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- Bizet's Carmen visits a small Tinos village

Bizet's Carmen visits a small Tinos village**Opera Lab Athens stages the popular opera at town square**

Erifyli Yiannakopoulou runs Opera Lab Athens, a project that was initiated by opera coach Gilles Denizot in Hamburg.

By Margarita Pournara - Kathimerini

Imagine listening to excerpts of Bizet's opera "Carmen" in the middle of a traditional village in Tinos under the shadow of a big plane tree towering over the main square.

Don't think of the usual recital fare, which normally includes a vocalist and a pianist, and which make most audiences unable to hide their boredom. This is a genuine street opera, performed by a dozen up-and-coming singers, the local 20-member women's choir and a number of the town folk who make their own contributions. Even the main taverna owner has been included in the performance concept.

It is definitely one of the most interesting projects taking place outside Athens this summer. "Carmen" will be staged at Tinos's Pyrgos this Sunday, in an Opera Lab Athens production. Kathimerini caught up with some of the artists, who talked about an undertaking we hardly get the chance to see in Greek countryside festivals.

The idea for a street opera came from a group of Greek opera students abroad, who got a warm response from fellow-students in Greece. These include Erifyli Yiannakopoulou, Sofia Kapetanakou, Rodoula Gaitanou and pianist Yiannis Tsanakaliotis.

They said their aim was to help the broader Greek public understand that opera is not necessarily a kind of music that is solely addressed to connoisseurs or requires any special education. They added that street opera makes the voice heard in a natural environment, involves the spectators and is more direct because it doesn't take place on a theater stage.

The production will be set on the main square of Pyrgos, the village of the marble workers. "It is not just a performance that will be staged in an unusual venue; it has been made to accommodate the audience," explained opera coach Gilles Denizot, who conceived Opera Lab. "We have kept the main storyline with scenes that can be staged on the square and even the most clueless person can understand what is happening. The dialogues have been translated into Greek and the arias will be in French."

"Carmen" is a Spanish tragic heroine in a French opera. To a Greek audience, she is reminiscent of many things, from Michael Cacoyannis's "Stella" with her trademark independent streak, to the rebels that took to the mountains during the civil war. For Denizot, it was important to bring out the elements that would make Greeks feel more familiar with this work. His teaching tactic is to adapt the material to every country's mentality.

Greek voices

"I founded the first Opera Lab in Hamburg. Today, there are another eight across the world. The opera labs are addressed to young singers who want to perfect their technique but to also rise up to the challenges of a career in such a difficult field. We organize seminars and annual projects, 'Carmen' being one example. Opera Lab Athens, which was established recently and is run by Erifyli Yiannakopoulou, runs along the same lines. All these years that I have been teaching opera, I have been amazed by the fact that Greece, such a small country, has many wonderful voices. You are a truly blessed country in this respect. Take advantage of it."

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