

Sicilian Opera at La Scala. Director Emma Dante's Unorthodox "Carmen"

Judith Harris (November 24, 2009)



On the occasion of the opening of the grand opera season at La Scala Theater in Milan, Emma Dante, a brave new theater director from Palermo, is presenting what promises to be an extremely unorthodox version of Georges Bizet's *Carmen*, conducted by Daniel Barenboim.



ROME - The opening of the grand opera season at La Scala Theater in Milan, which will take place as always on the feast day of Sant'Ambrogio (Saint Ambrose, that is) on December 10, is first and foremost about music, and is also an emotional, political and fashion event, but rarely more so than this year.

Emma Dante, a brave new theater director from Palermo, is entirely new to opera, and yet is presenting what promises to be an extremely unorthodox version of Georges Bizet's *Carmen*, conducted by Daniel Barenboim. All Milan is buzzing with anticipation ("Will *Carmen* be gay? A trans?"), and when tickets went on sale November 23 for a special cut-rate performance to take place December 4 for young people, the box office window was slammed shut within 120 seconds of its opening, and on-line tickets were sold out within exactly fifteen minutes. All twelve regularly scheduled performances have also been entirely sold out for months.

"Her vision is of *Carmen* as universal," said Stephane Lissner, the French superintendent who runs La Scala. For Lissner, Dante's vision embraces, in the opera, "the South and women's condition there, and superstition." So what does that mean?

Speaking to Natalia Aspesi for [La Repubblica](#) [2], Dante herself explained: "The women in my theater performances are dumbed down (scimunita) whose context of rage, pain and submission has made them into idiots (rincoglionite—okay, mine is a polite translation). But *Carmen* is no victim, she's a rebel who breaks every rule and doesn't bother with politeness. She knows her destiny is death because of her longing for freedom, and she goes knowingly toward it.....This production is the fruit of considerable forethought, and is certainly not intended as a provocation. I tried only to insert a little virus into this world so far from my own, in part to understand if one can try experimentation within grand opera."

In 2005 Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone—today Vatican Secretary of State—took issue with Dante's production of **La Scimmia**, in which a nude youth who plays the ape of the title appears on a cross. When it was presented in Genoa, where Bertone was at that time archbishop, he tried to prevent it being performed.

One opera blogger called Dante an "out of left field" choice to direct *Carmen* at La Scala, but also a "Sicilian prodigy." The lead singer is Anita Rachvelishvili of Georgia while the sulky, handsome Uruguayan baritone Erwin Schrott (who is married to the gorgeous Russian soprano Anna Netreko) will sing Escamillo. Don Jose will be sung by the popular German tenor, Jonas Kaufmann.

Taking with her the stage, costume and lighting designers, Dante toured Palermo seeking atmospheric signals appropriate to her *Carmen*. In some scenes the sets have therefore Sicilian-inspired religious symbolism signifying death, with, in the foreground, brightly colored costumes. The result is a *Carmen* that is very strong, vibrant, but with more than a hint of violence as Don Jose attempts to "abuse" *Carmen*, in the words of Rachvelishvili.

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