

## **“Una *Carmen* más madura”: Calixto Bieito and *Carmen* at the Liceu**

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This article will explore some of the themes that arise from Calixto Bieito's September 2010 production of *Carmen* at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona. Bieito has worked closely with the Liceu on previous occasions, presenting productions of *Un ballo in maschera*, *Wozzeck*, and *Don Giovanni* in radical, polemical styles that divide critics and audiences alike, making Bieito one of the most in-demand directors in European theatre. This article will look at how Bieito's *Carmen* relates to his other operatic productions, with a reflection on his staging at the Festival de Peralada in 1998 and will explore some of the issues raised by the production at the time of its staging in 2010.

The current economic background of the arts in Catalonia has forced arts companies to draw up new strategies for filling houses and gaining further funding. The reduction in the Generalitat's Culture Department budget (from €334.4m in 2010-2011 to €282.3m in 2011-2012, a cut of 15.6%)(Generalitat de Catalunya: 2011) has meant that theatres have had to adopt measures to increase their efficiency, while at the same time attracting audiences to their performances. In the case of the Liceu, the funding reductions from government institutions both on regional and state level have severely affected their finances; the Generalitat has reduced their contribution from by €1.7m, a 15% reduction (Morgades: 2011a), and in the summer of 2010, the Ministerio de Cultura announced a 10% reduction in their contribution to the theatre over three years (Morgades: 2011b), with a likely further cut in the coming years. In the light of this, the Liceu has been forced to undertake a different approach to the financing of the institution, and with its budget having been cut by a third and a number of productions cancelled, the necessity of filling the house to capacity is even more urgent.

Given this difficult financial context, the choice of Calixto Bieito's controversial production of *Carmen*, a revival from the 1999

Festival de Peralada, could be interpreted as a canny mix of controversy and money-making for the production that both opened and closed the 2010-11 season. As an opener, it ensured column inches in the press for the Liceu, and as a closer to the season it would be a lucrative summer tourist season production. In addition, the perennial appeal of *Carmen* as an opera, Bieito's reputation for controversy, and the proven success of his production from Peralada played in the Liceu's favour, and the political and social context of recent years, to be mentioned further on, while arguably coincidental, proved *Carmen* to be one of the most culturally significant and relevant productions of the season.

*Carmen*'s reappearance at the Liceu marks the end of a 17-year absence from the opera house's repertoire, and this production, by director Calixto Bieito, is ostensibly that which premiered at the Festival de Peralada in 1998/99 and then went on tour throughout Europe, and was revived for the beginning of the 2010-2011 season at the Liceu. The production was subsequently performed again in July 2011, to cater for the height of the tourist season, thus combining the controversy of a Bieito production and the money-spinning effect the Liceu is looking for.

Bieito's visually-demanding, controversial productions have turned him into one of the most sought-after directors in Europe, and his stagings are vociferously debated in the press by those who consider his work modern and necessary for the survival of opera into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and those who vocally condemn the Tarantino-esque violence, fetishisation and sexualisation of his productions.<sup>1</sup>

Productions like 2001's *Ballo in Maschera*, controversially staged with a row of men on the toilet with their trousers around their ankles, 2006's *Don Giovanni*, with graphic simulated sex and urination on stage, and the oppressively industrial atmosphere of *Wozzeck* in 2008 are frequently-cited examples of Bieito's extravagant, provocative work. Bieito's 1999 *Carmen*, however, might be considered relatively tame and restrained, in comparison to

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Delgado. (2010). Calixto Bieito: Staging excess in, across and through Europe. In: *Contemporary European Directors*. London. Routledge. Ch. 14.

