

VOA'S CARMEN...

Visually, a bomb

By MICHAEL QUIGLEY

Aside from the music, there's not much to recommend about the Vancouver Opera Association's ongoing production of Carmen.

The gloomy, claustrophobic, Byzantine sets present anything but an atmosphere evocative of Spain. The direction finds characters moving about the stage in an awkward, simple way reminiscent of beginner's theatre. With an almost guaranteed sold-out house, it's difficult to see why both director and designer didn't try something even a little different, if not completely avant-garde. Opera has come a long way since Carmen's premiere.

VOCALLY O.K.

Vocally speaking, the VOA production left considerably less to be desired on opening night last Thursday. As the femme fatale heroine, Joy Davidson amply filled the mezzo lines with solid, nonexaggerated vocalizing, though her acting, replete with "we know better" glances at the audience, was too underplayed. Canadian tenor Jean Bonhomme is a robust Don Jose if there ever was one, though his singing in the last three acts was beautifully lyrical as well as dramatic. Vocal honors also go to Barbara Shuttleworth as Carmen's foil Micaela, whose aria "Je dis que rien ne m'epouvante" was the highlight of the third act. The only weak link in the cast vocally was baritone David Myrvold as Escamillo. In his famous second-act Toreador Song, he was vocally muffled, both in projection and clarity. The quartet of two smugglers and two gypsies was fine.

In the pit, the Vancouver Symphony held its own under conductor Kazuyoshi Akiyama, making his North American opera debut. In addition to their music-making, the VSO had the

added job on opening night of dodging several oranges and apples, the overflow of an on-stage battle with fruit, which rolled into the orchestra pit. Perhaps the VOA will provide the players with hardhats??

This time, all in tune

By MICHAEL QUIGLEY

Two years ago during a Vancouver performance of Brahms' 2nd Piano Concerto, guest soloist Ivan Moravec walked off stage after the first movement of the piece. At the time, Moravec was in search of a piano tuner, the cause of his apprehension the Queen Elizabeth Theatre's somewhat questionable excuse for a piano.

Since that disastrous afternoon, Moravec helped choose a spanking new Steinway for the VSO, and he returned Sunday to give the instrument a thorough workout.

WRONG STYLE

Moravec, now that we were able to hear him in a well-tempered light, turned out to be a very fine pianist, though not as far as the work on display, Ravel's Piano Concerto in G, was concerned.

Premiered in 1932, this piece is sassy, tongue-in-cheek, flavoured with both Spanish and jazz elements, akin in attitude to Prokofieff's 3rd Piano Concerto and even Rhapsody in Blue.

Its dazzling first movement was played much too delicately, too poetically, as well as too slowly, Moravec's style more appropriate to

some of Ravel's solo impressionistic works. The limpidly poetic second movement was better suited to Moravec's approach, though there were still a few uncalled-for little niceties. Tempo-wise, the finale was satisfactory, though the brash outbursts from the orchestra were subdued, as at the work's opening. Needless to say, the orchestra itself under maestro Akiyama was outstanding.

The concert opened with Three Symphonic Movements by Akiyama's countryman, Akira Miyoshi, which was one of the more interesting large-scale works by Japanese composers which the conductor has introduced since the beginning of his tenure here. Somewhat akin to the music of Alban Berg, the Miyoshi showed considerable skill in orchestration, despite its conservative twentieth-century sounds.

WASTE OF TIME

The concert closed with Rimsky-Korsakoff's Scheherazade. Why the VSO wasted its (and the audience's) time on this hyper-orchestrated monstrosity of a musical fairy-tale is hard to say. About all that can be noted is that the orchestra's playing was superb, including concertmaster Gerald Jarvis' fluid rendition of the solo part.