

## Border Town

The Metropolitan Opera's startling new take on Carmen grapples with real-world issues



Cracknell's concept transforms Carmen into a worker in a contemporary factory, possibly making munitions. In Tom Scutt's costume design, Carmen's boots imply the Southwestern setting.



The rodeo arena, created out of towers decked out with LED tubes.



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Carmen, having broken out of the factory, flirts with Don José at a gas station.



Act IV is staged on a turntable, allowing the action to shift between Don Escamillo's rodeo performance and the fatal encounter between Carmen and Don José.



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The truck's interior is lit with eight mini-tens. In the following act, the vehicle is seen lying on its side.





Two shots of the haunting video sequences that begin each act.



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In Act III, with the LED tubes turned off, Hoare creates an eerily effective band of white light upstage, using Martin MAC Vipers on the cyc.



In Act I, some of the LED units are seen behind the translucent factory wall. “They give this interesting texture of life beyond it without you knowing exactly what it is until the end of the act when the wall flies out and you get the big reveal,” Hoare says.

BY: DAVID BARBOUR

The Metropolitan Opera, not famed for high-concept approaches to classics, achieved a coup in January with its new production of *Carmen*. One of the most popular pieces in the canon, it often attracts directors who lean into its steamy blend of romance and betrayals, using the setting of Seville and its bullfighting culture as a colorful backdrop.

Director Carrie Cracknell will have none of that. Her take on *Carmen* is brutally realistic and thoroughly of this moment, unfolding in a border town in the American Southwest. (Cracknell has said it could be any American industrial city, but to the eyes of a New York audience in 2024, the sense of it being on the border is very difficult to shake.) The famous factory where *Carmen* works looks rather more sinister, surrounded as it is by soldiers and lurking men who might be illegal immigrants. When *Carmen* tries to escape her grinding existence, she ends up in a smuggling operation that may include human trafficking.

Here, *Carmen* is the opposite of a temptress; eager for autonomy, she is manipulated by men and buffeted by circumstances beyond her control. Her fatal Act IV confrontation with Don José is packed with anguish and fury.

In an interview with *Playbill*, Cracknell says, “Traditionally, this opera has been staged by men and has characterized *Carmen*’s death as an act of passion, or to some extent an act of fantasy. A Romani woman, undeterred by societal norms, who is fearless and unconventional, dares to change her mind about the man that she loves and in return is killed by Don José. There is a risk that her death feels in some way to be ‘what she deserves.’ As contemporary audiences, we need to ask ourselves why we obsessively watch narratives about rape and femicide. What do these stories do to our culture? Do they normalize this violence? Glorify it? Fetishize it?”

Such questions animate Cracknell’s production, along with an awareness of a world reshaped by globalization and mass immigration, all of which posed profound questions for the design team. “We felt that putting it in the 19th-century would create a distance between the audience and the piece,” says scenic designer Michael Levine.

Noting the opera’s “romantic point of view,” he adds that it can become “a kind of fantasy. We wanted to make it feel more immediate, to dust off the piece a little bit, and make it more present. Who is *Carmen*? What kind of factory is she in? These questions come up when you don’t do it in period.”

With such questions on the table, Levine says, “You start to come up with key points that you can hold onto as a designer.” Instead of a cigarette factory, *Carmen*’s first-act workplace may be a munitions plant. He notes that since the workers are having a cigarette outdoors, they are probably in the back of the building, near the loading dock, hence the three openings with plastic flaps. A chainlink fence keeps out the men, adding a prison-like quality, as does the second level patrolled by guards toting rifles.

At the end of Act I, *Carmen* and some of her coworkers break out of the factory. But, rather than ending up at Lillas Pastia’s inn, a crossroads for smugglers and other intriguers, they are discovered in the cargo hold of a tractor-trailer truck. In Levine’s view, “The women are being used to get contraband across the border. They’ve stolen arms from the factory and there are drugs inside the boxes. And they’re being guarded by a different set of men.” As Act II begins, the women nevertheless engage in a dance, choreographed by Ann Yee, that Levine describes as “about freedom, an expression of joy.”

