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What can the opera ‘Carmen’ teach us about domestic violence?

November 1, 2024 [bluedoorpress](#)



Rihab Chaieb in a modern production of Carmen

This question came to me after seeing a production of Bizet’s opera *Carmen* at the Proms (August 29th 2024). I was blown away by the power of the music, the singing, the acting, the staging and the story itself. [Rihab Chaieb](#) played Carmen, and interpreted the character using a feminist lens, eschewing the normal ‘femme fatale’ tropes that many productions opt for. Look, for example, at this representation of Carmen:



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Significant research shows that women experience much higher levels of domestic violence than men, in terms of severity, duration and impact.

I felt this version of *Carmen*, Diane Paulus's Glyndebourne production managed by Adam Terrance for this prom's outing, really brought home how patriarchal structures and discourses were, and still are deeply oppressive to women. The modern staging revealed a militaristic, authoritarian society where the army appear to be policing their own people. In particular, in the absence of any 'real' work to do, the army's chief occupation becomes sexually harassing, humiliating and trying to seduce the women working in the neighbouring cigarette factory.

Chaieb's *Carmen* was a powerful woman aware of her sexuality and the way the world responds to it. She was also a vulnerable woman, who is portrayed as a victim of male violence. She is a beautiful girl who works in the cigarette factory and falls for Jose for complex reasons. Jose is a tortured character. He is a confused soldier who has joined the army, leaving behind his possessive, woebegone mother. When *Carmen* gets into a physical fight with another girl from the factory over a man, she is arrested and Jose is commissioned to look after her. He becomes besotted with her teasing, seductive personality, dancing and songs, and then deserts the army so he can free and be with her.

Rather than being the destructive force she is often portrayed as, Chaieb's *Carmen* is a more insecure woman, searching for certainty in a febrile world. Chaieb's *Carmen* is attracted to the singularity of Jose's love; his obsession with her.

However, we observe her grow and learn about herself as she tires of Jose's clingy, jealous behaviour. In this production, her attraction to the superficial, showy bullfighter is presented as knowing. Her looks and gestures show she doesn't take him very seriously. She ostentatiously performs 'being in love' with him. Her approach is emancipatory: she is clearly escaping Jose and his jealousy, rather than actually falling in love with the narcissistic bullfighter.

When Jose returns after seeing his dying mother, Carmen is adamant in her rejection of him.

As a

result, she is aware that she has more or less signed her own death warrant, but she chooses freedom rather than imprisonment. In this production, Jose strangles her to death — and doesn't stab her as it's outlined in the original script. The strangulation is both metaphoric and literal: a choking of the very breath that creates such sublime music.

This production of the opera teaches us about domestic violence because the stage becomes claustrophobic, the lights darken, the scenery and other actors hem in Carmen. We watch real people (not pixels on a screen) enact the symbolic drama of a controlling, possessive man treat a woman like a prized possession which can't be given away. We see how Jose quickly dehumanises Carmen in a way that much of the world does: she is consistently criticised for being a 'free woman', in particular for expressing herself sexually. Her famously seductive song spells her doom. The very thing that makes her attractive kills her.

In this production, it was very clear to me that Jose's possessiveness and controlling behaviour towards Carmen emerged out of this context.

Several operas have what might be called in old-fashioned, patriarch parlance the ‘fallen’ or ‘loose’ woman as their central character such as *La Boheme*, *La Traviata*, and *Madam Butterfly*. Like Carmen, they all have the female protagonist in the title. They all explore male desire in the context of women who are deemed to have ‘failed’ in some sort of way; they all exoticise and objectify their heroines, and they all give their female protagonists the best melodies. Modern productions have succeeded, when like this version of Carmen, they undercut the opera’s inherent sexism through the staging, costumes and acting.

So to answer the question: what can Carmen teach us about domestic violence? Well, I would say a great deal. The stage, the music, the songs can illustrate how and why such violence unfolds, and most importantly, bring home to us the horror of such violence.