

OPERA AND REAL LIFE

Bizet: *Carmen*, Act II, first half (English National Opera, 2015; sung in English. Calixto Bieto, *director*; Justina Gringyté, *Carmen*; Leigh Melrose, *Escamillo*; Eric Cutler, *José*)

After the excerpt ends, José tells Carmen that nothing has sustained him in jail so much as the now-withered flower she gave him. But it is not until one of José's officers arrives drunk and the smugglers have to kill him, thus implicating José as an accessory, that he agrees to desert and go with Carmen to the smugglers' hideout in the mountains. By Act III, the bloom of their romance has worn off, and he has become jealous and possessive, picking a fight with Escamillo when he comes to invite Carmen to his next *corrida*. The tense situation is defused by Micaela, who has come to tell José that his mother is dying. He leaves, but swears to return.

Act IV takes place outside the bull-ring, with (in a traditional production) a big chorus and splendid procession. Carmen arrives on Escamillo's arm. Her friends warn her that José has been spotted in the crowd. Fatalistically accepting the outcome, Carmen stays to meet him. He says he still loves her, but she replies that she has moved on. But the encounter has only one possible conclusion. When she throws back the ring he gave her, he pulls out a knife and slits her throat. As the crowd emerges cheering Escamillo's success, José confesses to Carmen's murder.

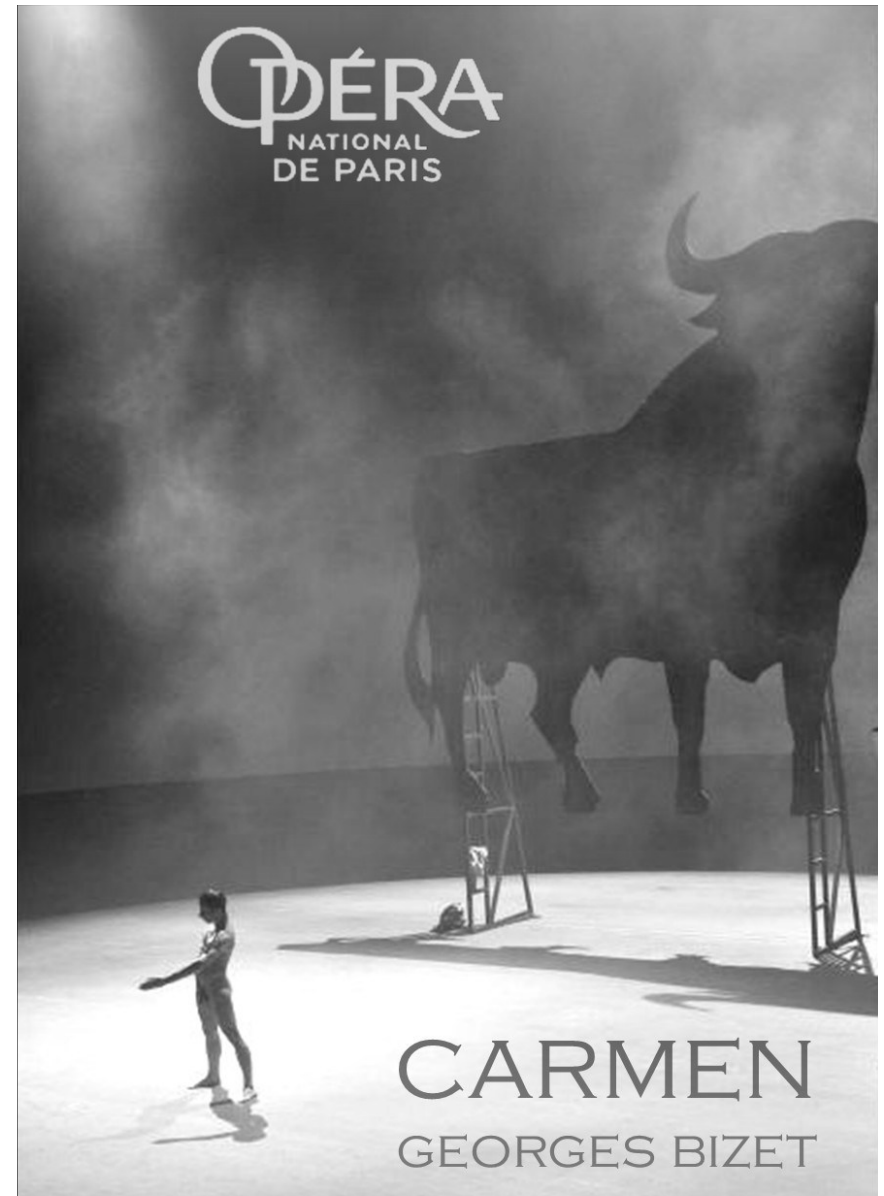
Bizet: *Carmen*, Act IV, ending (Paris 2020; Calixto Bieto, *director*; Sir Mark Elder, *conductor*; Béatrice Uria-Monzón, *Carmen*; Roberto Alagna, *Don José*)

