

AROUND TOWN

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Free love,
at a priceBY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

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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 Spain in the 19th century

If you want to be sure of filling an opera house, the director of the Lisbon Opera once told me, you put on a production of *Carmen*.

But it wouldn't be fair to say that the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO), until recently suffering from falling ticket sales, has merely followed this seasoned advice. Plans for the show began in late 2007, for instance. But the real reason next week's production at Taipei's National Theater is all set to be a major artistic event rather than just a popular blockbuster is that Taiwan is importing, virtually wholesale, a charismatic production that has already wowed audiences in both London and Sydney.

Originally commissioned by the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden (in conjunction with Norwegian National Opera), and then transferred to the southern hemisphere's equivalent, the Sydney Opera House, this production was the work of celebrated director Francesca Zambello. Its aim, she said, was to resurrect the exotic flamboyance and dangerous allure of southern Spain as it was perceived during the lifetime of the composer, Georges Bizet.

The last time I encountered Zambello's work was in a DVD of an operatic version of *The Little Prince* (reviewed in the *Taipei Times* on May 12, 2005). I was totally overwhelmed. It contained all the traditional attractions of the story itself, plus innumerable original imaginative effects. This, I thought at the time, was what opera productions really should be like. And now Taiwan is to see the same director's treatment of the most popular opera ever composed. No wonder tickets are already hard to find.

First, more about the nature of the event. Opera Australia has brought a large contingent of singers and backstage staff to Taiwan in order to recreate the original production here. Sue Olden, technical operations and projects manager for Opera Australia,

who is supervising this co-presentation in Taipei, said the NSO had been eager to work collaboratively on an opera, and to combine guest and local singers, plus technicians, in a joint venture. This was not only for the benefit of audiences but also for the cast and staff, working together on a project over an extended rehearsal period. It would give the Taiwanese involved the opportunity to gain experience and skills from a major performing opera company, she said.

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.

DOUBLE BILL

The three main roles are double-cast. The American mezzo-soprano Kirsten Chavez will sing the frank and sensuous gypsy Carmen on Thursday and July 11, while Hungarian-born mezzo Viktoria Vizin will take the part on the evening of July 10 and the afternoon of July 12. Both have substantial reputations and each will be well worth hearing.

Meanwhile, Carmen's lover, Don Jose, will be sung by Richard Troxell (Thursday and July 11) and Justin Lavender (July 10 and July 12). Lavender is well known to Taiwan audiences, having sung here in *Madame Butterfly* and *The Damnation of Faust* to strong effect.

Micaela — Don Jose's former girlfriend who he abandons in favor of Carmen — will be Sydney's Hye Seoung Kwon (Thursday and July 11) and Taiwan's Chen (July 10 and July 12).

As for the rest, the toreador Escamillo will be Michael Todd Simpson in all performances, and Taiwanese soloists Kewei Wang (王凱蔚), Liao Chong-boon (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 up-to-date information on possible returns.



A large group of singers and backstage staff were brought to Taiwan by Opera Australia to work in collaboration with the National Symphony Orchestra in staging *Carmen*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NTC