

## **Historical Context of *Carmen in the 1920s: The Era***

At the start of the 1920s, the world was emerging from the dark times of World War I. It is important to understand how different post-war life was in the US compared to Europe. Europe was dramatically affected by the aftermath of the war. The people faced widespread death and destruction, and life was unstable as countries began to rebuild and reorganize. Germany had post-war financial responsibilities to repair some of the damage to civilians, but quickly ran out of money. German currency became worthless, affecting trade and the European economy. Workers feared for their jobs as industries that were essential to wartime success, such as the steel industry, began to cut back production because they simply were not needed anymore. This led to strikes all over Europe as workers adjusted to a changing product demand. In addition, war veterans were being reintroduced to the work force at home, causing many women who had joined the workforce when the men were away to be unemployed.

Europeans also faced the growing communism regime in the Soviet Union. Communism, a system of government in which all people are equal economically, politically, and socially, was seen as a threat to traditional ways of life for many Europeans. The Soviet Union also had power in international politics, and governing bodies feared the influence communism could have on the state of affairs in Europe. This simply added to the stress of a suffering economy and the general despair of Europeans after WWI.

Life in the US, on the other hand, was looking up after the war. The US did not experience the war's destruction as directly as Europe, and people were just happy that peace was restored. Social and cultural changes were widespread as young generations rebelled against tradition and went after new freedoms and values. The US made a shift towards consumerism culture, with new technology, growing cities, and changes in leisure activities fueled by mass entertainment. The Roaring Twenties also were a time of new fashion, art, music, and dance. With change aplenty and generally happy people, life in 1920s USA was definitely grand.

### **Labor and a Changing Job Market**

During wartime, Americans did not spend a lot of money and products not essential for war were simply not widely available. When the war was over, Americans were ready to spend their money on things like cars and houses. With this increased spending came inflation and an increase in the cost of living.

During the war, laborers organized into unions and had success in gaining fair wages and shorter hours. However, with postwar inflation on the rise, strikes occurred across the country as workers fought for changes in wages and hours that reflected the increase in the cost to live. In 1919, 4 million workers participated in strikes, one of the largest strikes occurring in the steel industry involving 365,000 workers. While the 1920s did bring increased business, it also created tension amongst workers all over the country as they tried to establish wages and hours that allowed them to survive.

The job market began to change as well. Jobs shifted from farm positions to service and technical employment opportunities. Factory jobs were numerous when it came to making things such as automobiles and textiles, and did not require skilled craftsmen to operate the technology involved in creating these products. Machines made jobs repetitive and often dangerous for workers. Factory workers were overwhelmingly white, and women and children also worked with no laws to protect them or offer equal pay.



Female factory workers

## Women

The role of women began to change during the Roaring Twenties. The traditional idea of women being homemakers was challenged with changes in the job market and technological advances. It became more accepted for women to earn their own wages, and they took jobs in offices, retail stores, and textile mills after the war's conclusion. With women having money to spend, companies began to target women with marketing that pushed them to become part of the growing consumer culture, advertising items such as cosmetics and cigarettes.

Additionally, technological advances that produced things like electricity and washing machines changed the home life of families in the United States. These inventions made tasks at home (that were traditionally taken care of by women) much easier and less time-consuming. This shift from women's traditional roles in the home to a more independent "modern" woman is evident throughout the 1920s. Perhaps the most iconic and extreme example of this new image for women is the flapper; with short hair and skirts and a cigarette in hand, flappers were less proper and participated in activities not traditionally considered lady-like.

Another important piece of the changing role of women is the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which was passed in 1920. This legislation gave women the right to vote, which was meant to be a powerful force in reducing discrimination towards females and improving society as a whole. While it certainly gave women a chance to participate in politics, women were still not very active in the political parties and their reforms were minor, mostly focused on rights for poor women and children. This Amendment also created further racial division amongst American women.



Women protesting for the right to vote

## Prohibition

In early 1920s, the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment officially made it illegal to sell, make, or transport alcohol in the United States. In the times prior to this amendment, heavy drinking was a habit of many American men and was encouraged by the cultural influences of immigrants from Europe. Supporters of the prohibition of alcohol often linked their opinion to religious reasons, and there were several religious groups involved in the temperance movement that called for legislation to place restrictions on alcohol.

Women also got involved in the temperance movement, often aligning their work with other causes, like the right to vote. They fueled their argument by speaking out about alcohol and its negative effects on home life, referencing financial struggle and domestic violence issues as side effects to typical American drinking habits. These women joined others who supported prohibition in the quest for new legislation after the end of WWI where there was already a restriction on alcohol put in place. These groups hoped to continue and expand upon these temporary policies.

