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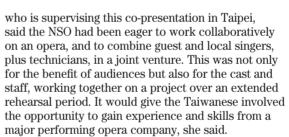


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 Sue Olden, technical operations and projects manager for Opera Australia

Francesca Zambello's production of 'Carmen' brings to life the venturous allure of southern



As a result, there will be around 250 people at work, either in view or backstage, when the curtain rises on Thursday. The cast includes children, gypsies, aristocrats, beggars, a horse and off-duty workers from a cigarette factory.

Taiwan is contributing the soloists for all the smaller roles as well as one singer, Chen Mei-lin (陳美玲), for one of the large ones. The Taipei Philharmonic Chorus and the Taipei Philharmonic Youth and Children's Choir are also both involved.

As for the rest, the toreador Escamillo will be Michael Todd Simpson in all performances, and Taiwanese soloists Kewei Wang (王凱蔚), Liau Chongboon (廖聰文), Lin Shiang-yeu, Shih I-Chiao (石易巧), Chen Chung-yi (陳忠義) and Lin Chung-kuang (林中光) will also be heard. Chien Wen-pin (簡文彬), back in Taiwan from Dusseldorf especially for the occasion, will conduct the NSO.

When *Carmen* first appeared in 1875 it was regarded as a novelty, and even revolutionary. It presented poor people (Don Jose is a mere army corporal) and then proceeded to take their emotions seriously. In this it can be seen as initiating the verismo (realistic) movement that was to increasingly dominate opera for the next quarter of a century.

Its music, too, was novel in its tunefulness and clarity. It turned its back on the then fashionable oceanic tempestuousness of Wagner and offered instead a simplicity of orchestral effect. Composers such as Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Richard Strauss and even Wagner himself were all to pay tribute to Georges Bizet's originality.

The gypsy element, too, proved very alluring to the opera's first audiences. In their Romantic-era fantasies, gypsies stood for a way of life free from bourgeois constraints, and as free in their love lives as they were in their vagabond lifestyles. Everything the hippies stood for in the 1960s was represented by the Spanish gypsies a century earlier.

"Everyone on stage, the principal singers, chorus, children, actors and dancers have been working tirelessly in the rehearsal room over the past few weeks learning the demanding and complex staging for this Zambello production," said Olden last week.

"Each of them has a dramatic part to play, so we asked the local cast to dig deep within themselves in order to take on the intricacy of the characterization required. For example, in Act 1, acting the role of raunchy cigarette ladies released from the sweltering heat of the factory into the town square, was initially neither easy nor indeed comfortable for the local cast.

"But to their credit they have really evolved as the characters they play and I do believe the audience will be surprised and delighted with what they see on stage. It will be a genuine and traditional *Carmen*."

Carmen plays at the National Theater on Thursday, July 10 and July 11 at 7pm, and on July 12 at 2pm. Admission is from NT\$500 to NT\$5,000. Tickets, however, are sold out. Contact (02) 3393-9888 for upto-date information on possible returns.