But how to suggest that the truck is in motion? “You could have a realistic highway in the background, with the truck sliding by,” Levine says, “but I thought it would be more interesting to do it in a slightly more abstract way that gives you a sense of movement, but which is also useful for the other scenes. So, I created this wall of LEDs that could move behind the truck.” The term “LED wall” is a bit of a misnomer; rather than a series of LED panels, the piece consists of illuminated tubes that provide an original and attention-getting backdrop. (More about these units in a moment.) Act III begins after the truck has crashed; as the lights come up, we see it sitting on its side. “The underside is strange and interesting, something that people don’t look at very often,” Levine says, noting that, as an object, it works rather like a screen, allowing, for example, Micaëla (Don José’s first love) to make a dramatic entrance. The lights in the LED wall are off in this act, but, Levine adds, he saw the opportunity to use it, in an expanded way. When the LED towers reconfigure to become an enormous rodeo arena; the act is staged on a turntable, allowing the action to shift between rodeo performance of Don Escamillo (*Carmen*’s new lover) and the fatal encounter between *Carmen* and Don José.

This production may set a record for vehicular traffic on the Met stage, what with the main truck, a smaller pickup truck, and a sports car for Don Escamillo. Levine told the *New York Times*, “He had ‘naively’ assumed [the vehicles] could be outfitted with small electric engines.” Instead, they are attached, via knives, to the Met’s scenic automation system. Gabrielle Heerschap, the Met’s associate technical director, told the *Times*, “For the semi, there is one cab and two trailers. The cab and one trailer are upright in one act. Later, after a scene change, the cab and the other trailer are seen lying on their sides.” The paper added, “It takes stagehands about five minutes when the curtain is down to move the upright trailer offstage, uncouple it from

the cab, flip the cab onto the floor, and position it in front of the second trailer.”

With all the vehicles, Levine says, “Storage issues came up. I couldn’t use every section of the Met’s upstage area and I could use only one storage bay, which is on the stage left side. So, the cars have to come on, then back off the stage.” Adding to the complications, “There’s a downstage section of flooring that has all the automation in it; it has to be taken away for Act III, then the Met’s revolve comes downstage” for the arena in Act IV. Also, he says, “The revolve has to be at 18”, so the floor downstage of that had to be brought up to that level, even though the automation underneath takes only 6”-7”, and all of it has to be taken away at intermission. The space all around the revolve had to be built up to 18”, which takes up a lot of space.”

## Lighting

The presence of the LED wall had many implications for lighting designer Guy Hoare, who sometimes uses them to create striking color effects. “I was in Paris, working on a show, when Michael sent me a picture of the truck speeding down the highway, with the [LED wall] used to create a sense of movement and excitement. We use it differently in Act IV to have the energy in the stadium. It feels appropriate that in Act III we give them a rest, using them as a kind of skeleton in silhouette. Of course, in Act I, they’re hidden behind the wall; they give this interesting texture of life beyond it without you knowing exactly what it is until the end of the act when the wall flies out and you get the big reveal.”

Illuminating the tubes is City Theatrical QolorFLEX LED tape. “At one point,” Hoare says, “because we were trying to cut down on the cost of drivers, we were looking at making some of the units warm white and others cold white; eventually, we decided to make them all full-color because trying to decide, two years out from the opening, which ones you want in color and which not is a risky false economy.” Instead, he says, “We cut down on the number of drivers. I think we ended up with 13 separate circuits on each of the 12 scenic towers.”

What with the Act I set located so far downstage and the presence of the LED wall, Hoare says, “The bulk of the lighting work comes from units on the tormentors and the curtain well.” The latter is “a position immediately upstage of the footlights with four [Elation Artiste] Monets on each side. It’s a deep downstage sidelight position and is probably the only way you could get sidelight down front without relying on the box positions, which are another 20’ downstage. We also added one extra ladder on each side, just upstage of the proscenium, to give us a couple of extra Monets; our set was so wide that the rep ladders would have been in the stage picture had we flown them low enough. We added a further three per side under the fly gallery.”

Hoare says that because of the LED wall, “The borders ended up sitting much lower than you would normally want.” This is true of, for example, the border five backlight “because it wanted to be masked by the black serge borders and the actual ceiling borders were quite a long way below that. If we were lighting it from behind, that was fine, but lighting from the front never looked particularly beautiful. The set dictated that all overhead light would have to be very steep.”

