

THE CONVERSATION

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Ayaha Tsunaki and the ensemble in Johan Inger's *Carmen* at this year's Adelaide Festival. Ian Whalen

A brutal, nightmarish *Carmen* imbues an old story with contemporary resonances

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Review: Carmen, Adelaide Festival, March 8, presented by the Dresden Semperoper Ballett.

Choreographer Johan Inger's *Carmen* is one we have never seen: a *Carmen* turned inside out. In this danced-through reimagining of the world's most-popular opera, we are pulled into the characters' inner turmoil. Their dancing gets under our skin, at times deliberately unsettling us.

This is perhaps close to *Carmen* as it was experienced in 1875, when Bizet's version of Mérimée's popular novel shocked its Paris audience with its unbridled sensuality. But Bizet's world is not ours. At a time in which we have increasingly come to see gender as something socially constructed, and when violence against women by men is openly acknowledged and discussed, another *Carmen* is required.

As in Bizet's opera, the women who work in the cigar factory with *Carmen* appear onstage before she does. They are nearly indistinguishable apart from the colours of their dresses, with their hair pulled back into tight chignons and matching eye makeup. There's a menacing quality in their sameness, a generic, disengaged sexuality. They exude sexuality, but not sensuality.

Author



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Carmen here, played by Ayaha Tsunaki and Suosi Zhu in alternating performances, is no traditional femme fatale. Not the saucy, sexy diva of grand opera displaying generous cleavage, the unrestrained gypsy woman, she is a woman who uses her sexuality as a tool because she appears to have no other choice in a world in which men have all the power.

As in the opera, Don José becomes obsessed with Carmen while guarding her in jail. Jón Vallejo, who played the role in the performance I saw, is lithe and small of stature, a beautiful, fluid mover, well matched with Ayaha Tsunaki's Carmen. But Carmen teases and taunts Don José, falling into the arms of the super sexy and tall Zúñiga (Gareth Haw) and the glamorous Toreador.



Ayaha Tsunaki and Jón Vallejo were well matched as Carmen and Don José. Ian Whalen

The Toreador (Christian Bauch/Joseph Gray) oozes sex, but as with Carmen, is not particularly sexy. Dressed in a spangly jacket and skintight, shiny pants, he moves alternately like a flamenco dancer and a bull in the ring. When he later dances solo in a small mirror-chamber created by ingeniously shifting vertical panels, we see that his narcissism is an expression of his machismo, that even his swagger is calculated to achieve maximum effect.

Stockholm-born Inger's choreography reflects his long association with the Nederlands Dans Theatre where he developed his choreographic language. Both the principal dancers and the ensemble are masters of shape shifting, creating non-human movements and silhouettes. With their extended arms and legs occupying space that seems beyond the normal range of human movement, they appear insect-like at times.

This work, originally developed for the *Campañía Nacional de Danza* in Madrid, is marked by a fierce athleticism, with dancers exhibiting superb control over every muscle of their bodies. Every movement, every gesture, is held only for a micro-moment, never in repose.



The dancers in Johan Inger's *Carmen* exhibit a fierce athleticism. Ian Whalen

This lack of resolution creates tension in our bodies as we watch, an uncanny kinesthetic connection with the characters in the drama who are slaves to their passions and the overarching social forces that oppress them.

The men dance powerfully, aggressively, dominating the stage and laying their imprint on every inch of it. It is an aggressive and fluid masculinity, beautiful, but dangerous and unpredictable, containing the seeds of its own destruction. The music driving the dance shifts freely between recognisable strands from Bizet's opera to a kind of soundscape, with throbbing pulsating percussive beats and plucked strings that build tension and drive the action.

The late Spanish fashion designer David Delfin's costumes serve both an iconic and dramatic function, with his design for the suited, black-masked, ninja-like characters that intrude into and manipulate the action being particularly striking. These figures, which become more numerous as the drama progresses, direct the inner turmoil, turning it into a visible nightmare world.





David Delfin's costumes for the ninja-like characters are especially distinctive. Ian Whalen

There is only one brief segment of serenity and happiness in the work, a kind of dream sequence featuring Carmen, Don José, and a young boy, who serves as our point of entry into this otherwise harsh and brutal world. Underscored by one of the most lyrical passages from Bizet's opera, we see the three together as if on a happy family road trip, laughing, lighthearted.

Bracketing this danced picture of contentment is Don José enraged and unhinged, about to pummel Carmen, a deeply unsettling image of violence shown as a tableau, one that etches itself into the mind's eye. Though the moment of happiness is illusory, we see and experience the dream that Don José believes he has lost. And it is heartbreaking.

When Don José and Carmen dance their last tragic dance, one that ends in her death at his hands, they twirl around like figures in a music box, exquisite, interlocked, but not of this world.

Carmen sees Don José's knife emerge, and in one horrible moment, it is over. We are left with the lingering feeling that something difficult and unsettled has entered our bodies, sitting just under our skin. This is perhaps the real Carmen, one that is more brutal than beautiful, more tragic than sexy.