

MARK GODDEN'S

# CARMEN

## AUDIENCE GUIDE

Milwaukee Ballet presents Mark Godden's *Carmen*, a story of tantalizing sexuality and fierce independence, as part of the 2024/25 season. Mark Godden's choreography is renowned for its innovative interpretation of the classic story. It brings out the timeless themes of love, jealousy, and betrayal in Georges Bizet's iconic opera.

### HISTORY

*Carmen* was first performed in 1875. This staging of Prosper Mérimée's 1845 novel was presented as a four-part opera composed by Georges Bizet. He had been commissioned to write an opera for Paris Opéra-Comique, which traditionally performed light, moralistic pieces. Bizet's *Carmen*, which portrayed vulgarity and depravity, came as a shock to audiences at the time. As a result, early critical reception was rather negative. Bizet was devastated by the reviews and unfortunately never lived to see the critical acclaim that the show presently enjoys.

There have been many stagings and retellings of the story of Carmen, including several ballets. In 1949, Roland Petit and his company 'Les Ballets de Paris' staged a ballet of *Carmen*, a piece that is believed to be the most-performed ballet set to Bizet's music. *Carmen Suite* was another *Carmen* ballet, performed in 1967, though this piece featured an original composition by Russian composer Rodion Shchedrin, inspired by Bizet's score.

### MUSIC

The music of *Carmen* is incredibly well-known. "Habanera," "Seguidilla," and "Toreador Song" are some of the most frequently performed and recognizable works of classical opera. Bizet did extensive research on the musical sounds and systems from the area in Spain in which the story takes place, and many of the most popular portions of the opera come from his studies. *Carmen* underwent several series of rewrites. In fact, Bizet was working on rewriting parts of the opera when he died, so his friend and fellow musician Ernest Guiraud finished the score.



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## SYNOPSIS

Village girl Micaëla has a rendezvous with her fiancé, the soldier Don Jose. Alarmingly, Don Jose runs past her and stops. He has a knife in his hand, clearly agitated, but is relieved once he recognizes her. He insists she conceal the knife and depart immediately. She agrees. Before she leaves, Micaëla places her devotional pendant around Don Jose's neck, and he rushes back to his regiment.

The Lieutenant assigns Don Jose to guard the tobacco factory. The factory ladies, especially Carmen, enjoy tormenting the naive young man. The mischievous Carmen easily pickpockets Don Jose's pendant and bewitches him with the scent of a cassia flower and a flash of undress.

Carmen is attracted to Don Jose's intensity. She is also attracted to the Lieutenant's authority. She dances with both. Despite her nature, Carmen returns the stolen devotional pendant to Don Jose, who falls in love with her and places the pendant around her neck.

Micaëla returns. Her devotion is strong, so she doesn't understand why Don Jose pushes her away. Meanwhile, Don Jose becomes progressively angrier that the Lieutenant wields authority over him, and ever more so that Carmen welcomes the Lieutenant's advances. Micaëla and the knife haunt Don Jose's explosive nature. As for Carmen's undivided love...the Lieutenant must die.

After the Lieutenant's murder, Don Jose joins Carmen's people—but Carmen's duplicitous nature is beholden to no one. When the Toreador arrives, the other women are entranced, and Carmen begins a liaison with him. She rebukes Don Jose's suspicion by claiming the Toreador is a financial opportunity rather than a romance; however, Don Jose is not fully convinced.

Micaëla discovers Don Jose and Carmen kissing. She also discovers the devotional pendant that she gave to Don Jose being worn by Carmen. Hysterical, she turns on Don Jose and nearly stabs him with the knife, but manages to rise above the violence and departs, leaving the knife behind.

With Micaëla gone, Don Jose looks for Carmen. When he finds her, she is carrying the Toreador's cape while smoking his cigar. Enraged, he throws Carmen to the ground, picks up the discarded knife, and stabs her.

Meanwhile, Micaëla has informed the guards about the Lieutenant's murderer. The guards arrive to discover Don Jose, incriminating evidence in hand, standing over Carmen's fallen body.

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## THE CHARACTERS



### CARMEN

A fierce and mercurial woman who works as a cigarette girl in Sevilla, Spain.



### DON JOSE

A corporal of the Spanish Dragoons who falls for Carmen's charms.



### MICAËLA

A kind and naive young woman in love with Don José.



### ESCAMILLO

A glamorous toreador (or bullfighter) who turns Carmen's head from Don José.



### THE LIEUTENANT

The captain of Don José's platoon.