the profligacy of his later, more infamous productions; nevertheless, it is not a production entirely devoid of controversy. As with his other productions, *Carmen* contains Bieito's frequently recurring themes of sex, violence as money as motors of society and manifestations of power; these shall be explored later. These three themes compose the backbone of one of Bieito's most effective theatrical devices: *Verfremdungseffekt*. A Brechtian technique of audience alienation, *Verfremdungseffekt* functions in this instance as a way to encourage the audience to reconsider and re-evaluate both *Carmen* as a story and opera as an art form. While theatre and cinema have undergone a transition to more modernist forms, arguably opera remains largely traditional in its presentation, with a marked prevalence of traditional or at least non-controversial aesthetics. To counter this, in his operas Bieito implements elements of Brechtian staging, such as scarce use of props, a disengagement from the illusory emotional narrative of the characters, and an unfamiliar setting to encourage the audience to reflect more objectively on the action taking place on scene.

In this production of *Carmen* the Brechtian modernity is manifested on stage through Bieito's stripping back of the baroque, romantic frills associated with more traditional productions, both in terms of scenery and in the minimising of Bizet's spoken dialogue. Similarly, the setting and scenery is ostentatiously modernised, with a minimal but referential set that allows Bieito to draw focus to the images that he does portray on stage.

This *Carmen* is removed from its 19<sup>th</sup> century origins and setting and brought up to the 1970s, and Bieito relocates the action to the Spanish exclave of Ceuta, thus undermining the traditional Andalucían iconography normally used metonymically to represent Spain, with repercussions both for local and international audiences. For a Spanish audience, Ceuta arguably evokes the physical isolation and permissiveness of garrison towns and borderlands adjacent to Morocco, the former potentially a place dangerously outside customary Peninsular social norms. For an international audience, the change from romantic Andalucían (or 'Spanish') iconography to the distinctly utilitarian, underplayed set, is jarring and unfamiliar.

This 'background *Verfremdungseffekt*' is then complemented by a emphatic use of symbols provocative to a local audience: Bieito

makes assumptions about the cultural background of the Liceu audience, and using these, makes use of a steady succession of carefully chosen, large-writ images, aiming to disconcert the viewer. As such, the most powerful tool of Bieito's *Verfremdung*, rather than the action on stage, is the scenery of the production.

As in Peralada, the set is almost parodic in its appearance; Bieito makes use of the larger stage at the Liceu to place the elements of the scenery far apart from each other. Indeed, despite the cuts, the larger budget, and the greater space of the Liceu allowed for a more expansive production than at Peralada. The large scale of the few items of scenery creates a rather overwhelming effect of size; the larger space of the Liceu arguably allows for a greater epic quality, more visual impact, and emphasises the movement and energy of the action on stage, and underlines the importance of the few items of scenery that there are. For example, the phone box where Carmen starts her *Habanera* is placed at the far stage right, and there is a considerable distance between there and the large flagpole, complete with ominously large Spanish flag, in the centre of the stage (Figure 1). The back of the stage was originally conceived to evoke the arches of a bullring, but this idea was dropped in favour of a plain semi-circular screen that allowed greater flexibility in the *mise en scène*, and enhanced the symbolism present in the opera. As if to compensate for the lack of actual bullring in the scenery, Bieito reinforces the bullfighting iconography in several ways; an overwhelmingly large Osborne bull looms against a blood-red backdrop (Figure 2), recalling the sun-baked melodrama of Bigas Luna's 1992 *Jamón Jamón*, and acting as an immediate metonym for 'España', i.e. not Catalonia. In addition, a large chalk circle is drawn on the floor of the stage (which itself is extended out over the pit in a semi-circular fashion, Figure 3), recalling the floor of a bullring, and in one of the more poetic and atmospheric moments of the production, a naked toreador practices his steps around the stage in the entr'acte before Act III.

However, in up-sizing these potentially controversial symbols of 'Spain' (as opposed to Catalonia), Bieito simplifies and caricatures Spanish identity to play on the view of Spain created by Mérimée and subsequently propagated by Bizet's opera. Over the course of the production, the symbols of this "foreign" identity are undermined and

destroyed, as the bull comes crashing down and the Spanish flag is used as a rag (although in the Peralada production, perhaps due to a sense of security in the more “Catalan” environment of the festival, the flag was trampled on). As an ironic counterpoint to the politically-weighted large-scale symbols, in Act II, a Maneki Neko – or a golden “welcoming cat” – is placed on the Mercedes; of Japanese origin, these kitschy trinkets are a foreign, but oddly-familiar sight in Chinese bazaars around the city.

