

Carmen Suite, a Ballet

Carmen suite "habanera" - Maya Plisetskaya ballet

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-1vCLEwPnk>

Carmen Suite is a one-act ballet created in 1967 by renowned Cuban choreographer Alberto Alonso to music by the Russian composer **Rodion Shchedrin**, commissioned by his wife, the prima ballerina assoluta **Maya Plisetskaya**. The distinction of prima ballerina assoluta is a title awarded to the most notable of female ballet dancers. To be recognized as a prima **ballerina assoluta** is a rare honor, traditionally reserved only for the most exceptional dancers of their generation.

The Carmen Suite is a percussive, jazzy revision of Bizet's opera Carmen. At the time of its creation, under Soviet rule, it barely got to the stage against heavy official opposition to its eroticism, but then it made such a positive impact that since then it remains in today's Bolshoi Theatre repertoire as a sought-after ballerina vehicle.

The music, taken from the opera *Carmen* by Georges Bizet and rearranged for strings and percussion, is not a 19th-century pastiche (a word which essentially means an artistic work in a style that imitates another work), but rather "a creative meeting of the minds," as Shchedrin put it, with Bizet's melodies reclothed in a variety of fresh instrumental colors (including the frequent use of percussion), set to new rhythms and often phrased with a great deal of sly wit. Initially banned by the censorship of the Soviet hierarchy as "disrespectful" to the opera for precisely these qualities, the ballet has since become Shchedrin's best-known work and has remained popular in the West for its iconoclastic (meaning an attack on long held and cherished beliefs) but rather a highly entertaining retelling of Bizet's opera.

A much publicized scandal arose when Canada invited the Bolshoi to perform it at Expo 67. The Ministry of Culture in Moscow refused to allow it to be shown there. The prima ballerina Maya Plisetskaya, for whom the ballet was created, a very courageous lady, refused to go to Expo 67 without this ballet, so the Canadians did not get to see it. The funny thing is, the sets for the ballet did get to go to Canada. What was all the fuss about? It was considered too sexually explicit. When you see the ballet you will wonder how anyone could have come to that conclusion, but the dreadful Ekaterina Furtseva, the Soviet Minister of Culture accused Maya of turning, "a heroine of the Spanish people into a whore." We always thought of Bizet's Carmen as a woman of loose morals to begin with, seducing several men and fighting amongst her co-workers. So how could a ballerina further degrade her reputation, no matter how sensual the dancing is? Bizet is the one who made

Carmen a "loose woman". The dancing in this ballet **IS** indeed sensual. Maya's movements **ARE** sensual, but not so much so that your impressionable kids can't watch it. The music is basically Bizet's, rearranged by Maya's husband Rodion Shchedrin, specifically for **HER** ballet. Only strings and five percussionists, but WOW, what music. It works perfectly for this ballet. Maya had to work hard for this ballet, and after the uproar, she paid for it with bad health for a while, but she won! Maya has danced the ballet about **350 times** in its present form, 132 times on the stage from which it was banned, the Bolshoi.

Synopsis

Place: Seville, Spain, and surrounding hills

Time: Around 1820

The scenario centers on Carmen, Don José and the bullfighter Escamillo. Carmen is a passionate, free-spirited woman in contrast to the temperamental and fickle Don José. Fate, another ballerina dressed in black and a representation of Carmen's alter ego, a second self if you will, tells Carmen's fortune with a deck of cards. A fight with tobacco dealers leads to Carmen's arrest by Captain Zuniga. In jail, she seduces Don José and convinces him to release her from jail. Carmen is subsequently caught in a love triangle between Don José and the popular bullfighter Escamillo.

A mock bullring which symbolizes life, uniting the bullfight and Carmen's destiny in a sinister personage. Spectators and a judge represent society's disapproval for the unconventional behavior of Carmen and her lovers. Fate reappears in the final act playing the role of a bull and the three main characters meet in the arena. Carmen dances alternatively with Fate, Escamillo and Don José until she is stabbed. She dies caressing Don José's face, revealing him as the assassin.

This Russian recording is from 1978, the choreographer is Alberto Alonso, and in the cast as Carmen, a gipsy woman, is the world famous Maya Plisetskaya, Don José, a corporal of Dragoons, is the renowned ballet dancer Alexander Godunov, in secondary roles are Escamillo, the bullfighter and Fate. The Orchestra of the Bolshoi Theatre is under the baton of Ghennady Rozhdestvensky.

