CARMEN’S 1875 ENDING NEEDS A CONTEMPORARY JOLT

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It’s Domestic Violence Awareness month, let’s talk about opera.

Most classical opera is sexist, not unlike the way minstrel shows are racist. Nonetheless, I make an effort to see Bizet’s Carmen whenever it’s playing because the female protagonist stands her ground against the brutality of a controlling and abusive man.

Mind you, Carmen dies in the end for having asserted her independence, which evokes Thelma and Louise rather than Elizabeth Cady Stanton, but as Carmen makes clear throughout the story, she would rather be dead than enslaved.

Using opera to tell stories about women choosing death over slavery is precarious propaganda. On the one hand, it exposes the horrifying social norms and stereotypes that have controlled women’s lives for centuries. On the other hand, it establishes those things as unavoidable consequences of being female. In other words, although Carmen is a very strong woman, the message about her life is dire: submit to men or die.

The Boston Lyric Opera’s recent production of Carmen got rave reviews for being a “contemporary” interpretation of the story, so I went expecting no gaudy costumes, and hoping the message might shift a bit in favor of women’s freedom.

Hardly draped in heavy fabric, some of the actors’ bodies were barely covered; breasts were literally falling out of tops. One scene had a totally nude man pirouetting as a toreador in front of a two-story-high cut out of a bull. The scene was a moving expression of a bullfighter’s vulnerability.

Other scenes seemed gratuitously manipulative.

The gargantuan cut-out of the bull, for example, was literally pushed over from behind at one point, so that it fell toward the audience. I half expected a stagehand to yell “timber.” It was impossible to tell whether the bull would land on people in the first few rows, or whether the noise would be deafening. The anxiety of not knowing made the scene feel like a cheap thrill ride at a carnival.
Weirder still, the fight scenes were a bit too HBO as very real-looking blood came gushing out of people’s bodies. The imagination of the audience would have sufficed.

Then there was the scene where Carmen is being pursued aggressively by a man she does not love. As Don Jose is telling Carmen he will never leave her alone, another woman, who is in love with Don Jose, enters the scene and tells Don Jose his mother is dying and has asked to see him. The audience burst out laughing. I still don’t get it. Is it unmanly to visit one’s dying mother?

By far the most disturbing scene was at the end when Don Jose kills Carmen with a knife because she has rejected him. Lots of bloody goo flows from Carmen’s neck as she falls to the ground. Don Jose then reaches down, grabs Carmen’s actual hair in his fist and starts pulling her body across the stage. Two men in the audience yell out “Yeah!!”

A few moments later, the curtain comes down, but it is disturbingly unclear whether the men were cheering for the show — or the fact that Don Jose taught Carmen a lesson about her disobedience.

No doubt the opera world is trying to make the genre more accessible to larger audiences, but does that mean appealing to the basest of men’s misogynist urges? Wouldn’t a truly contemporary expression of Carmen have made the point that men who abuse women are unwelcome in civilized society?

Here’s hoping the next production has an ending that goes something like this: Carmen grabs the knife from Don Jose’s hand and kicks him in the groin. Don Jose apologizes, begs forgiveness and goes home to see his dying mother. The audience erupts in thunderous applause.