The theme of violence permeates the production, but often through suggestion; Zúñiga is beaten up offstage, and the strong military presence is a constant reminder of this. The theme is also reflected in the reviews and their frequent use of the adjective “violent”, and Spanish/Catalan words like “*bronca*”. Indeed, by opera standards, the production is violent, but from a televisual or cinematographic point of view there is little overt violence, all is suggestion. Nevertheless, in this production it is an indispensable and omnipresent phenomenon. In Bieito’s staging, it is the motivation behind the action and is accepted by the protagonists as a necessary part of the narrative reality of the circumstances.



Figure 1. © Antoni Bofill



Figure 2. © Antoni Bofill



Figure 3. © Gran Teatre del Liceu



Figure 4. © Antoni Bofill

In the same vein, the constant presence of the Spanish Legion is a manifestation of this violence, and the military aspect of the production is heavily emphasised in a much more sinister way than previously staged; rather than the tin-pot jolly singing soldiers of a more traditional production, this *Carmen's* soldiers are faceless, immoral sexual predators hiding behind the anonymity afforded by their Spanish Legion uniforms, seemingly untouchable in their Ceuta hideout. The soldiers represent the intersection between violence and sex: they lust after Carmen, surrounding her threateningly at the beginning of *La Habanera*, scaling the telephone box on stage in their pursuit of her (Figure 4) and paying for sex wherever they can get it, as reflected in Carmen's companion Mercédès (Itxaro Mentxaka) performing oral sex on soldier Moralès (Àlex Sanmartí) during the *Chanson Bohème* in exchange for bundles of cash.

Nevertheless, Carmen and her companions manipulate the soldiers with their sexuality to get what they want. Indeed, Carmen herself is more pragmatic Almodóvar heroine than fetishised gypsy girl; her clothing is modern, she is well aware of her sexuality and uses both it in conjunction with her companions Frasquita and Mercedes to squeeze money out of the excitable Moralès and Zúñiga: even if the women's goals are as crassly superficial as the attainment of money, it is a requirement of their circumstances. Bieito stresses, however, that rather than being romantically oversexualised as a gypsy erotic fantasy, he considers Carmen an ambitious figure: 'No la veo como una mujer fatal que va con el sexo en la boca y las piernas abiertas sino una mujer temperamental, dueña de su libertad' (cited in Cervera: 2010). However, Bieito touches on a controversial conjunction of sex and coercion in the implicit meaning of officer Zúñiga's (Josep Ribot) worrying interaction with Mercédès's young daughter. Arguably a superfluous character, the figure served to represent a focus for the three themes of sex, violence and coercion that Bieito considers integral to the work.

Although Bieito considers these three themes universal and contemporary, this production of *Carmen* is rendered especially relevant by the political and social circumstances of its timeframe. Although set in the 1970s, and despite the eleven years elapsed between Peralada and the Liceu productions, by means of his

oversized symbols, Bieito evokes contemporary themes germane to Barcelona and Catalonia in general, as well as wider issues in society. The looming Osborne bull and adoration of toreador Escamillo are arguably the manifest iconographies of a tradition that may be considered invalid in Catalonia, and would immediately connect the local spectator to the recent outlawing of bullfighting in Catalonia, effective from 2012; a high-profile piece of theatrical manoeuvring whose value lies in headlines rather than actions.

Carmen's very gypsy nature calls to mind the recent debates over the expulsion of the Roma from France, and closer to home, the debate sparked by Partido Popular representative for Badalona Xavier García-Albiol's comment that the situation of the gypsy populations of La Mina, Sant Adrià de Besòs and Badalona was 'worse' than in France (*ABC*:2010). Bieito's gypsies are certainly not romantic, and their presence here merely highlighted their status as outsiders within the parameters of society.

