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# From Dresden, a memorable Carmen

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By **ALAN BRISSENDEN**

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This *Carmen* sizzles with sex, surrealism and impeccable dance from the Semperoper Ballett Dresden. Swedish choreographer Johan Inger's contemporary concept turns the attention to Don Jose and the darkness at the heart of this story of love, jealousy and death — not only human death, but also the death of innocence.

The ballet begins and ends with a young boy, initially bouncing a ball, but traumatised by the end by what he has seen of the behaviour of adults.

Jose, in police uniform, and two other men enter and their vigorous trio startles with wide-arching developpes, athletic twists, turns and strict unison.

Others join them, the back wall opens, forming the doors of the cigarette factory, and the girls enter in short frilled dresses, Carmen in red. She flirts with the men, but gives a flower to Jose. When they go, he dreams of flowers descending around him.

Inside the factory, Carmen slashes a girl's face during a fight. Arrested by Jose's superior, Zuniga, she seduces him and escapes. But when the Toreador appears in his spangled jacket, she flirts with both men in an entangling trio, then returns to the besotted Jose.

Overwhelmed by jealousy, he shoots Zuniga then flees. Run as fast as he might, he cannot escape the dark shadows of guilt that pursue him.

Then, in a gentle trio that parallels the earlier one, in a moment of deceptive happiness, he dreams the boy is his and Carmen's son, given a doll.

But the shadows return, filling the stage with menace, and the Toreador appears dancing a sensuous tango with Carmen.

He goes, and Jose embraces her, draws a knife and kills her. The horrified boy rejects him and he stumbles across the stage, slumping down in a miserable heap. The boy dismembers the doll and covers his face with his hands.

As Don Jose, Jon Vallejo has commanding stillness, an inexhaustible athleticism and a strong dramatic sensibility. His Carmen, Ayaha Tsunaki, is a girl who can hardly see a man without wanting him, but is at the same time believably attractive. Christian Bauch captures the Toreador's haughtiness, Gareth Haw is a savage Zuniga and Anna Merkulova's Boy encompasses well the gradual loss of innocence.

Curt Allen Wilmer's set is composed of tall boxes that are moved around, opened up, sometimes with mirrors adding to the surrealism of the scene.

As the choreographer plays around with the opera's story, Russian composer Rodion Shchedrin has a great time with Bizet's music, often to good effect.

This is a *Carmen* that won't be forgotten.