

Production Notes for *Carmen* from Michael Cavanaugh, Stage Director

A “Boogie Nights” *Carmen*

After Franco’s death, a dangerous, intoxicating era of freedom.

In the fall of 1975, Spain was released from 40 years of oppressive rule by the dictator Francisco Franco. There was a great deal of upheaval as Spanish society came to terms with its re-entry into the modern world. The ascent of King Juan Carlos brought relaxed restrictions on travel, trade, standards of morality and artistic freedom. This was thrilling to some and horrifying to others. There were protests, an increase in crime, and acts of terrorism as many in the population fought to retain the old ways. But there was also a massive outpouring of relief and joy and exhilaration, as an energized people celebrated their newfound liberty.

Setting our production in and around Seville 40-odd years ago is a perfect fit for this beautiful, powerful, and harrowing opera. The mid-70s was the heart of the sexual revolution, when many in the western world were embracing romantic freedoms. Spain, however, was still very much stuck in an era of repressive misogyny. Carmen herself perfectly personifies the new modern Spanish woman, determined to live and love on her own terms in spite of those set against her. Meanwhile, the military and police struggled with losing their grip on civil order. This is paralleled by Don José’s spiral into derangement, brought on by his inability to accept the freedom of the woman he professes to love.

Bullfighting and cigarette smoking, both important aspects of the narrative, were still hugely popular in Spain at that time. Smuggling, too, was an enormous part of the flourishing underground economy. It was an era of wonderfully colorful fashion as well, of course, and the clothing styles of the ‘70s; equal parts vibrant, sensual, and over-the-top, are matched by the mix of musical styles in the opera. Much of this opera’s great popularity stems from its combination of light, fun opéra-comique and dark, dangerous verismo.

Thanks to the intense, often gritty films of ‘70s, such as *The French Connection* and *Taxi Driver*, and, more recently, the evocations of the same era such as *American Hustle* and *Boogie Nights*, we think of the culture of that time in the same way as so many view this opera, as a uniquely powerful combination of kitschy, sexy, and dangerous.

The scenic elements of our production embrace the flavor of the era as well. The architecture is stylized, with clean, spare lines to emphasize the severe psychology of the piece. There are tall towers and curved walls, suggestive of a prison coming apart, the clash of femininity and machismo, the push and pull of order and freedom. As the story progresses, a rough, natural form emerges, hinting at the unpredictable danger to come. And always there is color, with bold statements in deep red, blue, and yellow.

There is a great nostalgia for the 1970’s these days; it seems to have been a time of energy, excitement and possibility. In newly free Spain, particularly, newfound notions of personal freedom were seen as exhilarating, intoxicating, and often scary. Just as in the opera itself, however, while some people embraced their freedoms, some resisted them, and others – tragically – were driven to acts of desperation and horror.