The near-omnipresent large Spanish flag hanging from a flagpole which takes up the vertical space of the stage, and makes an appearance several times throughout the production is perhaps the most controversial symbol of *Verfremdung*. For a local audience member, it is a clear reference to the tension between Spanish and Catalan identities, manifested in the social and political arena in the dozens of disputes between the central government and the Generalitat over a range of issues, from budgets, to schooling, healthcare and linguistic policy. The flag's symbolic power lies in the fact that it is likely to provoke a reaction in every viewer, from *centralistas* to *catalanistas*, and the resulting reaction became a common theme in the reviews.

With the Liceu audience in mind it would be hard to argue that Bieito's choice of symbols is not designed to provoke; a native of Miranda de Ebro, near Burgos, he grew up in Barcelona, and is conscious of the potency of such images as the large Spanish flag and Osborne Bull, and of their effect on stage in the ostensibly Catalan-speaking milieu, like the Festival de Peralada in 1999 and notoriously vocal Liceu audience in 2010/11. That is not to say, of course, that the reaction will be universally negative, rather that there



seems to be an assumption that the audience will be well aware of the complex response such manifest symbolism will cause.

The destruction of these symbols, then, takes on a more subtle meaning. Rather than representing a childish, inconsiderate anti-*españolismo*, it in fact encourages the audience, who may live a totally different reality of 'Spain', with a different understanding of borders, to question the acceptance of these externally-imposed images. Bieito seems to encourage the audience to reject the image of Carmen, her trappings and surroundings as canonically 'Spanish' in favour of a more modern manifestation of the story.

A constant in the reactions to the productions was the perceived maturity in the 2010 production and the reference point of Peralada. As will be mentioned further on. Bieito himself commented:

El montaje apenas ha cambiado de concepto. «Es igual. Pero plásticamente es distinto porque en Liceu todo es más grande, la luz es más expresionista y hay más coches y todos son Mercedes» (cited in Cervera: 2010).

Nevertheless, in the decade that has passed since Peralada, there is a sensation that there is a maturity to the production that was missing eleven years ago. Many reviews noted that Roberto Alagna and Itxaro Mentxaka reprised their roles in both productions, giving a sense of continuity and evolution from the Peralada staging. In the words of Roberto Alagna, "El personaje [Don José] ha cambiado porque yo soy más veterano, tengo más experiencia vital, y creo que ahora Don José es más humano. No tiene miedo de Carmen, pero tiene miedo de su pasado, y en ese sentido es un personaje muy sensible y en algunos momentos más espiritual" (cited in *La Vanguardia*: 2010). Interestingly, much was also made in the reviews of the 'experienced' Carmen Béatrice Uría-Monzón (not insignificantly a French national with Spanish parents), who had interpreted the role over 300 times in her career, and claimed that "ésta es la Carmen que [yo] esperaba, fuera de los clichés, del flamenco y de otros estereotipos" (cited in *La Vanguardia*: 2010); notably, she had only played the role once before in Spain at the Teatro Real in Madrid. The maturity of the production was echoed in the headline in *La Vanguardia* on the 23rd of

September, “Calixto Bieito deja libertad a los cantantes en una ‘Carmen’ más madura” and in the same paper, Maricel Chavarría underlined that the time elapsed since Peralada and the context of Bieito’s later work had allowed a different reading of the production (Chavarría: 2010).

