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A Smoldering Gypsy's Smoldering Time, Down at the Old Bull Ring

Ballet Hispanico's Take on 'Carmen' in 'Carmen.maquia'

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Photo



Kimberly Van Woesik of Ballet Hispanico in Gustavo Ramírez Sansano's "Carmen.maquia," based on the novella and opera. Credit Paula Lobo

“Carmen” began as a Frenchman’s fantasy of Spain, first in a novella by [Prosper Mérimée](#) and then, immortally, in Bizet’s opera. So it is no violation of authenticity for a choreographer, especially a Spanish one, to tell the tale in another style, even if that style is the angst-ridden expressionism of, say, Nederlands Dans Theater.

Such is the mode of Gustavo Ramírez Sansano’s “Carmen.maquia.” Made in 2012 for the Luna Negra Dance Theater in Chicago, which is now defunct, the work has been adopted by [Ballet Hispanico](#) as the first full-length narrative dance in that troupe’s 44-year history. At the Apollo Theater on Saturday, the company premiere met with ovations.

With modish black-and-white costumes by the fashion designer [David Delfín](#) and a flexible set of accordion-pleated sections and Picassoesque images of bulls and women, by Luis Crespo, this “Carmen” has a spare, elegant, Modernist look. The music is a playlist of various orchestral versions of Bizet’s score, shunning vocals, and the original story of the titular Gypsy seductress and the naïve soldier Don José is basically intact.

Intact, though not always clear, as many details in the printed synopsis prove illegible onstage. Sometimes the opacity stems from symbolic props and the multipurpose set, yet, more fundamentally, the trouble seems to be that Mr. Sansano is not particularly interested in storytelling. Neither, really, is he that concerned with form, except for the formal expression of emotional conflict.

“Carmen.maquia” alludes to tauromaquia, or bullfighting, and its various tangled duets have some of the shifting power dynamic of a bullfight. But the principal struggle is internal, as revealed in the convulsive solo that begins and ends the work: Don José, tortured by the desire that will destroy him.

Rippling and twitching in rapid agitation, compulsively making the body snap back on itself, Mr. Sansano’s movement language can express indecision all right. But despite some Spanish inflections, vacillation is about all it expresses. The choreography is busily attentive to the music at the level of notes, accents and even tone color, especially in cartoonish bits that clash with the dour expressionism, but rarely in longer phrases and contours. Just as there’s no singing in this music, there’s little lyricism in the dance.

Mr. Sansano has the skill to show the conflict between desire and duty by interrupting a duet reuniting Carmen and Don José with an ensemble doing military maneuvers in the aisles of the theater. And there’s a structural symmetry to the succession of duets, as the leads swap roles of pursuer and pursued.

Ballet Hispanico fielded a fine cast. Kimberly Van Woesik’s Carmen had a seductive, fatal insouciance. The precise Christopher Bloom brought to Don José both a boyish nobility and a hangdog defenselessness. As his rival, the bullfighter Escamillo, Mario Ismael Espinoza was fully believable as a lady-killer threat, and Min-Tzu Li, as Don José’s jilted girlfriend, gave firm shape to the choreography’s Martha Graham-like moments.

But “Carmen.maquia” is theatrically static. Its dance vocabulary, cramped and oppressive to begin with, proves inadequate. Like Don José, “Carmen.maquia” can’t quite handle Carmen.