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Anthony Clark Evans as Tonio, Maria Natale as Nedda, Mason Gates as Beppe, Cooper Nolan as Canio (all in foreground). All photos by Pat Kirk.

What makes Leoncavallo's **Pagliacci** one of the world's most performed operas, decade after decade? In some ways, it is a true oddity. At only two acts and 90 minutes on stage, it is a 'tweener – a mere aperitif rather than a complete banquet of opera, yet more filling than the usual one-act alternative. Although the role of Canio is sought by any tenor capable of a decent rendition of the universally famous aria "Vesti la giubba," it is a rather small part that often disappears from the stage apart from its two memorable highlights. What's more, Canio is a marionette, with his wife, Nedda, taunting his heart

1. Pagliacci
2. Everything is Illuminated
3. Crazy for You
4. All the Way
5. Women Laughing Alone With Salad
6. Arabella
7. Dancing Lessons
8. The Resting Place
9. The Mystery of Edwin Drood
10. Fun Home

2018 (67)
 2017 (72)
 2016 (55)
 2015 (20)

strings, and his colleague, Tonio, manipulating his suspicions.



Anthony Clark Evans as Tonio, Maria Natale as Nedda.

What *Pagliacci* does offer is captivating and melodic music captured by an almost post-to-finishline intensity of emotion. Except for periods of comic relief, either raw passions are spilling over or they are palpably bottled up waiting to explode. Although the themes of love and betrayal are common in opera, the play-within-a-play device uniquely depicts life imitating art imitating life at its most violent. Opera San José's compelling production extracts all the power of this great tragic opera.

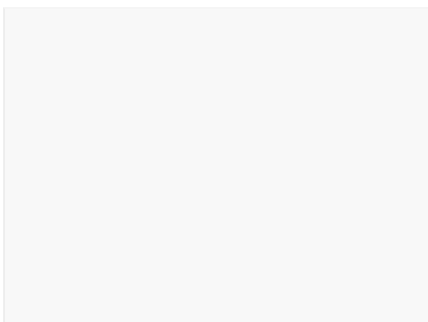
Composer/librettist Ruggero Leoncavallo was profoundly influenced by Piero Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, the one-act opera which debuted in 1890 and dealt with peasant life in a small Sicilian town. Leoncavallo embraced the new genre of that breakthrough, *opera verismo*. His setting in Calabria lies right across the Straits of Messina from Sicily, and *Pagliacci* shares *Cavalleria's* same dramatic tone, musical idiom, social context, religious observance, lover's betrayal, and revenge.



Maria Natale as Nedda, Mason Gates as Beppe.

The taut and tense plot of **Pagliacci** involves a traveling *commedia dell'arte* troupe performing in a small town. Intrigues unfold among the performers. Life and art intersect in the second act in the play-within-a-play when Canio takes revenge on Nedda over her betrayal. The universality of unfaithfulness and that of the clown theme stoke the opera's popularity.

In many ways, the opera belongs to the hunchback Tonio, who madly pursues the married Nedda and contrives to inflame Canio toward revenge. A signal of how good this production would be was when baritone Anthony Clark Evans delivered Tonio's prologue with consummate command and beauty to bravos from the audience. His message in the prologue is that the troupe will perform a comedy about real people, and that the actors themselves are real people, thus framing the idiom of *opera verismo*. Evans also offers an effectively menacing presence throughout, along with his fine voice.





Cooper Nolan as Canio.

The pivotal figure, however, is the adultress Nedda. An alternate title for the opera could be ***Everybody Loves Nedda***, as all of the male characters have designs on her. As Nedda, Maria Natale is a fiery temptress and magnetic presence – as cruel as she is beautiful. The role calls for vocal strength with lyric beauty, and Natale delivers on both counts. Her powerful and controlled vibrato fill the hall as does her persona.

Three tenors fill out the cast, led by Cooper Nolan as Canio. He and Emmett O'Hanlon as Silvio both handle the drama of their characters well. Their vocalizations are fine, but each sounds a little cloaked. On the other hand, Mason Gates as Beppe, resonates with great clarity, and he gets to demonstrate some acrobatic skills as well.

This is a very fine production. Choristers, including a children's choir, add richness to the musical sound. The stage is beautifully set by Andrea Bechert, and Cathleen Edwards's stunning costumes fill the stage with a lively look.

Pagliacci, with music and libretto by Ruggero Leoncavallo, is produced by Opera San José and plays at the California Theatre, 345 South 1st Street, San Jose, CA through December 2, 2018.



another review by
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