As expected, the combination of Bieito, *Carmen*, and season opener at the Liceu generated a lot of column inches across the spectrum of the press, who were familiar with both the Peralada production and Bieito’s other works at the Liceu. As such, almost every review of the production drew attention to Bieito’s directorial reputation, and used a suitably forceful vocabulary when describing Bieito’s creative work – “violento”, “bronca” and “radical” all featured in the various opinion pages of the culture sections of the main newspapers. Reviewers of this current production heavily emphasise their assessment of Bieito’s *staging*, largely considering the visual, kinetic aspect of the production, while verdicts on the musical and vocal aspects tended to be brief. Indeed, during my time at the rehearsals there, there was very little musical direction from the stage; conductor Marc Piollet was entirely in charge of the musical side of the opera, while the stage direction was purely Bieito’s domain, emphasising the precedence Bieito appears to give to spectacle over music, suggesting that the director expected the musical aspect to be in place before the stage direction began, and this is reflected in the reviews, who noted the skilful direction of the actors and the effective use of the choir. *ABC* contrasted the overall harshness of the visual aspect of the production with the subtle musical direction of Marc Piollet and the delicate lyricism of some of the images presented – the naked toreador, for example – and with the exception of Roberto Alagna, reserved their praise for the second cast (Menéndez-Haddad: 2010a).

While Roberto Alagna was practically universally praised for both his musical and acting quality, as well as being a barometer of the evolution of the production from Peralada, and Marc Piollet was lauded by both *La Vanguardia* (Chavarría: 2010) and *ABC* (Menéndez-Haddad: 2010a) for lightness of touch. However, with the exception of María Bayo, the other vocalists were given a lukewarm reception; for all her experience in the role, Béatrice Uría-Monzón’s

Carmen was considered vocally inadequate for the production, with several papers noting the lack of the usual audience enthusiasm for *la Chanson Bohème*. Nevertheless, Uría-Monzón's confidence in the role led to praise for her stage presence. Some reviewers, however, such as *Time Out's* Javier Sánchez Pérez noted that in with playing with Mérimée's and Bizet's clichés, Bieito's *Carmen* fell into clichés of modern film-making, and noted that the incessantly vulgar atmosphere of cars, bras, and booze. Likewise, Carmen, Frasquita and Mercédès's quest for money and sex recalled the artificial, forced atmosphere of a Quentin Tarantino movie (Sánchez Pérez: 2010). For all the inconsistency of the forceful images writ by Bieito, ABC's Pablo Menéndez-Haddad noted that the production "se mete en la esencia misma de la obra" (Menéndez-Haddad: 2010a) echoing the common opinion that the modernity of this Carmen made the 18th/19th century story as relevant as ever in its portrayal of universal themes of misery and unhappiness. Regardless of the spectrum of opinions that Bieito's *Carmen* has provoked, it is clear that the power of the imagery of the production overshadows the musical quality of the piece. It seems that the abstract strength of the *mise en scène* led reviewers to evaluate the opera more in non-musical theatre terms; the strength of each cast member's acting skill seemed to be far more of a consideration than their musical ability.

In addition, a typical bent of the reviews of *Carmen* frequently contrasted the comparatively mild 'controversy' of the current Carmen to other, more hardcore Bieito productions, alluding to a possible 'mellowing' of the director, as though Carmen has closed a ten-year cycle of adolescent bad behaviour. This 'mellowing' has been welcomed in the right-wing national press: for example, *La Razón* called the 2010 *Carmen* 'el mejor Bieito' (Sans Rivière: 2010) and ABC gives it a largely positive review, and appreciated the 'madurez' (Menéndez-Haddad: 2010b) of the work in its evolution since Peralada, lauding the production's coherence and lyrical and visual strength. This right-wing 'approval' is perhaps representative in some measure of the process Bieito's work has undergone; from the shock tactics of *Ballo in Maschera* and *Don Giovanni* one knows to expect radical reinterpretation from his work. Bieito's radicalism was counterweighted in many reviews by a mention of the supposed

conservatism of the Liceu audience, nevertheless there seems to be little consensus on whether the bravos or the boos overruled each other. *La Vanguardia* suggests that the initial boos of the shock of the production were outweighed by the bravos at the end of the production (Chavarría: 2010), and *El Punt* noted that “Al final, l'escriadassada habitual en les estrenes de Bieito va ser moderada, però en onze anys el director ha fet coses millors.” (Cester: 2010b)

