

4 : EXTRAVAGANCE ESCHEWED

A. BARRIE'S BASIC BOHÈME

1. Class title 1 (*Carmen* with *Bohème* insert)
2. Section title A (*Bohème* transformation)

That video, as you probably know, started with one of the most spectacular productions to be seen today—the *Bohème* staged at the Met in 1981 by the late **Franco Zeffirelli** (1923–2019)—and contrasted it with the 2019 staging at the Komische Oper in Berlin by **Barrie Kosky** (1967–).

3. Barrie Kosky and Calixto Bieito
4. Kosky's *Bohème* and Bieito's *Carmen*

We are looking today at two stage directors of a similar: **Kosky**, who is Australian but based in Berlin, and the Catalan director **Calixto Bieito** (1963–). The underlying topic is realism of stage presentation. Why should these directors, not normally known for their abstemiousness, take two of the most colorful operas in the repertoire—*La bohème* (1896) by **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924) and *Carmen* (1875) by **Georges Bizet** (1838–75)—and stage them in near-monochrome. Most of the class will be on *Carmen*, but I do want to look to Kosky's *Bohème* for a few minutes first. We glimpsed Kosky's work in the first class with Monteverdi's *Orfeo*; I doubt anyone would consider this either monochrome or abstemious:

5. Monteverdi: *Orfeo*, part of Orpheus' Act II aria

Barrie Kosky has referred to himself as a “**Gay Jewish Kangaroo**.” Why is this relevant? Well, because that *Orfeo* scene is surely a riot of camp excess. More seriously, because in 2017 he became the first Jewish director to be invited to the **Wagner Opera Festival in Bayreuth**. His assignment was to direct the composer's only mature comedy, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1867), the only director not called Wagner ever to do so. And the brief he negotiated with the Wagner great-grandchildren who run the festival now was to bring the question of Wagner's **antisemitism** right out into the open. He began in the music room of Wagner's own house next door, meticulous in every detail, for a read-through of the composer's new opera. We meet **Wagner** himself, his wife **Cosima**, his father-in-law **Franz Liszt**, and the Jewish conductor of the first production, **Hermann Levi**. At this point, I'll skip to the end of the act. The read-through involves the family members we have just met, plus a bunch of singers in costume for the other roles. The act ends with a furious argument. But then Kosky does something wonderful and surprising. I hope you can catch it from the video.

6. Wagner: *Die Meistersinger*, beginning and end of Act I (Bayreuth 2017)
7. Wagner on trial in Act III

What has happened, of course, is that Wagner find himself in a very different version of Nuremberg, in the dock at the **postwar Nazi trials**. This will be the setting for the whole of Act Three, which I haven't time to get into. But even this makes an important point. Realism in staging is not merely an aesthetic choice. Sometimes, as here, it is absolutely essential to raise issues that matter in the real world, not merely in the bubble of opera-as-entertainment.

8. The Kosky *Bohème* was...

So Barrie Kosky was not averse to pouring on the detail when he needed it. But for the *Bohème* he did in 2019, he made the opposite choice, moving the action up to the time of the opera's composition, and making the attic the studio of a photographer, not a painter. I'll play you the last 7½ minutes of Act I, and see if you can tell me why—or at least what is gained by this approach. The singers are **Jonathan Tetleman** and **Nadja Mchantaf**.

9. Puccini: *La bohème*, end of Act I (Komiche Oper 2019)

10. — still from the above

Two questions. Is this realistic? Not in the Zeffirelli sense, no. But in that every element on the stage is real rather than painted, yes. And if there is any other kind of realism, what kind is it? I suggest that it the *inner* realism that I mentioned the first class as being more important than any externals: truth to character. With nothing else to see, we look at these so very young people and remember what it's like to fall in love for the first time. How brilliant, I thought, to find a teenager with a voice like that! So I looked up Nadja Mchantaf's age. It is not published, but she had a ten-year career as a competitive dancer (ending up as North German champion) before even entering music school. After she graduated, she had over a dozen roles in other German opera houses before coming to the **Komische Oper** and doing three other leading roles before this one. So she must have been around 30 when this video was made; she is clearly a terrific actress! There is one element, though—**the camera**—that is not used for realism but more as a **metaphor** about how one edits oneself to present to someone else, or to frame your relationship to that someone else.

B. CALIXTO'S CENTERED CARMEN

11. Section title B (Zeffirelli to Bieito transform)

Once more I compare the classic **Zeffirelli** spectacular to one of our modern remakes. The Zeffirelli scene is from the opening minutes of Act II at the Arena in Verona. The **Calixto Bieito** image it turns into is one of about a dozen similar productions that have traveled all over the world since its first creation in 1999. I'll show you a substantial chunk of Act II in an English-language version from the **English National Opera** in 2015. But first, let's see the Zeffirelli as a video. The ostensible scene is a broken-down dive outside Seville, used by smugglers as a rendezvous, prostitutes as a pick-up point, and soldiers from the nearby barracks as a place to let off steam. Never mind that the Verona set looks nothing like a dive; Zeffirelli gave the audience what they came for: flamenco and Spanish color.

12. Bizet: *Carmen*, opening of Act II (Verona, 2022)

13. — still from the above (repeat)

I called this section “Calixto’s *Centered Carmen*” because what he does is to strip away all the peripherals—the gypsy references, flamenco dresses, and castanets—to reveal what he considers to be the core of the opera: a free woman navigating a brutal, male-dominated world. He sets it around 1970 in some border region characterized by tension, lawlessness, and rigid boundaries of class and gender. The world of his *Carmen* is characterized by toxic masculinity, and one strong but vulnerable woman willing to do what it takes to maintain her own freedom, but ultimately brought down by her refusal to compromise. So that you can get a feeling for the production as a continuous experience rather than a series of clips, I am going to play an unbroken 20 minutes at the start of Act Two. You will have to forgive the fact that the subtitles are full of typos, but I thought it would be helpful to hear the opera in English. Lithuanian (but British-trained) mezzo-soprano **Justina Gringytė** is **Carmen**, British baritone **Leigh Melrose** the toreador **Escamillo** (a very interesting characterization) and American tenor **Eric Cutler** the **Don José** (who does not get much to do in this particular scene). Make notes, if you like: we shall discuss it immediately after.

14. Bizet: *Carmen*, first 22 minutes of Act II (ENO 2015)

15. Eric Cutler and Justina Gringytė as Don José and Carmen (ENO 2015)

What did you think? What did the stripped-down setting achieve in terms of heightening the reality of the characters? Was Bieito able to maintain the interest despite the lack of folkloric color? What about the very unusual treatment of Escamillo? Watching the opera, I have always been struck from the contrast between the Quintet for the two smugglers and three women—which comes pretty close to being a number from operetta or musical theater—and the almost-unaccompanied scene between Carmen and Don José that follows. Did Bieito find anything different in the Quintet? And how did he use the relative sparseness of the seduction scene?

16. Roberto Alagna and Béatrice Uria-Monzón as Don José and Carmen (in various cities)

None of the ENO cast could lay claim to be among the most internationally-famous exponents of their role. But here are two who can: the tenor **Roberto Alagna** and the late **Béatrice Uria-Monzón**, who died last year; despite their names, both are or were French. A stripped-down production such as Calixto Bieito’s stands or falls on the dramatic reality it can bring to the drama of the final act. Here are the two stars in the last 6 minutes of the opera, I think in Paris, cutting immediately to a shot of the conductor, **Sir Mark Elder**, whose face sums it up more than any verbal comment ever could.

17. Bizet: *Carmen*, final scene (Paris 2020)

18. Class title 2 (Sir Mark Elder)