

CARMEN

AN INTERVIEW WITH NICHOLAS MUNI, STAGE DIRECTOR OF BLO'S *CARMEN*

As a freelance stage director, Mr. Muni has directed over two hundred productions with companies in North America, Europe, and Australia. The 1993-1994 Season marked his debut at Boston Lyric Opera with the American premiere of the Neapolitan version of Bellini's *I Puritani*.

BLO: How does it feel returning to BLO after 16 years?

Nicholas Muni: Great. Boston is one of my very favorite cities anywhere in the world. I love the young, progressive energy and the intellectually stimulating atmosphere. BLO itself has evolved and progressed over the years into one of the premiere regional companies, so I'm very happy to be returning.

BLO: What have been some of the more significant changes in the opera world during that time?

NM: I think mainly that progressive production approaches have become much more common on the North American scene. If one looks to the MET, and considers both the repertoire and the types of productions they have done during the past 16 years, it is clear that tastes in the US have become much more adventurous. The emphasis has also shifted away from decorative spectacle to very detailed, intense singer-focused approaches--which I think has partly to do with many more theater and film directors being invited to the "opera table".

BLO: How is directing this opera different from what you have done in the past?

If you mean other productions of *Carmen* I have done in the past (my last one being in 1992, also about 16 years ago, funnily enough) I would say the musical version we have created this time is much more streamlined and focused on the core of the piece. Also, in this production we are emphasizing the economic disparity between bourgeois society and gypsy society and the social prejudice against the gypsies.

BLO: How would you characterize your style of directing?

NM: I aim for a balance between the conceptual integrity of the production on the one hand and an ultra-real, gritty style of interaction between the actors on the other. To me it is very important that everything the actors do seems improvised, while it has all been worked through very carefully, with special attention being given to cause and effect. In Germany, they use the term *konsequent* which means, roughly, "consequential", in other words moment "B" only occurs because of moment "A". I also strive for as much specificity as possible. Specificity yields dramatic tension. Generality kills dramatic tension.

BLO: What do you find most rewarding about directing?

NM: How much I learn each time I do an opera never ceases to amaze me, even operas I have done many times. There is always more to learn during the research phase and by working with different designers, conductors, and actors. The other aspect I really enjoy is to allow my imagination to unleash itself as I listen to the music--this is an incredibly enjoyable visceral experience. The interplay between intellectual rigor and letting the imagination go is something I truly relish.

BLO: What do you enjoy most about *Carmen*?

NM: Aside from the sheer brilliance of the music, getting past the gypsy stereotypes. I find we have a very limited and uninteresting collective understanding of these amazing people. The fact that this culture stemmed from India, in the Punjabi region, as part of the military caste offers such a richness. I am also very drawn to the Catholicism in the piece, as it pertains to the backstory of Don José and his internal struggle as he fights off a woman he identifies as "the devil". I find

it fascinating that he is a nobleman, a "Don" and that he finds himself on this unending downward spiral toward hell and facing the devil.

BLO: Why do you think *Carmen* has stayed so popular over the years?

NM: Great tunes, an unending stream of music that is beautiful, interesting and always connects to the public in a very special way. Our job is to make it seem fresh each time and that is made possible because of the truly interesting story underneath the stereotypes.

BLO: How do you think productions of *Carmen* have changed over time?

NM: I think they have gotten grittier, angrier, darker--and I think the pendulum has swung a bit too far in the case of the character of Carmen, who should possess such a stunning charm that one can believe that a man like Don José would be so intoxicated by her so quickly. I mean, it is certainly possible for him to be attracted to a demon--that's not the point. People are attracted to dangerous partners, people who are not good for them. But if José is smitten right from the start by an angry, violent woman, it means that he is already susceptible to that side of himself--and I think that is something that evolves over time for him. I think, for example, that the month he spends in prison between Acts I & II is critical for that development. But not in Act I.

BLO: *Carmen* is a time-honored opera-done and done again. How will you keep this opera fresh?

NM: One needs to look under each and every stone, each word, each phrase, every clue from the novella--and then fill in these stories with logical but out-of-the-box thinking. It is very hard to forget how well you already know the story -- but you must trick yourself into approaching it as if you know nothing about it and question every little thing. Then there's a chance you might find something fresh because you have not been blinded by stereotypes and have created a real specificity.

BLO: What can the audience expect of your production of *Carmen*?

NM: It is big, bold, and very simple. All the detail will be in the performances of the actors. Hopefully, those details will come across as interesting and completely genuine--and therefore it will feel like a "rich" production, but that richness will emanate from the actors and what is happening between them rather than a lot of scenic detail and "stuff". It is important to mention that this type of approach is possible because of the intimacy of the Shubert Theater--that's a real gift and I look forward to working in that space.

BLO: What do you hope the audience will take away from this production?

NM: A disturbing sense of unease, like when you feel there's a deep knot in your stomach, and then an emptiness, a real sense of sadness and despair. A nice night in the theater, right?! But that's the feeling I hope the audience has at the very end, like getting punched in the gut. Up until that point, I hope it feels like a roller coaster ride of humor, charm, eroticism, honor, and danger.

BLO: When did you first fall in love with opera?

NM: In high school. Our choir director got a call to bring some of the boys to be supers (**supernumerary**, a performer who appears in a non-singing role, equivalent to an extra in a movie) in a production of *Aida* at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. I volunteered and had a blast. The cast was not bad: Franco Corelli, Martina Arroyo, Mignon Dunn, and Benaldo Giaotti. I remember it as if it were yesterday. When Corelli did his famous diminuendo on a high B-flat during the tomb scene, going from ff (*fortissimo*, very loud) to pp (*pianissimo*, very soft) without a break in the voice, that was it for me.

BLO: What do you enjoy most about directing opera?

NM: I like the complexity and the unpredictability of how all the parts will coalesce in the final week. There is nothing like that. It all happens so quickly and with such intensity--and it is impossible to predict if it will work until the first performance.

BLO: If you were not involved in opera, what field could you see yourself venturing into?

NM: Film.