More and more, the reviews dismissed the habitual controversy that seems now a pre-requisite for Bieito productions as a sign of an established audience who never fail to rise to the provocations placed before them. The squalid grandeur of *Un ballo in maschera* and the disconcerting urination of *Wozzeck* certainly have their shock value, but these are productions, as of 2011 that are several years old now (*Un ballo in maschera* was premiered at the Liceu during the 2000-2001 season, and Bieito's *Wozzeck* dates from 2007), and if opera is an acquired taste then Bieito's reputation, being what is it, should prove no great mental leap. This suggests that those who boo Bieito's productions go for the morbid fascination of seeing the florid, baroque production of yesteryear despoiled in a (relatively) savage, post-modern way, or that they are either in some way theatrically infantile and cannot accept his highly visual, rather than musical concept. In either case, the polemic production often served to provoke the (re)viewer into nailing their colours to the stand.

For example, *Avui*'s Montserrat Guardiet's reaction to the imagery of *Carmen* is of one of betrayal by supposed (Catalan) compatriot Bieito and she manifests her apparent discomfort at the blatancy of his symbolism. As such, her review is an illustration of the immature reactions and the *victimisme* that Bieito is out to challenge; the reviewer has failed to see past the admittedly provocative symbolism to the content underneath. Fortunately, Guardiet's colleagues were able to see beyond the provocations; Imma Merino hit the mark with her comment that the production is 'intencionadament *cutre*' (Merino: 2010), and Xavier Cester considers the polemic surrounding the production indicative of a society in which there is little real consensus or negotiation and opinions are either black or white; one must either wildly applaud Bieito and bathe in his reflected international glory or plead for his excessively

choreographed, pornographic shows to leave august institutions like the Liceu well alone (Cester: 2010a). As such, articles like “Vol dir que calia, Sr. Bieito” by Cester’s colleague Montserrat Guardiet are manifestations of childish disappointment (Guardiet: 2010). Guardiet denounces Bieito’s provocative imagery as anti-Catalan, and expresses disappointment at this behaviour from someone who has been welcomed into (or appropriated by) the Catalan establishment, betraying a helplessly short-sighted and potentially harmful concept of what culture in Catalonia is, who produces ‘Catalan’ culture and a worrying intolerance of cultural discussion.

Despite this, Bieito is still considered a successful Catalan director; given the attendance of ‘society figures’ at the *Carmen* premiere, such as then-President of the Generalitat José Montilla, Joan Manuel Tresserras, Jordi Hereu, Artur Mas, Maruja Torres, and Xavier Albertí (López Rosell: 2010), attending Bieito’s work seems to have become something of a society event, perhaps indicating a certain ‘welcoming into the fold’, or indeed, institutionalisation both in Spain and abroad. Upon winning the 2009 European Culture Prize from Pro Europa, Bieito commented to *El País* “no [lo] necesito, pero que me produce una sensación muy agradable” (cited in Morgades: 2009), revealing Bieito’s own ambiguous feelings towards being brought into the institution of theatre in Barcelona and Spain in general. Given this reaction to the prize, and at the conclusion of his 10-year stint as Artistic Director of the Romea, this production of *Carmen* could arguably be seen as Bieito’s swansong in Barcelona. When he left for his next production of Parsifal ‘a su manera’ at the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich in December 2010, Bieito left behind mixed opinions about his legacy to Barcelona, both in terms of his collaboration with the Liceu and his greater oeuvre.

To close, despite the evident, and perhaps even cliché controversy that a Bieito production provokes, this 2010 *Carmen* is perhaps one of his best works; in its striking and intelligently provocative aesthetic it serves Bieito’s mantra of opera as a social and educational medium, and is one of the most culturally engaging and relevant productions to come out of the Liceu in some time. The artistic concept may not be to everyone’s taste, but this is an opera that engages with relevant cultural and political issues.

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