In Act III, with the LED tubes turned off, Hoare creates an eerily effective band of white light upstage, using Martin MAC Vipers on the cyc, when Carmen learns that a fortune teller’s cards predict her death. “Originally,” Hoare says, “we were hoping to do a band of light that could fly upwards but there are no bars that can fly that far upstage. We rigged the devices so that, with their tilt, we can get the band to slowly rise over the course of ten or 15 minutes.”

To light the truck’s interior, Hoare says, “We originally rigged a lot of NanoPix units in a trough, but they were so much brighter than we needed them to be. And, as is often the case with LEDs, the bottom ends just popped on. So, we cut them and went with eight mini-tens; they’re not nearly as punchy but are bright enough for what we need. And they can fade up very nicely and gracefully rather than announcing their presence as soon as they come on.”

The Met’s rig continues to evolve on an annual basis. “Overhead, they still have the Elation Chorus Lines and the Monets out front,” Hoare says. “They’ve changed the [Vari- Lite 4000s] on the boxes to [ETC/High End Systems] Halcyon Platins, which are really quite punchy. They’ve also added Halcyon Golds to the front of the circle and some Halcyons on the ladders; currently, each has one Halcyon Gold and one VL3500. It’s quite sobering because I remember when I thought the 3500 was the brightest moving light in my arsenal but put one next to a Halcyon...”

John Froelich, the Met’s resident lighting designer, says, “Before the Halcyon Gold and Platinum upgrade this season, our auditorium moving light positions were all arc source fixtures. The move to the Halcyon line provided brighter sources with a more even field. Given that we only have 16 positions available to hang equipment, these upgrades have provided more design flexibility. It might be strange to some that we have hung Halcyon Golds 100’ away from the stage. The decision to use Golds came down to fixture size; we have to use smaller fixtures in our dress circle rail position to eliminate visual obstructions for our audience. Another improvement with the move to Halcyons has been the reduction in the noise floor for our audience.”

Interestingly, Froelich says, “I have implemented a single fixture method. Rather than investing in profiles and wash fixture types, I have decided to stick with profiles that have heavy frost flags, using them as washes when needed. Sticking with fewer fixture types helps with artistic speed and overall rig efficiency, which is important

given the size and pace of our repertory. A major deciding factor in choosing the Halcyon line was the elimination of the dreaded 'banana shutter.' The fact that I can use the Halcyons in a wide zoom and have almost straight shutters really made the difference. Being able to make clean cuts off drops and scenery made the decision for me."

Froelich also opted to replace the overhead bridge spots. The original specification was 1.2kW PANI projectors modified to followspots mounted above the stage on bridge one (the most downstage overhead lighting position upstage of the proscenium). "I had the idea to replace them with a moving light so that designers could more easily control color/frost/max intensity as well as sync with full stage blackouts and other big-button-type looks, but we wanted to maintain live operator control. This led us to look at Halcyon, which advertised the 'followspot' feature. At first, it had too much resistance in pan/tilt for our operators, but we were able to work with ETC to get custom firmware written, which dialed it back. We used our in-house electrical/fabrication shop to design and build a chassis for the light, and to create a controller.

This gives our operators local control over iris size and intensity." Lighting is controlled by two ETC Eos TI consoles plus 30 ETCnomad Pucks.

Being new to the Met, Hoare had to deal with the summer tech process during which shows are lit on an empty set before the opera is fully staged. "We got a first draft of each act," he says. "The thing I found hardest was you're only looking at the scenery. But as soon as we put 100 chorus members onstage in December, we realized that the scenery was beautifully lit but there was no light on the people. I learned a lot from the process; it was about as mad, fast, and intense as I expected. But the lighting team and, particularly John, were so supportive and helpful— and, above all, honest about what I could expect from the process."

One point made by Froelich had to do with the house use of followspots on the principals, a preference of general director Peter Gelb. "I don't tend to use them a lot," Hoare says. "John gently persuaded me that, whether I liked it or not, there would be followspots. But in terms of this production, there's no way I could pick out a principal amid a sea of chorus members without a nice, discreet followspot. Just knowing that they were there, doing their thing, was a huge relief. I could get on with lighting everything else."

