

No Castanets for This Carmen

PROSPER MERIMEE wrote her up over 100 years ago. Bizet made her the subject of an opera in 1875 and she's still going strong. Now however, for the first time, one of the sultriest sirens in literature has got a surname—Miss Carmen Jones. She no longer lives in Seville, you won't find her rolling cigarettes in a factory or fighting her rivals in the workrooms on the banks of the Guadalquivir. No, Carmen doesn't live there any more. Instead, take it from there to a parachute factory in Jacksonville, Florida, during World War II.

Carmen Mark III, the Carmen of Oscar Hammerstein's musical play to Bizet's music, is a Negress and her story is told against a background of Negro lives and loves. Ten years ago, this all-Negro musical kept the names of its cast in neon lights for two years on the Great White Way. Just lately the CinemaScope, stereophonic boys got hold of it under the direction of Otto Preminger, who was responsible previously for such adult film pieces as *Laura* and *The Moon is Blue*. *Carmen Jones* the film, according to *Time* magazine, is enough to blister the rear walls of many a movie house. "At its best," *Time* says, "the original *Carmen* is a pattern passion: a rose, a flame and a blade, woven into drama as formal as a Spanish dance. In *Carmen Jones* the dance is a ring of savages in firelight, jumping any way

the devil pulls the strings, terrible and beautiful and simple as God's chillun without wings."

In *ZB Sunday Showcase* at 9.35 p.m. on March 27, listeners will hear recordings from the sound-track of the film. These feature the voices of Marilyn Horne as Carmen (she sings for Dorothy Dandridge in the film), LeVern Hutcherson as Corporal Joe (played by Harry Belafonte), Olga James (Cindy Lou, nee Micaela), Pearl Bailey (Frankie-Frasquita), and Marvin Hayes (Husky Miller-Escamillo, played by Joe Adams in the film). Bizet's score, they say, has scarcely been altered except that the stirring old "Torreador's Song," now called "Stand Up and Fight," is heard early in the score. Pearl Bailey takes over the "Chanson Bohème" from Carmen and belts it out as they never heard it in old Bohemia, accompanied by some crackling drumming from Louis Bellson the famous jazz musician who, in real life, doubles as Miss Bailey's husband.

The revised plot goes like this. Carmen Jones folds parachutes in a factory in Jacksonville, Florida, in between mixing it with her work-mates and wrapping up the military guard—except Corporal Joe who loves Cindy Lou, a home-town girl. On her way to the goal-house, Carmen lures Joe beyond the call of duty and they arrange to meet at Billy Pastor's, a flashy café. There Carmen, Frankie and Myrt meet the celebrated prize-fighter Husky Miller with his hangers-on, Rum and Dink. Joe arrives, but already his star is on the wane. Carmen wants to

go off to Chicago where Husky is to fight, but she wants Joe there as well. He deserts for her sake and from there the tragedy works itself out.

Carmen Jones, then, is not for the operatic purist. But the translation from Spanish to Negro terms, it is claimed, tends to make it more life-like than the milk-and-water translations of the opera we hear. It must be remembered, too, that the opera's libretto takes great liberties with Mérimée's grim and powerful story, and these liberties tend to weaken it. *Carmen Jones* is an attempt to translate the spirit, fire and amoral objectivity of the original story into contemporary terms. Whether it succeeds, of course, will no doubt be debated, but the recordings of many of the musical numbers from the film should give listeners a fair idea of how the problem has been tackled.

Oscar Hammerstein has said that he has tried to make his version of the opera entertaining to the vast crowd of theatre-goers who enjoy stage shows, provided you let them know what's going on. In making the film, rather than compromise with the acting in order to get good voices, Preminger and Hammerstein quite openly advertised the fact that in many cases they have dubbed in the singing. The singers were directed along with the actors for the film so that they should know just what it was that they were singing about.

The film naturally eliminates the recitatives, which are not by Bizet anyway. They were written by Ernest Guiraud after Bizet's death so as to make *Carmen* into a "grand" opera. The work was originally played with spoken dialogue as it was intended for theatres of average size, like the Opera Comique in Paris, where it had its first performance. Incidentally, it is still played in this form there.

Just to give you a taste of the *Carmen Jones* variety of lyrics, Carmen sings the lilting "Habanera" to these words:

Love's a baby dat grows up wild
An' he won't do what you want him to,
Love ain't nobody's angel child
An' he won't pay any mind to you.



THE RIVALS for Joe's affections—Carmen Jones and Cindy Lou, the latter part played and sung by Olga James



THE CAPITULATION of Corporal Joe—Harry Belafonte and Dorothy Dandridge