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RELEASE: MARCH 27, 1986

A NIGHT AT THE OPERA

After all these years, I went for the first time to the Metropolitan Opera at its beautiful modern Opera House in New York City. The performance was Bizet's "Carmen." It was an experience I looked forward to -- and it was one I shall never forget.

The most memorable part of the long evening wasn't any of the famous arias. It was the curtain calls which came about midnight. It was quite remarkable to see and hear that elegantly attired audience of beautiful people booing like angry fans at a baseball game.

They booed Maria Ewing's Carmen. Most of all they booed the director and the others responsible for this new production of one of the most popular of all grand operas.

Half the audience in the less expensive seats had long since voted with their feet and gone home. But the people in the $100 and $200 seats stayed to the bitter end to enjoy the pleasure of audibly manifesting their displeasure.

It costs the Met at least $500,000 to put on a new production, either a new opera or a newly-staged and newly-costumed old opera. The music of Bizet's "Carmen" is a proven and perennial favorite; the orchestra was perfect; the sets were stunning and appropriate; the singers were not spectacular, but adequate.

But the audience didn't just say "ho-hum" or "we've heard that song before." They were revved up to a frenzy of booing. With a century of experience in operas, showmanship, and audiences, how could the Met stage such a fiasco?

The only explanation I can come up with is that this "Carmen" was directed and costumed by men and women who don't understand human nature. They don't understand what attracts a man to a woman and the chemistry that happens between them.

"Carmen" is the story of a saucy tart who attracts men as honey attracts flies. Full of song and merriment, she flirts with the soldiers, plays around with Don Jose who falls passionately in love with her, and then dumps him in favor of the handsome toreador.

Bizet's plot is realistic and true to human nature. Carmen knows how to attract men, any man, all men. But she herself goes, not for a pliable lover who can be manipulated like a marionette on a string, but for a real man. In her society in Seville, Spain, a

"real man" was a bull fighter.

The director of the Met's 1986 "Carmen," Sir Peter Hall, transformed this flashy dame into a woman who was tough and sullen, depressing and dowdy. The man behind me mumbled, "She acts like a manic depressive."

Carmen's body language was wrong: she hung her head down like a charging bull, she slouched, she turned her back to everybody, she assumed masculine and contrived positions of body, arms, and legs. Carmen's costumes were wrong: somber, slovenly, and eccentric. In one act, she wore a hat so only a few in the front rows could see her face.

Carmen's singing was misdirected: she snarled and lurched with her voice. She portrayed a personality which the New York Times called "a pouty teenager, determined not to ingratiate herself with us in any way," and she surely succeeded. By her death scene, the Times added, "it was hard to care whether she lived or died."

The performers did so much cigarette smoking on stage that it's no wonder some of the singing sounded raspy. The constant clouds of smoke were very distracting.

There's nothing the matter with innovation applied to theater or opera if it is an improvement or even if it makes a good show. There is nothing wrong with portraying a female character who is nasty, sullen, slovenly, and mannish.

But you can't show such a character as irresistible to men, because she isn't, and attempting to do so is ludicrous. Since the directors and costumers don't seem to understand this, they led the Met into a half-million dollar fiasco.

As I travel the college lecture circuit, I meet hundreds of young men and women who want to have a mature relationship with someone of the opposite gender, but they don't understand how to do that. Many young women have not cultivated a feminine personality that can make a man feel like a man. Many young men are so confused about women, uncertain about how to behave, and unable to make decisions, that they can't make a woman feel like a woman.

Androgynous currents in literature, entertainment, and education have disadvantaged a significant segment of young Americans in their 20s and 30s so that they don't know how to attract a spouse and cultivate a mutual and enduring commitment to marriage and family. That's too bad, because they are missing out on the greatest joys of life.