



Carmen updated

Sir, Your report (Jan 3) on the Italian opera director who is remodelling *Carmen* should depress all those with an interest in culture and equality. We cannot cure society's ills by rewriting the classics. Prosper Mérimée, the author of *Carmen*, was a subtler and cleverer writer than superficial modern critics might realise: his groundbreaking novella was suffused with irony, inviting us to question the rights and wrongs of the treatment of the mysterious heroine. Those who accuse past masters of not conforming to their view of society may have a point, but they should write their own opera, or collaborate with new writers, not crassly rewrite work that was composed with deep thought and even genius.

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Carmen, played here by Anna Caterina Antonacci, was always a powerful character and in the latest version she is also a match for her knife-wielding spurned lover

Carmen is given a new ending in support of Italy's battered women

Italy

Philip Willan Rome

An Italian theatre director has rewritten the finale of Bizet's *Carmen* to enlist the tragic heroine in a campaign to prevent violence against women, a social problem that cost more than a hundred lives in Italy last year.

In the revised final scene the gypsy cigar-maker is stabbed by her spurned lover, Don José, but manages to grab a pistol and shoot him, revolutionising the denouement of Bizet's opera in a version to be staged in Florence from Sunday.

It is not clear whether either succumbs to their injuries.

Leo Muscato, the director, has set the story in a gypsy camp in the late 1970s to create the same sense of distance that Bizet's audience would have felt in 1875 from the almost contemporary

story written by Prosper Mérimée. The real artistic "betrayal" comes at the end, however, when the violent outcome is turned on its head.

The modification was agreed on with the theatre superintendent, Cristiano Chiarot, who questioned how a modern audience could applaud the murder of a young woman when women are being killed in Italy at a rate of almost three a week.

Muscato told *La Repubblica*: "The theme of death here reeks of male chauvinism: the woman must sacrifice herself in order to preserve her liberty. It's a point of view that makes no sense today."

The modern interpretation coincides with a debate on femicide at the opera house in Florence. The dress rehearsal on Friday is being combined with an event, *Carmen Does Not Die*, in which female intellectuals will share



Leo Muscato, the director, says the opera's finale, from 1875, "makes no sense today"

thoughts, experiences and readings on the subject of violence. Those who want to are invited to wear something red, and to bring something red — shoes, scarves, clothing — to deposit symbolically at the entrance to the theatre.

The modification of the story line and the debate on violence appear to have developed in parallel. "The new ending was supposed to be a secret. It was decided on about a month ago," Paolo Klun, a spokesman for the opera house, said. "The librettists adapted stories they heard about into their works, remaining respectful of the characters,

the story and the music. That's the kind of transposition that's happening here."

The action takes place in a run-down gypsy camp surrounded by wire fences where people live in bedraggled caravans; a grim reality all too familiar on the outskirts of Italian cities.

"Carmen is an abused woman who suffers beatings and is seen bleeding and with a black eye. We want people to understand that," Mr Klun said. "The idea for the change came from the realisation that when the audience applauds at the end of the last act, they are applauding in the presence of a corpse."

The theatre management expressed similar sentiments in a recent letter to staff: "Only recently public opinion and politicians have started to mobilise against a phenomenon that is taking on terrifying dimensions around the world: violence against women, sexual abuse, discrimination and femicide."