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'Carmen' chameleons

Catherine Malfitano and Milena Kitic find differing ways to inhabit the role of composer Bizet's diva.

By DIANE HAITZMAN
Times Staff Writer

THEY will alternate in the title role of Bizet's "Carmen," opening tonight at Los Angeles Opera — but offstage, soprano Catherine Malfitano and mezzo-soprano Milena Kitic are different definitions of diva.

The American Malfitano, 56, jet black hair hanging to her waist, makes an effortlessly grand entrance for an interview in the opera company's offices at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, appropriately for someone who has triumphed as Violetta, as Salome, as Tosca. She is not in costume for the role of the passionate gypsy temptress, but she easily could be. There's the long black dress with the plunging neckline, the fiery red-and-black flowered wrap that drips beaded fringe, the dangling earrings of filigreed silver.

"My director says, 'My God, she is Carmen already,'" Malfitano says. "I tend to dress for roles — in the style of the character I play. Some singers rehearse in pants no matter what the role is. For me, not possible."

A few days later at the same location, Kitic, 36, who will sing in tonight's performance, makes an equally theatrical entrance — but the only thing that's traditional Carmen-red about her is the lipstick. The blond Yugoslav, for the last four years a Pasadena resident, appears in a high-fashion leather jacket, heels and slacks in tones of aqua and cream. The effect is less seduction in Spain than a shopping spree on Rodeo Drive.

When an opera staffer compliments her on her appearance, she leans back: "It's better to look good than to feel good, particularly if you are going to play Carrrrrrr-men."

Beneath their visual and vocal differences, though, Malfitano and Kitic both see Carmen as the ultimate diva role, and both say they feel a special kinship with it.



LOCAL EXOTIC: Mezzo-soprano Kitic, Belgrade-born but now a Southland resident, has played the role as a blond but here will don a traditional dark wig.



CANDOR: Carmen is "one of the most truthful, honest heroines I've ever played," soprano Malfitano says. "That's why women love this character."

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Maffiano observes, with a hint of mystery and a dramatic toss of the fringe: "I have to say this is my style of dressing, more so than other characters. If you scratch beneath the surface a little bit, you'd find that I'm a Carmen type."

The role, as she explains, was written in 1875 for a soprano. But because it's in a lower range than many soprano roles, it's sung by mezzos as well.

Not that Maffiano is the kind of singer given to paying much attention to the way others approach a part she also plays.

"Never! I've never done that from the beginning," she asserts. "I think I'm a very instinctive person by nature. My parents were both artists, so I had a lot of nurturing from an artistic point of view. That allowed for a tremendous amount of exploration and fantasy. Risking was part of my upbringing."

"I think you have to have lived through some of this, or explored it through dreams or fantasy, to make it come to life," she continues. "Otherwise it's just looking like a dame with the hands on the hips, pretending to be sexy. Being absolutely comfortable with the self at any given moment, I think that's truly sexy."

But then, as Kikic says: "Different things are sexy in different countries. It's very weird sometimes."

Kikic, who appeared with Los Angeles Opera in 2002 as Gilda in "Tales of Hoffman," calls Carmen her signature role. Her 3-year-old son, Milan, is also a fan.

"The overture to 'Carmen' is his favorite. He plays the cymbals every time," she says.

But Kikic — who first sang the part in her native Belgrade in 1989 and later performed it throughout Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and Belgium — did so most often as a blond in updated "Carmena." She jokingly describes some of them as "Eurotrash."

"I can just tell you, for instance, in Germany — because I have mostly performed the role there — they see Car-

men in leather pants and leather jacket," she says. "They see this as the ultimate in being sexy. Where Spaniards, of course, pay more attention to movement and dresses and femininity."

In fact, Kikic won a German music critics' award for a "Eurotrash" Carmen in that country in 1998, even though "I strongly objected to everything they wanted me to do. But I found my own way. I didn't think of the Spanish Carmen for a moment, I just played the modern girl, because nowadays there are Carmenas on every corner, there are Carmenas everywhere. There is the emancipation of the woman. Back then [in 1875], it was shocking."

Kikic will wear the traditional dark wig in L.A. Opera's production, which originated at the Teatro Real in Madrid, and she prefers it that way.

"I enjoy now working with the people from Madrid," she says. "I think this production will really look closest to Spanish tradition of all the productions."

Unlike Maffiano, Kikic describes herself as an intellectual student of the role, interested in the way other artists have interpreted it. "There is always something to learn, even when you watch a tape from old times. All of us give our soul and our emotions and our interpretation and everything else, but you analyze — this is what art is all about. What accounts for the enduring appeal of *Don Juan* or *Pygmalion*?"

"She is one of the most truthful, honest heroines I've ever played," Maffiano says. "That's why women love this character, and men are attracted to this character even though she scares them. And she does scare men — she scares her lover Don José because she is unflinchingly honest. We know even today that if John Kerry's wife is honest, people don't like it. People don't like honest women."

And what of the diva label that seems inextricable from the role?

"The diva singer who plays the diva role has to find the woman underneath the diva. Otherwise it is, again, a cliché," muses Maffiano. "What is a diva when she is not in front of throngs of people? She is just a woman."

Kikic, the career Carmen, is less worried about the description.

"Now it is being used for all kinds of pop singers, like Celine Dion," she says. "I don't mind. I think it sounds very nice — the recognition, the appreciation."

She shrugs, then laughs.

"There are worse words than that."

'Carmen'

Where: Los Angeles Opera at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles

When: 7:30 p.m. today, Saturday, Tuesday, Wednesday, next Friday, Oct. 30, Nov. 5 and 6; 2 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 31, Nov. 3 and 7

Price: \$25 to \$290

Contact: (213) 972-8001