Maya Plisetskaya, the shining star of this ballet, was a Soviet-born ballet dancer, choreographer, ballet director, and actress. She danced during the Soviet era at the same time as Galina Ulanova, another famed Russian ballerina. In 1960 she ascended to Ulanova's former title as prima ballerina assoluta of the Bolshoi, the internationally renowned classical ballet company in Moscow.

Born in 1925, Maya Mikhailovna Plisetskaya was the daughter of a Russian film actress, Rakhil Messerer, and a mining engineer, Mikhail Plisetsky, both Jewish.

Her early life was struck by tragedy as her family suffered under the Stalinist Soviet regime – her father was executed for associating with someone who used to work with Trotsky, while her pregnant mother and baby brother were sent to a labor camp. She was then 12 years old and was taken in by an aunt, her mother's sister. She studied ballet from age nine and first performed at the Bolshoi Theatre at the age of 11. As she developed her skills, she moved from *corps de ballet* to soloist and finally to Prima Ballerina Assoluta and she was a dancer not quite like any other, particularly with her striking red hair and her long arms.

But her early years life under Stalin, were also marked by political repression, partly also because her family was Jewish. She was not allowed to tour outside the country for sixteen years after joining the Bolshoi. During those years, her fame as a national ballerina was used to project the Soviet Union's achievements during the Cold War. She was considered a maverick by the Soviet Union, a severe defection risk, and was constantly monitored by the KGB, who even put a listening device in her bed. To global incredulity, she was refused permission by the Soviet state to appear at Covent Garden, in London, on the Bolshoi Ballet's Western debut tour in 1956. Her restrictions were highlighted by the artistic opportunities found in the West by defectors of her time – the famous dancers Rudolf Nureyev, Natalia Makarova and Mikhail Baryshnikov. Later she was questioned why she did not defect too. She replied that she feared for her family's lives, and besides did not choose to give the Soviet authorities the satisfaction of retreat.

However, Khrushchev soon realized that the charismatic dancer would be better used in Soviet service and finally, in 1959, lifted her travel ban. On her Western debut, in New York in 1959, she caused a sensation, audiences "moaned with delight," a leading critic reported. American film stars queued up to meet her at glamorous official parties. Robert F Kennedy developed a fondness for her, and John Steinbeck lunched her, saying the backstage of the Soviet ballet world would make a fine setting for a novel. Ingrid Bergman even offered to help her defect.

During her long career she performed Swan Lake more than 800 times, being constantly ordered to do it for visiting heads of state, and told a friend about the debilitating effect on her: "It's the most wonderful ballet music ever written. Maybe the best ballet ever created. And I want to pull my hair out and stuff it down the political bosses' throat – that's what they've done to me." Despite her constant battles with both political and artistic authorities, Maya Plisetskaya had astonishing longevity as a performer, dancing Swan Lake and Carmen into her sixties. She herself described her approach as a fusion of formal correctness of style with "the art of music. You have to hear it, and **you must sing it with your body.**" This is so touching...

Her skill as a dancer changed the world of ballet, setting a higher standard for ballerinas both in terms of technical brilliance and dramatic presence. Her success worldwide brought her fame and fortune after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when she and her husband finally left Russia to live in Spain and Germany. In 1991 she published her autobiography "I, Maya Plisetskaya" (translated into English in 1994), writing with ruthless candor of her political battles.

She still worked in the ballet world in 2012, at age 87. But then on May 2, 2015, in Munich (aged 89) she was stricken by a massive heart attack and subsequently died, survived by her husband, and a brother. According to her last will and testament, she was to be cremated, and after the death of her widower, Rodion Shchedrin, who also was to be cremated, their ashes are to be combined and spread over Russia.

Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his condolences, and Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said that "a whole era of ballet was gone" with Plisetskaya.



Maya Plisetskaya in 1998 at age 73



Maya Plisetskaya in 2011 at age 86



Plisetskaya with her husband, Rodion Shchedrin, in 2009



Plisetskaya receives a high award from President of Russia Vladimir Putin on 20 November 2000.