Accompanying the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment was the National Prohibition Act, or the Volstead Act. This gave the federal government the power to enforce the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment. However, this proved

to be tricky, due to the explosive growth of speakeasies, bootleggers, and mob activity. Bootleggers, or sellers of illegal alcohol, supplied the speakeasies. They smuggled alcohol from overseas or used generic materials easily purchased at a store combined with rations of alcohol meant for medical prescriptions to make their own. In New York City, with 32,000 estimated speakeasies, bootleggers were able to make a living while supporting these undercover bars, fueling a growing party culture.

Speakeasies ranged from nice clubs to dingy basements, but they were no longer segregated and provided a lively atmosphere for men and women alike to dance, drink, and have a good time. Live music was a huge part of the party atmosphere. The owners of these establishments took great care to hide their alcohol supply and to bribe police to turn a blind eye to the activities of the speakeasies.

Rather than limit alcohol, prohibition made alcohol even more widespread. Mobs and gangs, which were generally committing general street crimes before this period, benefited greatly from prohibition. Organized crime became so common, almost running like a business. Mob leaders would hire extensive numbers of people to help them fuel the American desire for alcohol while making sure authorities remained in the dark about their work, often through bribing officials. Competition between mobs was fierce, and they were able to generate a huge profit through their crimes.

Federal officials hired to enforce this new legislation were not effective. With few funds and agents to do the job, these officials were underpaid and therefore ended up taking money from bootleggers and mobs rather than reporting or shutting down illegal bars. There were simply not enough resources to carry out the task of enforcing this law, and the party culture of the speakeasies and organized crime was alive and well in America.



Inside The Cotton Club, a popular speakeasy in NYC.



Mugshots of mobsters

## Mass Entertainment

After the war, Americans had more free time and more money to spend. With the shift in industry that took place after war time necessities were no longer needed, a faster, more advanced lifestyle took over. Communication was widespread with newspapers, magazines, and the radio, which was a powerful way for people to be updated on news and sports and listen to music without having to be able to read. Cinema, which evolved from silent films to the “talkies” later in the 1920s, was a popular escape for the American people. Cars became common amongst families, and roads and highways were developed to take advantage of this new and easy transport. And with all of these ways to communicate, businesses began to spend more on advertising, fueling a new consumerism culture in America.

With more time for recreation, organized sports such as tennis, boxing and baseball became very popular. In 1923, Yankee Stadium was built in New York City. Babe Ruth, an American hero, called this stadium home during his career as a pro baseball player. Nicknamed “The Bambino”, Ruth was arguably one of the best baseball players of all time, holding a record of 60 home runs in one season until 1961. With incredible power to his game, he revolutionized the way baseball was played. People were anxious to watch him play or listen to the game on the radio. His fame spread to American households all over the country through the new technological developments in communication.



Babe Ruth

## Music

Jazz was the signature musical style of the 1920s. In line with the radical shifts away from tradition, jazz was different. Its African-American roots blossomed out of New Orleans and eventually spread all over the country, as musicians began to move north and play in the

speakeasies. Jazz is characterized by improvisation, often showing off the skills of the musician; it is syncopated with a swing rhythm, giving it a relaxed feel. This made it perfect for dancing!

In *Carmen in the 1920s*, you can hear influences of various types of jazz sounds in the score. Ragtime is peppy and syncopated, and is the basis of stride piano, which Richard Erikson used in the composition of the score for this ballet. In ragtime, a musician needs to use the left hand to hold the rhythm. Stride piano takes this ragtime concept and makes it more complex, requiring the left hand to make great “strides” on the bottom left of the piano, hence the name. Rumba, which is popular in Cuba and incorporates a drumming beat, is also an inspiration for the score.



Duke Ellington, pictured here with his band in 1945

## Dance

New social dancing accompanied the developments in music, capitalizing on the departure from tradition. The “swing” feeling of jazz music inspired several different types of swing dancing, with the Charleston and Lindy Hop being two of the most iconic of the era. Created in New York with roots in African-American dance, the Charleston consists of twisting and kicking motions of the feet to the rhythm of the music. It is usually danced solo. The Lindy Hop evolved out of the Charleston and became a social event, with people dancing in pairs. The relationship between dance partners in space is one of the key elements of this style of dancing, which often involves improvisation from one partner while the other follows. The movement can be slow or quite fast, but it is always seamless and perfectly synched with the rhythm of the music.



