

# Carmen Retold

John Thackary

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a review of

“Carmen” (2022) Dir: Benjamin Millepied

Benjamin Millepied’s retelling of the classic opera “Carmen” feels like the kind of movie that you need some time to process...and then some more after that...and then even more later on. It’s hard for someone to make up their mind about a film and safely tuck it away, never to be examined again, when the density of the film in question insists on coming back to haunt the viewer.

“Carmen” oozes curiosity about that very type of inconsistency. Its actors’ dexterity, its focus on choreography, and its unpretentious metaphoric heft point towards an odd periodicity. How the truth of situations, political or otherwise, always feels so touch and go. How, much like the characters of this film, they dance.

“Carmen” wriggles mischievously through cracks that haunt the ostensibly consistent concepts of national-borders, gender, and language like the ghosts of bothersome itches that were perhaps never truly meant to be scratched. “Carmen” shouts with its body that the value of an event or a relationship may not rest on its length or consistency. Perhaps it rests not on laurels, but on its very own.

There’s a refreshing stylistic and narrative update here to the nineteenth-century French opera of the same name upon which “Carmen” is based. The film’s novel inclusion of dance-choreography stays in keeping with one of its source materials’ earlier dance-musical remakes “The Loves of Carmen” (1948) featuring Rita Hayworth, but the original text’s plot, a conflict of duty vs. love in the context of a military milieu, gets stripped down in this modern version into something more thematically similar, rather than narratively faithful, to what came before it.

In Millepied’s version, Aiden (Paul Mescal), a reclusive American veteran of that country’s twenty-first century wars in the middle east, spends his days pummeling punching-bags in the desert of the southwest, evading his sister’s admonishments to get a job, and fiddling with his guitar to audiences of approximately no one in the echoey privacy of an abandoned mill.

Meanwhile, mere miles to the south, the film’s eponymous character (played by Melissa Barrerra) is living life resignedly on the run from mob-like figures in her native Mexico. When Aiden is one day begrudgingly roped into a paid ride-along with an eerie border-guard-militia, the latter outfit dives headlong into a confrontation with a caravan of border-crossing migrants, of which Carmen is a member. In the heat of that horrific moment, as Carmen frees herself, Aiden too makes a dramatic choice to do much the same. It suddenly leaves him and Carmen as the only ones remaining at the scene. From then on, they’re left without much choice other than to stick-together in a wandering voyage to safe-haven through the myriad dangers of the borderlands. Their dance begins.

“Carmen’s acting feels like its own sort of jig, in a way. Dramatic energies swing back-and-forth between masculine and feminine, and originality and familiarity of acting-style within the same performer, as if to blow-sky-high any notion that such categories need be opposites at all. Aiden’s intimidating military tattoos and hulking figure belie a sensitivity of spirit.

Mescal’s subtle facial-expression and strong-silent-type vibes bring to mind the German actor Franz Rogowski, yet he also imbues Aiden’s hollowness with a unique sense of abrasive regret.

There's a reminiscence of Penelope Cruz in Barerra's wide-eyed confidence, but also a painful specificity in her quiet rendition of Carmen's reluctance to accept her own humility.

Her movements are graceful and flowing, yet we are also shown the realistic result of practicing that type of precision; a muscularity of bodily-figure that reads as conventionally masculine.

Perhaps most versatile of them all is Rossy de Palma's turn as Carmen's eccentric Aunt Masilda. She evokes the ocular-soulfulness of Ana de Armas in the same moment that she singularly melds motherly-wisdom with the most, if faultily broad, still wholesomely ribald humor put to film since Imelda Staunton waxed poetic about a dildo in Matthew Warchus' class-conscious-queer-historical-drama "Pride" (2014).

While "Carmen" is technically a musical (a handful of bangers indeed are sung and many a sick-move indeed are busted within it), it sports a disinterest in wearing that genre's conventions on its sleeve. No characters abruptly sing to us about their goals, no one uses wordplay, no one dances in a manner that reads as too meticulously constructed.

Rather, its moments of groove feel achingly organic. Its pairing of perhaps purposefully-clunky dialogue on one hand with usually wordless dance numbers on the other seems almost like an eye-roll at the occasional inefficiency of words to evince much clarity at all. Most of its choreographic or melodic moments unfold when characters merely speaking or singing expository words might fall terribly short.

That lack of directness feels achingly accurate in a scene where a lullaby is sung to comfort a frightened child, or in another where someone lets loose in corporeal celebration upon finally escaping from the authorities. It's as if the philosophical preoccupations of symbolic culture-critical thinkers were being unleashed in film-form. But ironically enough, it replaces the arguably not-fun academic jargon common in such circles with an equally playful and visceral appreciation for the heightened expressiveness of what might scientifically be referred to as "a few truly rockin' bods."

In terms of its simple, but flooring imagery, this film reminds me of the analytical adage that some stories teach you how to watch them as you watch them. At one point, several passersby gently caress our protagonist's shoulders as they enter a club in slow-motion, as if an analogy for how generously a brief relationship like Carmen and Aiden's can treat both parties despite its durational finitude.

As Masilda instructively guides Carmen's body through a dance routine in a later scene, handling her limbs like puppet strings, there's a sort of comfort in the interaction that pinpoints a difference between guidance and control. It's an act of agency willingly, temporarily entrusted rather than agency continually denied.

In much the same way that writers like K. Aaron and Max Stirner have mused about the utility of political paths acting in parallel as much as acting in-conjunction, "Carmen" rejects both separatism and unity as philosophical constants. It seems to ask if "Gray area" could perhaps be defined not just as "where concepts, or in this case, interests and desires overlap," but also "where we learn that such overlap is never eternal, either."

Just because solutions to complex issues often take the form of "it kinda just depends," perhaps this doesn't make such approaches inactive. Maybe it just means they're attentive to the unpredictability of social intersections. Like the probability of an American meathead and a Mexican refugee somehow stumbling into intimacy both existential and romantic. They have struggles which are connected rather than the same. Dependent upon when they need each other, rather than always being uncritically unified.

If the assertions of theorist Hanna Arendt are to be taken seriously, we might be wary of political unity as a solution to anything. As if a given issue can be distilled down into what many of us anti-authoritarians perhaps over-simply refer to as "the real problems."

As if directness has ever meant anything other than erasing context. Erasing movement. As if there has ever been anything more or less predictable than nature and its accompanying turns of reliability and disappointment, feast and famine. Back and forth.

Like the flowing sand that periodically reappears in the hallucinations experienced by "Carmen's characters. Sand doesn't die; it just moves. It becomes rock when hot. Becomes mud when wet. It pays attention to its waltz-partner, and adjusts its step accordingly. Not because it's giving up on its own choreography. But because it accepts the reality of dance partners existing at all. The reality of intersections being messy, negotiated. Like improvised dance.

To riff on the old saying, one might say that, sure, to err is human. But to boogie? Perhaps that's divine.

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