two-way mirror, then, it is developed further, with two "*pas de deux*," one danced by Carmen and Christina (Antonio's assistant) and the other by Carmen and Antonio. In this manner, Saura shows Christina and Carmen competing on stage and fighting during the factory scene, and the parallels between Carmen and Don José/Antonio's love, which develops both on and off

stage. But when Antonio finally visualizes how Carmen should dress for the scene in front of the arena, she appears in front of him with the imagined dress and mantilla only to remain standing alone on stage as her image reflects in the mirror. At that moment it becomes obvious that all dualities have merged and that at both levels, on and off Antonio's stage, the plot will end dramatically. The emphasis on duality is preserved further in the musical interpretation. For example, at the beginning of the film, while the Flamenco artists are singing, accompanying themselves with guitars, Antonio puts on a taped version of the operatic version, and slowly, the rhythms of the two performances blend while the aria sung by Carmen (Montserrat Caballé) "Sous les remparts de Séville... j'irai danser la séguedille" progressively takes over. This usage of two musical performances which are sharply different but draw from the same source (Bizet) recurs at every parallel, reminding the viewer that he is living two experiences.

Saura's film is a glorification of movement and rhythm. In a bare setting, his camera becomes an eye that captures and gives interpretation to every gesture, magnifying the narration of drama and expression of emotion through dance.

With Rosi and Saura's *Carmens*, the spectator is presented with two totally different approaches to the adaptation of music into film. Rosi, in the opera tradition, has emphasized the vocal aspect and has brought *Carmen* to the screen in a manner which tried not to transgress from the standard operatic stage performance by retaining the continuity of the opera's action. At the same time, Rosi has added movement and interpretation to the opera, giving a new perspective to its visual effects. As a result, Rosi's *Carmen* is the most sophisticated opera on film. It has become a work of great sophistication because of Rosi's understanding of the novel and libretto, of cinematographer Pasqualino De Santi's understanding of the location and its light, Antonio Gades' sensitive choreography and Enrico Job's well-designed sets and costumes. Saura's adaptation of *Carmen* is also a masterpiece at three levels. On the first

two levels, thanks to the memorable choreography of Antonio Gades, Mérimée's novel is adapted not only to film but also to dance, and then, with genial inspiration, Bizet's music in turn finds a new medium when adapted and blended with the rhythms of Flamenco. In his adaptation, Saura has broken with all other efforts to bring the music of Bizet's *Carmen* to film. He has introduced it through the element film expresses best: motion.

Rosi and Saura, have dared challenge the traditions of opera and dance, proving that directors with insight and sensitivity can find new ways to deal with adaptation. They have developed a symbol of emotion and reality through the setting they have chosen to tell their story. Both have added to the local surrounding of the initial story, with Rosi, this comes about by braking away with the usual conventions of opera and its setting; with Saura, *Carmen* becomes a mystifying and erotic puzzle. Both directors prove that Mérimée's story will continue to exert its fascination on artists for a long time to come.

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