

Carmen Unbound

Empire Cinema Bowral
2 August 2026

For around twenty dollars you can sit in a regional Australian cinema — bird's-eye view, subtitles included — and watch one of the world's great opera houses deliver a brand-new production of *Carmen*. I saw it on Sunday at the Empire in Bowral. No plane ticket. No hotel. No three-hundred-dollar seat in the gods. Just a darkened room in an ordinary town and the full weight of the Teatro alla Scala orchestra and chorus, recorded live in Milan on 8 June 2026.

The miracle is the orchestra. Even through the cinema speakers the sound has a physical presence that no film score can match — the strings, the brass, the flute, the way the chorus sits inside the pit rather than floating above it. The performance is riveting in a way that cinema rarely manages. It is, in its quiet way, revolutionary. The Australian cinema circuit has made these high-definition transmissions one of the few remaining ways that large-scale European theatre reaches beyond the capital cities without requiring either wealth or pilgrimage. For the price of a modest meal you can watch a great drama, let a great orchestra hold the tension, then drive home on ordinary roads. Treating these screenings as a minor alternative rather than a major cultural opening is a mistake.

This is the new Teatro alla Scala production conducted by Myung-Whun Chung and staged by Damiano Michieletto — a co-production with Covent Garden and the Teatro Real, Madrid. (Full credits at the end.)

Sitting there as an ordinary cinema-goer, something unexpected happened. The performance did not simply deliver a familiar story. It made me begin to imagine a different production — a new direction for this evergreen opera.

Kasia Urbaniak's *Unbound* is not a work of cultural theory. It is a practical manual written by a woman who spent years as a professional dominatrix while training as a Taoist nun. Its central insight is blunt: most women have been trained to freeze at the precise moment they most need to speak, ask, claim, or refuse. Desire is treated as dangerous, asking as greedy, power as something that belongs to other people. Urbaniak's method is to reverse that freeze — to teach women to stand inside their own desire without apology and to use attention itself as a form of influence. The "good girl" contract, she argues, is a training in disappearance. Unbinding is the refusal to disappear.

Read through this lens, Bizet's *Carmen* becomes almost too clear. *Carmen* does not freeze. She does not manage her desire or justify it to the men who wish to contain it. She names what she wants and walks toward it. When the room tightens around her she does not perform the expected softening. She remains unbound. And the opera kills her for it.

Don José is one of the great tragic figures of the lyric stage. A provincial soldier of ordinary virtue, he is undone by a single irreversible act of desire. He deserts, he murders, he ends broken over the body of the woman he could not possess. For more

than a century we have been invited to see him as the victim of Carmen's fatal allure. But have we been looking at her through a male ownership lens the whole time? José's tragedy is real. So is the fact that the opera is structured around his inability to tolerate a woman who will not belong to him. When we centre his pain, Carmen risks becoming the instrument of a man's downfall rather than a figure who simply refuses to shrink.

Alain de Botton's view is that Romanticism is a poor guide to relationships. The Romantic inheritance teaches us that love should be intense, exclusive, and all-consuming; that the right person will complete us; that passion is proof of truth; and that any cooling or limit is a kind of betrayal. In practice this ideal often produces possessiveness, disappointment, and the demand that the other person exist primarily as the solution to our own longing. José is a near-perfect illustration. He does not merely desire Carmen; he requires her to be the proof that his desire is destiny. When she refuses that role, the Romantic script leaves him only collapse or violence. Carmen's crime, in this light, is not cruelty. It is her refusal to participate in the fantasy that another person can be owned or completed by love.

Damiano Michieletto is one of the most consistent and provocative directors working in European opera today. His productions are rarely decorative. They tend toward psychological pressure, updated social textures, and a willingness to make the audience uncomfortable. He has a gift for clarifying power relations on stage, and in this *Carmen* the physical and emotional imbalance between the two central figures is never soft-pedalled. Yet even in a staging as alert as his, the gravitational pull of the tenor's collapse remains strong. Italian opera has long treated the male tragic arc — the tenor's disintegration, the baritone's jealousy — as the emotional engine of the drama. Carmen, for all her musical dominance, can still be framed as the catalyst rather than the subject. Michieletto does not invent that tradition; he works inside it, and the tradition is hard to escape.