For more detail and different images, see the class website:

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4. EXTRAVAGANCE ESCHEWED

October 8, 2026

EXTRA VAGANCE ESCHEWED

SOME DECADES AGO, THERE WAS A FASHION FOR EXTREME REALISM in opera productions, typified by the Zeffirelli spectacles at the Met. But with the turn of the century came a few directors who not only bucked the trend, but made a point of rethinking some of the most colorful productions in the repertoire, aiming for a realism that eschewed folklore and nostalgia in favor of something altogether more gritty. This class will consider two of them: the Catalan director **Calixto Bieto** and the Australian-born Berlin resident **Barrie Kosky**.

Kosky is interesting, because he is fully prepared to use extreme realism when it serves important ends, as in his 2017 production of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* at Bayreuth, an investigation of the composer's anti-Semitism. But his *Bohème* at the Berlin Komische Oper two years later stripped away traditional detail to focus on the capacity of the very young lovers to reinvent themselves in a world of romantic escape largely of their own making.

Bieto first tackled *Carmen* in 1999. Since then, versions of his production have been seen all over the world. He has said that his goal was to present Carmen as a uncompromising woman nonetheless vulnerable to a prevailing culture of toxic masculinity. To do this, he stripped away the usual flamenco costumes and castanets, to present a drama taking place mostly in a dusty wasteland surrounded by giant billboards and beaten-up cars. *rb*.

A. BARRIE'S BASIC BOHÈME

We start with glimpses of two productions in which Barrie Kosky floods the stage with detail, then sample a brief moment from his bare-bones 2019 staging of *La bohème* that nonetheless captures the special flavor of the whole.

Monteverdi: Orfeo, Act II aria (Berlin 2014; excerpt from Class 1)

Wagner: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, opening and closing of Act I (Bayreuth 2017, with Michael Volle as Richard Wagner)

Puccini: *La bohème*, Act I ending (Berlin 2019; Nadja Mchantaf, *Mimi*); Jonathan Tetelman, *Rodolfo*)

B. CALIXTO'S CENTERED CARMEN

After a brief clip of what is probably the most spectacular *Carmen* in the world—the Franco Zeffirelli production at the Arena in Verona—we turn to two incarnations of Calixto Bieto's staging, its absolute antithesis.

Bizet: *Carmen*, Act II, *Danse bohémienne* (Verona 2022; Franco Zeffirelli, director; Elina Garanca, *Carmen*)

The Bieto production is updated to around 1970 and set in the wasteland around some big city, but otherwise it more or less follows the plotline that Bizet's librettists, **Meilhac** and **Halévy**, adapted from the 1845 novel by **Prosper Mérimée**. In Act I (not played), **Carmen**, a free-spirited worker in a cigarette factory, catches the eye of **Don José**, a young army corporal. Despite a visit from his village sweetheart **Micaela**, he is vulnerable to her seduction, and allows her to escape while he is taking her to jail on a minor charge.

We will watch the first 22 minutes of Act II. Traditionally, this takes place at the inn of Ls Pastia, where people are partying and dancing. Carmen, who is waiting for Don José to be released from prison, is there with her friends Frasquita and Mercedes. A crowd arrives with the toreador **Escamillo**, who makes an impression on all three women before moving on. The smugglers **Dancaïro** and **Remendado** recruit the women to distract the customs officers on their next operation, but Carmen declines saying that she has a date. And indeed José is heard in the distance, singing a folksong. Alone with him, Carmen begins a dance as foreplay, but a bugle is heard in the distance sounding the return to quarters. When José says he must go, she mocks him.