



Robert Carsen's shattering *Dialogues des carmélites* returns to Amsterdam for a last time

There is always something unnerving about revisiting an experience from a distant past that made an unforgettable impression. Will the second time live up to one's expectations? Hasn't one's memory blown the past experience out of proportions? Won't the lack of surprise make it underwhelming? I have vivid memories of my first experience with *Dialogues des Carmélites*. That was in 1997, when this same production by [Robert Carsen](#) for Dutch National Opera was first staged. I remember exactly whom I was with, where I sat. I remember how I was mesmerized from the start and, most vividly, the lump in the throat I felt during the shattering finale. Almost 20 years on, on Saturday night, that lump was back.



Jean-François Lapointe (Le Marquis de la Force) and Stanislas de Barbeyrac (Le Chevalier)

© Hans van den Bogaard

I never thought I could relate in any way with the story of a community of Carmelite nuns and their fate during the French Revolution. The libretto, based on a screenplay for a film script written by Georges Bernardos, is inspired by the true story of the Carmelites of Compiègne who were condemned to be guillotined in 1794, at the height of Robespierre's Reign of Terror. But behind the romanticized narrative, Poulenc's opera is really about the anguish of life and the fear of death. The music is never overly dramatic, yet its impact is immediate and at times, it is extremely realistic. Musical lines always fit Bernardos' text closely. The score alternates flowing, lushly harmonious

melodies with contrasting jarring passages that mirror the anguish of the central character, Blanche de la Force. On Friday, conductor Stéphane Denève proved expert in drawing Poulenc's musical lines from an inspired Residentie Orkest.



Doris Soffel (Madame de Croissy) and Sally Matthews (Blanche)

© Hans van den Bogaard

The way Robert Carsen's staging closely follows the music is something fascinating to watch. The staging hardly makes use of sets or props: it relies almost entirely on lighting (Jean Kalman) and on the movement of the cast of singers and a large crowd of extras. During the first bars of the music, a crowd of French revolutionaries sternly stares at the audience, quickly separating to become the walls of a claustrophobic room, in the centre of which the Marquis de La Force sits. Time after time, the crowd crosses the podium in waves precisely choreographed (by Philippe Giraudeau) to the music, and sets the stage for the next scene. The final scene, the famous *Salve regina*, when the sixteen nuns walk to the scaffold in the most realistic *diminuendo* of opera history is a shattering theatrical experience.

Although there is an extensive use of *parlando*, *Dialogues* is very much a singers' opera and the music always places voices at the forefront. On Saturday night, the singing ranged from good to excellent. The relatively small male roles were luxuriously cast with baritone Jean-François Lapointe (Marquis de la Force) and tenor Stanislas de Barbeyrac (Chevalier de la Force). The attractive timbre of the latter did wonders in the lyrical duet between Blanche and her brother. I liked the sensuous quality of Sally Matthews' ripe soprano as the heroine, Blanche de la Force. Her vibrato unfortunately clouded her respectable attempts in French diction, which paled in comparison with other (often native) members of the cast. Nevertheless, her portrayal of the young noble who seeks purpose and refuge from fear in a religious life was often stunning.



Sally Matthews (Blanche de la Force)

© Hans van den Bogaard

Adrienne Pieczonka gave a moving performance as Madame Lidoine, the new prioress who leads her flock to martyrdom. I found Michelle Breedt's Mère Marie disappointingly one-dimensional. Surely, if Soeur Constance so fervently wishes Mère Marie to be elected as the new prioress, there should be more warmth to the character than the stern woman portrayed here? As the cheerful young novice Soeur Constance, [Sabine Devieille](#) displayed a radiant light soprano that soared like a beam of light, each word exquisitely chiselled. The dying Madame de Croissy is a role which is often more acted and croaked than anything else. Mezzo-soprano Doris Soffel actually sang the old prioress' agony in a truly gut-wrenching scene and, when she finally gave up the ghost, the audience's silence was palpable.