This difficulty is not confined to one director or one national style. Contemporary feminist opera has spent two decades trying to rebalance the canon. Directors have relocated *Carmen* to modern factories, refugee camps, and late-capitalist nightclubs. They have given her solidarity with the other women, made the soldiers' violence more explicit, and sometimes allowed her a final moment of agency or defiance. These interventions matter. They have made the ownership structure of the story visible in ways earlier generations preferred not to see. Yet many of them still end by absorbing Carmen's refusal into a larger narrative of male damage or systemic victimhood. The unbound woman is acknowledged, then folded back into the tragedy of the man who cannot possess her. The score is more radical than most of these readings allow. It does not apologise for her. It simply lets her stand.

What if the structural heart of the evening were her refusal rather than his disintegration?

Imagine a production that treated the Habanera not as a seduction aimed at José but as a public declaration delivered while she moves freely among the chorus, never once addressing him until she chooses to. The Card Aria would carry a different weight. The cards are not merely a prediction of personal death. When the death card appears it can be read as the death of the woman who is owned — the version of femininity that freezes, softens, and belongs — and the emergence of the modern

woman who will not. Carmen does not flinch at the card. She acknowledges it, sets it down, and continues. The fatalism is still there, but it is no longer only about her body. It is about the end of a contract.

In the final scene the difference would be decisive. The space empties. The chorus, present throughout as witnesses rather than commentators, withdraw to the edges or simply stop moving. José is left alone with her in a wide, unforgiving light that refuses to romanticise either figure. Carmen does not run and she does not plead. She stands her ground and meets his gaze without softening, without performing fear, without offering the expected last negotiation. The violence, when it comes, is entirely his. Her unbroken attention and refusal to shrink remain the last facts on stage. José's isolation is total. When the act is done he is the one who looks trapped — not by her allure, but by the limits of a claim that was never going to be answered.

The chorus does not surge forward in horror. They watch, as people do when a truth they have always known is finally enacted. The music ends. The lights do not soften. The score already supports this. A director who kept faith with that lack of apology — who let the evening turn on her unbroken claim rather than on José's inability to possess it — would still be staging *Carmen*. It might even be a truer one.

The La Scala production puts the refusal on stage with full musical force. The Australian cinema circuit makes it possible for ordinary people in ordinary towns to witness it for twenty dollars. That combination is rarer than it should be. It is worth noticing. It is worth the drive. And it is enough to make a humble cinema-goer begin to imagine what else the opera might still become.

Production Teatro alla Scala new production, co-produced with the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and Teatro Real, Madrid. Recorded live at Teatro alla Scala, Milan, 8 June 2026.

Conductor Myung-Whun Chung Staging Damiano Michieletto Sets Paolo Fantin
Costumes Carla Teti Lighting Alessandro Carletti Dramaturgy Elisa Zaninotto
Orchestra & Chorus Teatro alla Scala Treble Voices Chorus Teatro alla Scala
Academy (Brunella Clerici) Chorus Master Alberto Malazzi

Cast Carmen Clémentine Margaine / Stéphanie d'Oustrac Don José Vittorio
Grigolo / Matthew Polenzani Escamillo Giorgi Manoshvili / Andrii Kymach Micaëla
Natalia Tanasii / Slávka Zámečnicková Le Dancaïre Pierre Doyen Le Remendado
Loïc Félix Moralès Simone Del Savio Zuniga Xhieldo Hyseni Frasquita Sarah
Dufresne Mercédès Marine Chagnon

Australian premiere cinema screenings: 1, 2 & 5 August 2026

Kasia Urbaniak, *Unbound: A Woman's Guide to Power* (2021) · Prosper Mérimée, *Carmen* (1845) · Alain de Botton, *The Course of Love* (2016) and related writings on Romanticism