

OPERA SANTA BARBARA

A Carmen Harvest Moon

By Daniel Kepl / VOICE

COINCIDENCE OR SORCERY? Opera Santa Barbara's Artistic and General Director Kostis Protopapas has earned plaudits over the years for his passion about possibilities, operatic and otherwise. But is it a stretch imagining him calculating opening night of the 2023-2024 Opera Santa Barbara season to overlap precisely with a gloaming Harvest Moon, coerced by the ghosts of the unsettled dead that linger in the liminal space between life and death, day and night? Short answer - No!

Last Friday's OSB presentation at the Granada Theatre of Georges Bizet's avant-garde for its time (1875) operatic treatment of Prosper Mérimée's novella *Carmen* found audience and artists alike shimmering with close moon encounter syndrome. The energy in the house and on the street as the Harvest Moon manifested gigantically over downtown Santa Barbara at intermission was pure Tesla – electrifying.

Bizet's anti-heroine Carmen is a cigar smoking, cigarette-selling, willful and sexually independent ghetto-bred prostitute. Her fate is a conflation of metaphors, perfect for last weekend's Harvest Moon with its blood-orange color and off-putting size. The city in which Bizet's opera plays out, Valencia, Spain is also famous for its blood oranges, as well as its blood sport. A crucial set piece in the opera, the arena in which bulls are sacrificed for the entertainment of cheering masses by Carmen's lover, the toreador Escamillo, is at least a properly ceremonial execution site, if bullfighting can be considered proper at all. Carmen's murder by her jealous and jilted suitor Don José takes place importantly, outside the bullring, a very public and maladroit stabbing on the seedy streets from which Carmen had emerged for a while at least, independent.

Making her OSB debut, California-raised Mexican American mezzo-soprano Sarah Saturnino grabbed the role of Carmen by its sexual revolutionary bootstraps and ran with it on opening night. Impeccable French articulation, a genuinely sultry and room-filling vocal capability in all registers including Bizet's challenging writing for the lowest mezzo range, and most importantly a powerful, barely contained mastery of nuanced acting in all its potency and bittersweet rage, then fear, then resignation as the opera makes its inevitable procession, like Escamillo's into the bullring, toward an all too human catastrophe - blind jealousy and pointless retribution.

Sevilla isn't anything like Kansas Toto, nor Santa Maria where he presently resides, but tenor Nathan Granner in his first embrace of the complex role of Don José, corporal of dragoons and poster boy for jilted yearning and out of control machismo hyperbole (read violence), spun his debut in the role last Friday to vocally stunning heights. Last seen with OSB in 2018 (Rodolfo in *La bohème*) and 2022 (Alfredo in *La Traviata*) his singing and acting last Friday brought the house down, for its punchy prowess and magnificent tone quality – a memorable realization of the role.

Chinese American bass-baritone and Santa Barbara resident Colin Ramsey has



Colin Ramsey as Escamillo



Anya Matanovic as Micaëla



Photos courtesy of Zache Mendez

Sarah Saturnino as Carmen

been seen in five Opera Santa Barbara productions since 2017. Taking to the role of Carmen's most recent lover the toreador Escamillo as snugly as the character's tight-fitting Taleguilla, Ramsey offered Friday's audience a character study in the subtle narcissism appropriate for a popular bullring celebrity and full-time gigolo. His addictively chocolaty vocal timbre clinched the heady spell he presented on stage in his debut interpretation of the role.

Soprano Anya Matanovic has been seen in three Opera Santa Barbara productions, *The Crucible* (2019), *Das Rheingold* (2021) and *La Traviata* (2022). Her role as Micaëla in *Carmen* is small, but the music Bizet gives her character is monumental. Micaëla's duo with Don José, *Parle-moi de ma mere* (*Tell me about my mother*), and her solo aria, *Je dis que rien m'effraie* (*Nothing Scares Me*), gave Matanovic's bright, cleanly articulated voice, with its rich endowment in high register finesse and middle register warmth, opportunity to nearly steal the show.

So many to congratulate, so little space! Soprano Sunwoo Park (Frasquita), Mezzo-soprano Max Potter (Mercedes), baritone Omar Alejandro Rodriguez (Le Dancaire), tenor Kyle Rudolf (El Remendado), baritone Matthew Peterson (Zuniga), and in his debut with OSB baritone Michael Segura (Moralès) – a wonderful ensemble cast of virtuoso singing actors.

Stage director Fenlon Lamb made the most of Dahl Delu's modest but extremely functional set design, enhanced immeasurably and imaginatively by Daniel B. Chapman's lively, colorful, and message-driven video and still projections. Helena Kuukka's lighting design was a collaborative masterpiece of additional visual and modo enhancement – a fabulous team, Chapman and Kuukka.

Chorus master, principal pianist, and director of the Chrisman Studio Program at OSB Timothy Accurso trained the OSB chorus admirably – some tricky bits in that score! Julija Zonic's fabulous Ojai Pixies tackled the important children's chorus sections in *Carmen* with not just cute aplomb, but real professional training; balanced voicing, excellent diction, and solid intonation. Choreographer Cecily MacDougall (State Street Ballet) sprinkled several virtuoso duo sequences for dancers Ethan Ahuero and Rachel Hutsell throughout the opera's four acts, that wowed.

And in charge of it all, maestro Protopapas held forth from the pit with benign pleasure and decades of experience in producing and conducting Bizet's masterpiece under his belt. Perhaps it was the ominous video projections of the full moon rising over the smuggler's mountain hideaway in Act III where Carmen has her death premonition that convinced this attendee Santa Barbara's operatic future is in good hands. By the way, Friday night's Granada performance was sold-out, and I'm told ditto for Sunday's matinee.



Nathan Granner as Don José