

Mexico

Tijuana

One singer stood out in the CASA DE CULTURA DE TIJUANA's production of *Carmen*, staged in a rodeo arena in a beachside area of this Mexican border city. She was Grace Echauri, the most astonishing Carmen I have seen. Her animal-like portrayal—ranging from an untamable bird to a bull ready to gore anyone who crossed her path—at times seemed like a study in mental illness, yet it was complemented by a dark mezzo and seemingly natural vocal control that kept out any trace of sentimentality from this performance. Playful in the first act, she was a deadly threat to Don José even by the time we got to Lillas Pastia's. The flippancy with which Echauri shaped her words was highly musical but also possessed of an underlying violence, with any beauty of expression laid as a trap.

As when I'd previously heard Echauri's Carmen, in Bangkok, she was surrounded with a decidedly uneven cast. Unusually in opera, the tenor acted better than he sang. José Luís Duval's Don José was vocally one-dimensional, but he pulled off the murder of Carmen with gross brutality. Annoyingly, he tended to pronounce French as if it was Italian. Amed

Lievanos's Escamillo never really came to life and his Toreador Song lacked bravura. Monica Abrego had some pretty moments as Micaëla. The chorus, drawn from both California and Baja California, was lively, and helped to bring continuity to José Medina's production. Few of its members had performed in opera before, and the same applied—more damagingly—to the players of the Orquesta de Baja California. Under the baton of Armando Pesquiera, they had rehearsed for only a few hours before performing with the cast—a fatal drawback in a regional opera production with inexperienced performers. But the musicians' ability shone through in the Entr'acte to Act 3, which was especially evocative under a full moon on the first night (August 30), while having real horses carry the principals on at the start of the act was one of the production's strongest points.

Tijuana's Instituto Municipal de Arte y Cultura (IMAC), the local city government agency dedicated to the development of culture, deserves kudos for its many attempts to promote the arts in a city more often associated—in the minds of neighbouring Americans anyway—as a place of cheap bars and crime. Seats at the two sold-out performances were deliberately low-priced in order to maintain accessibility. For visitors, Tijuana also offers the magnificent Centro Cultura Tijuana (CECUT), complete with exhibition spaces and restaurants that beat anything on the adjacent American side of the border. With more careful casting and better orchestral preparation, Tijuana could offer first-rate opera for audiences from both sides and become a more significant centre for the arts.

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