The production confronted Hoare with the contradiction of a gorgeous score with a gritty, even sordid *mise en scène*. "A lot of the work I do with Carrie tends toward the austere. We tend to keep it stripped back and monochrome. But there can be a monochrome with an almost romantic warmth and another with a cold bleakness. I'd say this *Carmen* was probably the latter."

## Projections

Each act of the production begins with a haunting, shadowy video sequence (seen on a downstage screen in the house curtain position), created by Roland Horvath, of rocafilm. The process, he says, "was a long and interesting journey. Together with the directing team, we started with the idea of a road trip with impressions of typical highway scenery and rural places in the US. Soon, we agreed that we would need to find a way to make those images more abstract in movement and texture."

Therefore, Horvath says, "We filmed some shots in Spain, the country I currently live in, to match the idea of a southern border region of the US, and some shots we created in London with Carrie, focusing on feminist topics." He adds, "I liked those first videos. They had a grainy texture and the actions by the dancers were simple but powerful."

But, working with Levine, he adds, "We found that film or video, even if very abstract, would distract too much from the rest of the opera. It is quite a difficult thing nowadays to match the film and opera experiences. More and more, I work with people who tell me that they need video, but who don't actually want to see it." Added to the challenge was the request to feature *Carmen* in the video sequences "but without showing her face or too much of her body, as the cast changes."

The solution came "when we turned on lights behind the white PVC [screen] we had hung downstage and saw the amazing shadows the [production] design created on it. We started filming this in 4K and 120p slow motion with a Sony FX3 from the front of house, even with the stage crew being busy behind the curtain. We knew it could be interesting and we could also bleed through the video with lighting or fire effects onstage. It works awesomely with the movement of the truck projected before Act II and for the fire effect of the burning truck in Act III.

"Still," he adds, "we needed to also tell the story of *Carmen*, to create an emotional connection to her figure. I went back to some ideas we had with Carrie in London, filming people behind frosted glass. It gives the feel of the person being very close without making the face visible.

The closer they come to the glass, the more details you get; by doing this, you can gain control over the actors' visibility. This allowed us to break the fourth wall, get in touch with the audience, and surprise them. When we first saw the projection of a huge person coming up to the screen and ostensibly touching it, we were all blown away.

There she was: a huge Carmen without a face but all her emotions visible. I was happy about this effect because now I could combine stage, lights, shadow play, and video clips of our Carmen.”

In addition, he says, “There is more ‘invisible’ video in place. In Act I, we project the inside of a digitally crafted factory onto the factory wall, which was made from frosted PVC panels. With this, we can give the set more depth and create the illusion of a huge factory with moving cranes inside it, changing the color, presence, and intensity along with Guy Hoare’s lighting design. In Act II, we help the illusion of movement onstage for the driving truck. And, in Act III, we project onto the whole background structure upstage and the truck lying on the turntable to enhance the feeling of rotation and movement. There are projections during the full length of the first three acts, but it is seen as light, shadow, and movement rather than video. It’s a very nice way to work with video nowadays, I think— adding a layer of video on the stage without it being too visible, yet still containing its power and magic.”

For example, he says, “Michael had turning rims on all the trucks to create the illusion of movement, but when we saw it, we found that the illusion wouldn’t be complete without the rubber of the tires also looking like they were rotating. That’s where we came in, projecting moving tires onto the stage tires. That was fun. We have a digital link to the stage automation so we can follow the positions of the cars onstage. Andrew Gusciora did a very good job of programming a little tool inside the disguise media server to handle the offset of the cars onstage and being able to manually manipulate the movement of tire projections when they were a bit off. Automation worked well but we couldn’t match it perfectly, so we tweaked it onstage, which worked fine. I also project an abstract video of movement onto the track and cars to enhance the feeling.”

Indeed, it’s an intensive example of all three design elements working closely together to create a unified effect.

With scenery that is also lighting and projections that enhance the effect of scenery, this is one of the more unified designs to be seen at the Met in some time. Carmen returns to the Met in April and will surely be seen in future seasons.