

8TH ANNUAL

# Roger Ebert's Overlooked Film Festival

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## U-CARMEN E-KHAYELITSHA



*Roger Ebert wrote from the 2005 Cannes Film Festival:*

A major success: The South African film *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, which won the top award at Berlin in February, is playing here out of competition, and is wonderful. Its a vivid version, bursting with life, of the Bizet opera, translated into the Xhosa language and sung by the magnificent Pauline Malefane and directed by Mark Dornford-May. Does the transition to a township near Cape Town work? The opera seems almost to have been written for its new location. Miss Malefane and the other cast members are not only gifted singers but are better actors than many opera singers; no wonder the film was embraced at Berlin.

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*Robert Keser wrote from the 2005 Chicago Film Festival:*

Bizet would surely approve of *Carmen* in *eKhayelitsha* (*U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*), director Mark Dornford-Mays translation of the operatic warhorse of amour fou into the Xhosa click language, where the grandeur and beauty of the soaring music seems to complement the setting of tin-roofed Capetown slums. Winner of the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, this version seethes with life and color, adding speedboats and limousines, cell phones and condoms, facial tattoos and ululations, not to mention barbed wire and police brutality. Even as Seville becomes a construction project, Don Jose carries a cop's walkie-talkie, and Escamillo turns into a famous opera star returning from New York fame (his Toreador aria plays out on a black-and-white TV set). Here, instead of *Carmen* turning up the ace of spades, her shaman throws bones and sees death in them.



Some rough voices, with less than refined timbre, may displease purists but these simply add to the gritty texture, as do occasional interpolations of African drums and acapella singing as well as some notably rude lyrics (piss off!). No one, however, can downplay Pauline Malefane's smoldering Carmen, a full-figured icon in a blue sweatsuit who commands the screen with iron confidence, whether impudently balancing a cup on her head as she sings the Habanera or, in one powerful sequence, wordlessly contemplating her face in a mirror held by a witch doctor as her aria accepting imminent mortality plays inside her head.



In a freshly invented flashback, Dornford-May lays out a backstory that makes Don Jose his brother's killer and Micaela his widowed sister-in-law, thus adding real weight to his mother's message of forgiveness and helping to solve the problem of the protagonist as mama's boy. If the film skimps on developing the love relationships, and appropriates certain filmmaking clichés (flashbacks in tinted high-contrast, circling 360-degrees around the lovers), adroit telephoto camerawork and editing precision do their job to rouse the senses. The Flower Song, conceived as an intimate exchange in a corner of a nightclub, with background chatter counterpointing the composers ravishing melody here, becomes thrillingly intense. What the narrator says to first introduce Carmen applies equally to the film: for every fault she had a quality that came out from the contrast.

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