

Electric Carmen

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Many opera plots contain riddles, but here's an intriguing new one: How did a virtually unknown young singer from Eastern Europe via west suburban Aurora land the coveted title role in "Carmen" at Lyric Opera of Chicago? Viktoria Vizin believes the hand of destiny drew her from her hometown on the border between her native Hungary and the former Yugoslavia to grab the brass ring of an international operatic career. "I believe in the old saying that everything happens for a reason," declares the vivacious mezzo-soprano, who is delighting audiences as the Gypsy femme fatale in Lyric's season-ending performances of the Bizet favorite. "Lots of big steps in my life just happened. "Of course," she adds, "I worked hard to make them happen!" Vizin's Carmen doesn't exude the down-and-dirty sexiness of Denyce Graves, who portrayed Carmen earlier this season at the Lyric. But she fills out Carmen's femininity with enough brains and soul to make her a more complex creation. Her lustrous voice and tall, elegant beauty don't hurt. Having sung Carmen at the Pittsburgh Opera and in smaller German theaters, Vizin (pronounced "VIH-zeen") was ready for her close-up when she sang her first Carmen in a major international theater two weeks ago at the Civic Opera House. "I was totally focused and not at all nervous," the 32-year-old singer said the other week in her dressing room backstage. "I really love playing this character. Coming from Eastern Europe, I was with Gypsies every day. They have a free soul and live life as it comes. They have rhythm in their blood."

The singer settled in the Midwest in 2001 to be close to her husband, Ricardo Esquivel, a Mexican-American installation engineer whom she had met during her first visit to the U.S. Three years later, the couple bought a home in Aurora for themselves and their family, which includes a daughter who's now 4 1/2, and a son who's about to celebrate his first birthday. In so doing, Vizin became the latest opera star to take up residence in the Chicago area, joining such singing notables as Jennifer Larmore, Susanne Mentzer and Samuel Ramey. At first, Vizin admits, she resented her husband's "taking me away from my roots" to live in the cold and snowy Midwest, worrying that she would be miserable based some 4,900 miles from her parents in Szeged, southern Hungary. "I finally told him, 'I will do this for love!'" she says. Since then, however, the singer has settled comfortably into the life of a transcontinental commuter. When she is performing in Europe, she brings her children along and leaves them in the care of her parents in Szeged. When she is fulfilling engagements in America, she travels with her husband and daughter, whom Vizin claims can sing practically the entire score to "Carmen," thanks to having attended all of Mommy's performances.

The transatlantic life is, of course, not without its drawbacks. "When I'm in Hungary, I miss America," the mezzo says. "When I'm here, I miss my family back home."

Vizin insists she doesn't mind that most folks in the Aurora area seem unaware they have an international opera singer in their midst. "Only my neighbors notice, when they hear me practicing," she says, laughing. Her skills as a singing actress underscore the fact that for years while she was working on her university degrees she couldn't decide whether her destiny lay in the opera house or the legitimate theater -- so she plunged headlong into vocal and drama studies.

Young Viktoria would hop a train every day at dawn from her hometown to a college in a neighboring town where she studied singing. She would finish her music classes in the morning, hop the train back home and grab lunch before boarding a bus to Budapest for afternoon classes at the city's main drama school.

This went on for two years before one of her teachers told her she should focus on opera because it afforded her the best of both worlds.

Winning an international voice competition in Romania in 1996 gave Vizin an added push in the right direction. (Her friends had warned her she would be eliminated after the first round because she's Hungarian.) The decisive moment came when one of her professors told her, "I looked over your thesis and I saw you singing onstage. You're a smart woman but, more than that, you are a born singer."

A soprano earlier in her career, Vizin switched to singing mezzo parts after making her professional debut as Meg Page in Verdi's "Falstaff" in Verona, Italy. Singing everything from Mozart to Wagner in various German and Swiss opera houses led to her auditioning for Matthew Epstein, the Lyric's former artistic director in 2001.

Vizin had given birth to her first child only three weeks before agreeing to sing the audition.

"My agent told me I was out of my mind," she recalls. "I said I didn't care, because it was something I had to do."

Even though her voice, postpartum, was curtailed at both the high and low ends of its range, she sang well enough to impress Epstein and the rest of the Lyric administration. "We liked her and thought she was good," says William Mason, Lyric Opera's general director. "Anytime you hire a relative unknown to follow Denyce Graves in a role like Carmen, you're taking a chance. But we felt it was a pretty good risk. Someone who can sing the part that beautifully and look that good should do very well for herself."

Audiences have two more chances this week to catch Vizin as Carmen before Lyric brings down the curtain on its 2005-06 season. The remaining performances are 2 p.m. Wednesday and 7:30 p.m. Saturday; phone 312-332-2244.

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