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REVIEW

A lush - if often loud - musical

In D.C., 'Carmen Jones' was simply irresistible Music Review

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Article Text:

Less than a decade after George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* helped to blur the distinction between opera and musical - and provide an unprecedented opportunity for black singers - Oscar Hammerstein II's *Carmen Jones* did something along the same lines. But while the former opus is widely embraced as a masterpiece, the latter remains more of a curiosity, appreciated mostly by incurable Broadway fans.

As part of a remarkable, \$10 million, 10-year initiative funded by the **Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation** for the Kennedy Center to produce "unique annual performances or collaborative efforts between artists," there was a starry, super-sized concert version of *Carmen Jones* over the weekend.

From what I hear, this venture alone cost \$1 million-plus. Judging by the overall quality and imagination at work in the center's Concert Hall, the money was, by and large, well spent. The results certainly justified the participants' faith in this 1943 work; three quickly sold-out performances testified to the public's interest in it.

Hammerstein's concept of transforming Bizet's *Carmen* into a modern, English-language "musical play" shifts the story from 1800s Spain to a 1940s Southern town (and, in the second act, Chicago). The opera's cigarette factory becomes a parachute factory, the opera's toreador a prize fighter. The new libretto may not match the original for poetic skill (Hammerstein's clinkers include "I know there's 20 million tom-toms beating way down deep inside my bones"), but much of it rings true.

The central plot of a free-spirited woman named *Carmen* and the man who cannot bear to lose her is the same. So, for the large part, is the music. This is no travesty. *Carmen Jones* retains as much atmosphere, humor and tragedy as *Carmen*.

The 1954 film version with Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte reiterated that point. This revival of the original show - with some excisions of dialogue, sprucing up of Robert Russell Bennett's reduced orchestration of Bizet's score and judicious downplaying of racial stereotyping in Hammerstein's book and lyrics - could not have made a much more emphatic case for the piece.

It could, however, have made it less loudly. Obnoxious amplification distorted words, spoken and sung; notes intended to emerge gently from throats punched you right in the ear instead. That said, Friday evening's performance still proved ultimately irresistible.

No stand-and-sing affair, this was more a semi-staged treatment, cleverly directed by Baayork Lee. Singers used a raised platform behind the orchestra and two staircases to generate theatrical motion. Even the richly blended Howard University Chorus, situated high above the action, always seemed strongly connected to it. And the Boys Choir of Harlem (luxury casting indeed) didn't just sing superbly, but got into the action spiritedly.

Vanessa Williams delivered a poised, sexy account of the title role, putting a delicious spin on such lines as, "Yes, tie me up, Joe." Hers is not the operatic voice Hammerstein (not to mention Bizet) had in mind, but, except for slipping off high notes as quickly as possible, it did the job.

Tom Randle, as Joe, matched velvety vocalism with incisive acting; he's a compelling tenor. (Luther Saxon, who created the role in 1943, was in the audience.) Gregg Baker was ideal as Husky Miller, his baritone rich in power and nuance. Too bad the miking made his speaking voice sound like Darth Vader.

Soprano Harolyn Blackwell, as Joe's former girlfriend Cindy Lou, proved as entrancing as she always does in her regular opera haunts and brought down the house with a satin-toned, exquisitely molded singing of "My Joe." The top-notch supporting cast included Larry Marshall, Larry D. Hylton, Roberta Laws, Michele Gutrick, Alan T. Reed and Thomas R. Beard Jr.

Placido Domingo (an old hand at singing the hapless hero in the Bizet opera) conducted an ever-vibrant and sensitive, if not always tidy, performance. A few bumpy bits aside, the National Symphony Orchestra enhanced the sonic picture.

On the visual side, Oscar de la Renta's outfits for the cast didn't do much (I haven't seen such unbecoming, frilly gowns since the finale of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*), but Richard Winkler's lighting added greatly to this rare, memorable encounter with *Carmen Jones*.

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