

CARMEN

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN CONKLIN, SET DESIGNER FOR BLO'S *CARMEN*

Mr. Conklin has designed sets on and off-Broadway, at the Kennedy Center, and for opera companies all over the world, including the Metropolitan Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Seattle Opera, San Francisco Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Bastille Opera in Paris, the Royal Opera and the opera houses of Munich, Amsterdam, and Bologna, among many others. Locally his work has been seen in BLO's *I Puritani* (1993), *La Bohème* (1992), *Beatrice and Benedict* (1992), and *Lucie de Lammermoor* (2005) as well as at the American Repertory Theatre and the Boston Ballet. He teaches courses in design for stage and film at NYU's Tisch School.

Boston Lyric Opera: You have spoken of two possible approaches to stage design: one the creation of a “narrative” space, the other the creation of a “psychological” space. Where does BLO's *Carmen* fall in this scheme? Will we see the cigarette factory? The arena?

John Conklin: *Carmen* is an opera rich in the specifics of its settings. Each of the four acts takes place in a distinct locale that could be said to contain and determine the actions and behaviors of the characters. Act I in a square in front of a cigarette factory, Act IV famously outside a bullring, etc. Three acts are in and around the city of Seville. Act III moves to a wild mountain setting for the gypsy smugglers' camp. These settings illustrate and support the surface narrative of the storytelling structure and action of the piece, but at the same time, they carry symbolic and metaphorical weight. For instance, the (almost ritualistic) killing of Carmen outside the bullring is echoed by the action taking place within it. But, we are going in a somewhat different direction.

BLO: So, a psychological space?

JC: Yes, when Nic Muni (the stage director), Gabriel Berry (the costume designer), and I started our discussions for this production Nic was very clear on his desire to focus on the inner psychological conflicts of the principle characters, driven not only by their internalized demons, but by powerful social forces—class, gender, economic realities, religious beliefs. He spoke of a central clash between the bourgeois society of fixed hierarchy, of control, of boundaries, of order, and the world of the gypsies led by Carmen and her associates—unfettered by the rules of society. And, indeed looked down upon, marginalized (and feared) by that society—perceived as dirty, foreign, outlaws, criminals, whores. But at the same time, sexually fascinating and ever-alluring in their freedom.

BLO: How are these two worlds, or forces, visually represented?

JC: A bare, earthen floor strewn with rocks underlies and literally forms the basis of the entire world of the opera—an endless expanse (or as endless as possible in the confines of the Shubert) of hardscrabble stone, mud, dirt, ashes, blood soaked soil. A series of man-made wooden platforms or walkways sit on and above it, an attempt to separate an orderly, apparently tidy world from this earthy chaos.

BLO: So no black lace, fans, shawls, white-washed walls, red tiled roofs, chili peppers, or roses between the teeth?

JC: Well, perhaps a fan or shawl here and there. We are deliberately keeping the period to the late 19th century—approximately the period of its composition. That cultural milieu is an integral part of the psychological make up of the characters. But there is so much “Spain” (albeit of a slightly French 19th century touristic air...Bizet never had actually been to Spain) in the music. It is so vividly and unforgettably expressed there, why duplicate it in the look? Furthermore, the text is so clear about where you are that I feel free to use the visual world to express other dimensions of the piece.

BLO: Having seen the set model, there is certainly another large visual element, a kind of ceiling that hangs over the set. How does that function? Visually? Metaphorically?

JC: We never quite know what to call this element. As you suggest, it is a large panel painted with what seems to be the remains or remnants of a religious fresco (the source is a Spanish early medieval representation of the Last Judgment). At one point it touches the earth, but mostly it hovers above the action. We see it shift, tilt, turn...now opening up the space...now pressing down. A wall? The ceiling of a church? A sky? A cosmic, inhuman God-like force?

BLO: And the religious element it brings in?

JC: The place and power of religion, of belief in some higher force, both the Catholic faith and the reliance in some ultimate destiny, fate, the Tarot cards pervade this opera. Don José tells us that he was at some point preparing for the priesthood (a rigid hierarchy), but an act of impulsive violence on his part has forced him to join the army (a rigid hierarchy) as an escape. But his obsession with Carmen draws him inexorably into another, in his eyes, pagan world, only to be agonizingly pulled back into his former world of family and church by the death of his mother and by Michaela. In the end he is unable to find any resolution except with a kind of terrifying exorcism as he, in a final spasm of violence, murders Carmen who he repeatedly calls “the Devil.” And Carmen herself fervently believes in the power of her Tarot cards.

BLO: Rumor has it that we may be seeing a bit of *Jersey Boys* in *Carmen*.

JC: When *Jersey Boys* moved into the Shubert for their recent run, they built a large, black portal that completely covers the ornate white and gold columns that make up the familiar proscenium of the theatre. One day, in checking some details, our Director of Production, Dan Duro, was intrigued with the startling difference that this temporary addition made to the visual dynamics of the theatre space and, joined by the lighting designer Tom Hase, we all visited the space and decided to keep it (it was built by *Jersey Boys* specifically for their Boston run. They’re just leaving it up and the Citi Performing Arts Center is donating it to us). Maybe we’ll just use it for *Carmen* or maybe for some of our other season productions. It does have a very compelling effect in breaking down the visual and psychological divide between the performers and the audience. The Shubert is already an enviably intimate theatre for opera and this only helps.

BLO: Have you designed *Carmen* before?

JC: Yes, rather many times, in fact. In Houston a fairly elaborate, four set, “naturalistic” production; in St. Louis a much more abstract world; in Stockholm at the Royal Opera, a somewhat cinematic version moving to several more locations than even the four Bizet suggests (in prison, inside the guard house, a factory, José’s village church). In Tulsa I worked with Nic (Muni) on a production that was part of an intriguing “Seville Trilogy” made up of *Carmen*, *Fidelio*, and *The Barber of Seville*. But Nic has rethought *Carmen* for this Boston production and I love working with him and my fellow designers, Gabriel and Tom, in exploring the nuances as well as the overall sweep of this great opera. Familiarity, in this case, breeds not contempt, but pleasure in rediscovery and renewal—the piece itself is so rich in drama, in music, so infinite in its power to evoke joy and excitement, and exhilaration in its creative team, performances, and audiences over and over again.