Some examples of the style of 1920s dancing

## Fashion

American fashion underwent some huge changes in the Roaring Twenties. After the war, production of ready-to-wear clothing became common. This established standard clothing sizes. Synthetic versions of nice fabrics, such as viscose rayon and fake silk, made it possible for the general public to mimic the upper-class fashions. Fashion changes were inspired by the art and film industries as well as the changing role of women in society. Newfound freedoms and departure from tradition were reflected in women's clothing choices. They styled their hair in short bobs and wore chemise dresses, a loose garment with a drop waist and raised hemlines. Wearing makeup became common, as did accessories such as bell hats and bold scarves inspired by art deco.

The flapper is an iconic representation of women's fashion of the 1920s. A huge part of the nightlife, flappers drank, smoked and explored their sexuality in the speakeasies. They wore slinky fringed dresses that were light, loose, and moved when they danced. Much like the jazz age in general, these clothing decisions and general behavior of flappers is a great representation of women breaking the rules and moving forward into a less traditional role.

Look for representations of traditional versus more independent women onstage. Micky will be dressed more modestly, in soft colors, in alignment with her traditional values. Carmen, on the other hand, represents the independent free-spirited women of the 1920s, and will be dressed in red tones and more flashy dress.

Men's fashion also changed, with the prosperous nature of the era encouraging developments in men's clothing. Sweaters were introduced as part of casual looks, and shirts become softer and available in many colors instead of simple white. Options for leisurewear and sportswear were also expanded upon as Americans spent more time engaging in recreational activities. Formalwear was transformed with the introduction of lapel jackets and the tuxedo. Well-fitted suits, often with vests and in strong colors, were a power statement. Look for this in the clothing of the gangsters in *Carmen in the 1920s*.



A page from a store catalog in NYC



Women's fashion of the 1920s

## Art

Art and architecture began to reflect the changing values of the Roaring Twenties. Art Deco became a widespread movement that was sophisticated in a non-traditional way. Simple, geometric, and streamlined, this visually-pleasing style drew inspiration from Egypt, Paris, and even Greece and Rome. Art deco was often symmetrical and repetitive in nature, reflecting the machines that were becoming such a crucial part of society. Cubism, which explored two dimensions rather than three, inspired an abstract element to art deco. This was a departure from the highly realistic and often nature-based art that came before this time.



The Chrysler Building in NYC



Tamara Lempicka, *Young Lady with Gloves*, 1930

## **Who's Who: *Carmen in the 1920s***

Below is a brief list of the characters appearing in *Carmen in the 1920s*.

Carmen: a young woman who captures the freedom and independence of the 1920s. She is one of the factory workers.

Mr. Z: head of the gangsters.

Micky: Secretary worker and a more traditional woman. Engaged to Donny.

Donny: Gangster, engaged to Micky but in love with Carmen.

Franny and Mary Lou: Carmen's flirtatious friends.

Lee: Owner of the speakeasy.

Eddy: a baseball player.

## **Plot**

Carmen works alongside other women in the factories. Outside, gangsters follow their leader, Mr. Z, as they patrol the streets. We meet young secretary Micky, who is engaged to Donny, one of the gangsters who is a particular target of Carmen's toying and manipulative ways. When Carmen is involved in a fight at the factory, Donny is ordered to take her away due to her actions. However, Carmen escapes, and chaos ensues.

Hiding away in a club, Carmen enjoys the night life of 1920s NYC. A young baseball player, Eddy, is immediately taken by Carmen upon meeting her, and tries to seduce her. He isn't the only one falling in love; Carmen has also charmed not only Mr. Z, but also Donny. As the three men begin to realize that they are fighting for her attention, the tension escalates. With the passing of time, Carmen's flirtatious attitude and the attempts of the men to win her over brings the audience into an exciting tale of love, passion, and heartbreak.

## **Theater Etiquette:**

- Arriving at the theater- It is important that you eat, drink, and use the restroom before entering the theater. Arriving late to the performance or getting up during the show disrupts the experience for other audience members. If you are late, please wait in the lobby and you will be taken to your seats during an appropriate moment in the performance.
- Cell phone use- turn off all cell phones or other devices that may sound during a performance.
- No photography or videography allowed- this is disruptive to audience members, and flash photography is dangerous for the dancers!
- Watching the show- please sit quietly in your seat and do not rest your feet on the seat in front of you. Talking is distracting, so save comments about the show for afterwards.
- Applaud!- there are several instances where you can (and should) applaud. At the end of the show is always appropriate, but you can also clap after a dancer takes a bow during the performance to show your appreciation. Applause helps the dancers do an even better job, so show them that you are paying attention and like what you see by clapping!