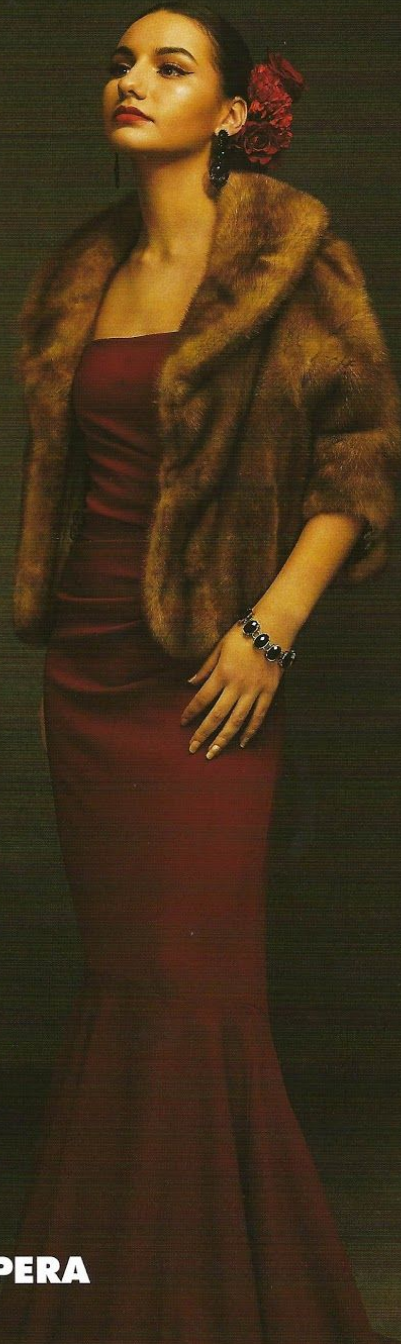


# OPERABILL

THE BROWN-FORMAN 2019/20 SEASON



10 BIZET AND HIS CARMEN

Shaking Things Up!

14 ARTIST PROFILES

20 UNPACKING ART

 KENTUCKY OPERA





## “Gypsy”, “Gitano”, or “Romany”?

Carmen's literary origins reveal the allure of the mysterious. Bizet's beloved opera is based on a novella of the same name by Prosper Mérimée. The novella was based on a real Spanish woman, but Mérimée exoticized the story by crafting his heroine to be gypsy. We question what he, as a Frenchman and outsider, actually knew of Romany culture. In an effort to better understand this culture ourselves, we turn to our partners as they share their experiences.

As a Romany woman, I hear and see a lot about myself and my culture that is negative: Grifter, criminal, fortune teller, carny, thief. I'm a Halloween costume, a character at a Renaissance Faire, a marketing buzzword, a Fleetwood Mac song. I'm a femme fatale. A free spirit. Deviant. I'm tragic and sexy. I'm Esemerealda.

I'm Carmen.

There's no shortage of stereotypes, mythologies. Stories about me by people who've never met me, because, I'm a "Gypsy." I put the word in quotes because, aside from a few reclaiming the word (with a capital G), it's a slur. It doesn't mean "Boho," "iconoclast," or "nomad." It's derogatory, an exonym.

We're not. We're Rom (or Roma, Romani, or, like I use, Romany). We're probably Indo-Aryan in origin, leaving the Indian subcontinent centuries ago for reasons long lost. We've been in diaspora ever since. There are more than 20 million Romany today, across the world, including Spain, inspiring the character of Carmen. We're also in the US, in your community, living and working alongside you.

For all the drama attributed to the Rom, most hide in plain sight. Centuries of distance forged diverse Romani cultures, but experience has made us pragmatic and private.

We're wary. We've been enslaved; decimated in the Holocaust; deported from our homes (even now, in 2019 Italy). We've been ghettoized and sterilized, targeted by police, systematically denied access to education, healthcare, and employment.

And though Romany deeply value arts, depictions of us as Orlando's ignorant, savage; as Dracula's pitiless henchmen; or as Carmen, the insatiable temptress that gets her's in the end—re-enforce us as other.

Instead, give us your hand; but not to read your palm.

*Nais tuke* \* for reading this. We've heard your stories for a very long time. Will you hear ours'?

*\* Romany for "thank you."*

*Caren Gussoff Sumption is a didicai Kalderash Romany and Jewish writer living in the Pacific Northwest.*



When presented with the literary and operatic versions of Carmen, it is no surprise to me that Mérimée and Bizet were captivated by the city of Sevilla and its inhabitants. A serious dedication to flamenco took me there the first time over 14 years ago. The city and the people I've met through flamenco have kept me going back annually ever since! Many of these friends and mentors are proud Gitanos with deep family roots in the neighborhood of Triana\*—just as Carmen is depicted.

Today, Trianeros live scattered throughout the metro Seville area due to the forced evictions of the 1950s/60s, and the gentrification of the neighborhood in the 1970s. For those not derailed by the multitude of modern urban threats that can take root when intact, interdependent communities are unraveled, the cultural memory of the Trianero way of life is still strong. The memories of living in (and being forced out of) *patios de vecinos* where a central courtyard provided a common living space for multiple poor but tight-knit families are still very personal and painful for the elders of these families. Though no longer living in the locale, family food traditions and religious rituals keep the spirit of collectivism across wide familial lines alive. Celebration of and mourning for the old neighborhood are woven into the *letras*—snippets of poetry sung as verses—in flamenco music. And it is proudly, explicitly recounted by the proponents of the form who are actively performing, teaching and still living *la vida flamenca* today. It has been my honor to be mentored by some of these Trianeros (most notably, Carmen Ledesma) who have shared their very personal perspectives on what it means to be Gitanos y Trianeros y Flamencos in 21<sup>st</sup> century Spain. And in turn, an honor to share with Kentucky Opera audiences for this production of *Carmen*.

*Diana Dinicola, co-director, Flamenco Louisville*  
*\*The Gitanos of Spain are a distinct subgroup of the Roma diaspora in Europe and the Trianeros a further subgrouping.*