

‘Anatomy Theater,’ ‘Carmen’ and ‘Don Carlo’ Reviews: The Roles of Women

Public dissections, transactional relationships and loveless marriage.



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Photo: Craig T. Mathew/LA Opera

By

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Los Angeles

David Lang’s gruesome and fascinating “Anatomy Theater,” which had its world premiere last week at Redcat in a co-presentation by LA Opera and Beth Morrison Projects, starts with a hanging, continues with a dissection, and makes the audience complicit in the spectacle of human suffering as entertainment. Inspired by the 18th-century practice of public dissections and the contemporaneous “scientific” belief that evil could be physically located in the body, Mr. Lang and his co-librettist, the visual artist Mark Dion, remind us how often strong convictions and practices that seem perfectly normal at the time can appear grotesque in retrospect.

Carmen

San Francisco Opera
Through July 3

Don Carlo

Through June 29

Directed by Bob McGrath, the 75-minute chamber opera did not hold back. First, the audience milled around a scaffold in the Redcat lobby (beer and sausages were provided) until the criminal, Sarah Osborne (the feral, electrifying Peabody Southwell), was dragged in to tell her pathetic life story and confess to the murder of her abusive husband/pimp and her two children. She was hanged, and then the showman Joshua Crouch, played by Marc Kudisch as an exuberant cross between Harold Hill and Sweeney Todd, urged the watchers into the theater for the main event. Mr. Dion's set included an elaborate cabinet of dissection tools; surgical videos and period anatomical drawings were projected on a scrim. As Ms. Southwell lay naked on the table, the properly orotund bass-baritone Robert Osborne, as the anatomist Baron Peel, vowed to locate evil in Sarah's body; his assistant—whose bafflement was conveyed by Timur's eerily high tenor—bloodily extracted one organ after another from the corpse and proclaimed it “normal.”

Mr. Lang's insidious score, spiced with accordion, bass clarinet and trumpet, had propulsive hints of Steve Reich and Kurt Weill (the 10-member ensemble, wild Up, was ably led by Christopher Rountree) yet left ample space for breath. Most poignantly, when Sarah's heart was removed and declared “unblemished” by the wondering assistant, the gleeful forward motion suddenly stopped, and Ms. Peabody sang an aria that began “My heart, my heart,” recalling her love for her children in a vulnerable, plangent mezzo. Carnage gave way to humanity; we were reminded that Sarah's greatest crime was to be poor, desperate and female.