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# OPERAVILLE

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2018

## Leoncavallo Meets Hitchcock



Cooper Nolan as Canio. All photos by Pat Kirk.

Opera San  
Jose's  
Pagliacci  
November 17,  
2018

Stage director  
Chuck  
Hudson and a  
strongly  
theatrical cast  
have come up  
with a  
Pagliacci for  
the ages,  
downright  
Hitchcockian  
in its ability to  
deliver the  
layers of  
tension in  
Leoncavallo's  
work. It's a

stunning, suspenseful night at the opera.

To deliver strong effects, of course, you need strong weapons, and this is evident from the start with baritone Anthony Clark Evans' Prologue. This Prologue is a peculiar piece in opera, a musical highlight, often performed at recitals, that arrives before the "real" story has even begun. Evans alternates between affable and ominous in his monodrama of actors and their hidden identities, and his intense presence plays well into the sometimes-overlooked subplot of Tonio, the hunchback whose spurning at the hands of Nedda turns him into an Iago-like schemer.

The more direct threat, of course, is Canio, the clown (Paglioccio) of

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### ABOUT ME



[MICHAEL J. VAUGHN](#)

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of seventeen novels, including *The Popcorn Girl* and *Billy Saddle*. His poetry has appeared in more than 100 journals, and he works as a competitions judge for Writer's

the troupe. Tenor Cooper Nolan succeeds in conveying a delicious darkness. He reminds me of that acquaintance who turns out to be a bad drunk, cracking jokes one second, seemingly ready to punch you the next. This first appears in “Un tal gioco,” Canio’s explicit announcement of how he will deal with anyone who makes a play for Nedda, his beautiful wife. Nolan delivers these threats with a forceful *lirico spinto*, and engages in bit of spousal arm-twisting that almost hurts to watch.

Digest. He lives in San Jose, and plays drums for the San Francisco rock band Exit Wonderland.

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Anthony Clark Evans as Tonio, Maria Natale as Nedda.

Maria Natale’s soprano is a bit large for the tight spaces of Nedda’s Bird Song – a piece of playful *bel canto* mimicry – but the payoff comes with everything that follows. Natale’s great power creates a Nedda with Carmen-like qualities. Hudson’s undercurrent of physical aggression continues as Nedda drives off Tonio’s menacing advances with a whip, and then engages in a number of carnal embraces with her lover Silvio (Emmett O’Hanlon, whose well-tempered baritone offers a bit of calm before the storm). What emerges from this duet, as Nedda bounces between Silvio’s promises and the echoes of Canio’s threats, is Natale’s excellent use of dynamics, including a *fortissimo* lament rife with anguish.

Nolan delivers the iconic “Vesti la giubba” in a strikingly subdued fashion, aided by the *chiaroscuro* effects of Kent Dorsey’s lighting (a single overhead spot). The result is an invitation to feel sorry for Canio, a man who has painted himself into a corner and can’t seem to find a peaceful way out. Nolan finishes the piece quaking with emotion, giving the finish a suitably edgy quality.

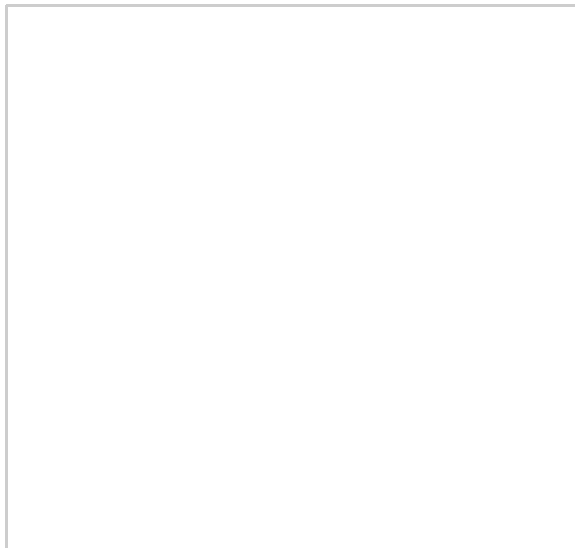
I have never before noticed just how beautifully Act 2 is set up. Having given each player full knowledge of the situation (except for the identity of Nedda’s lover) and forcing them into the necessity of giving a performance, Leoncavallo sets up a thick tension, each player going through stage prep like they’re walking through a minefield.



Maria Natale as Nedda, Mason Gates as Beppe.

Into this malestrom comes – almost unexpectedly – some excellent commedia dell’arte. Evans and Natale demonstrate playful bits of physical comedy, followed by Mason Gates entering on a fake horse to take over the show and offer a serenade (a gifted lyric tenor who performs backflips and handstands, Gates was born to play Beppe). The well-worn performance, naturally, mirrors the drama of the players’ backstage intrigues (thank you, Hamlet), until Canio starts veering off-script in a way that makes both on- and off-stage audiences feel a little queasy. The sadness of “Vesti la giubba” is gone as Nolan goes into monster mode, his voice growing and growing with each demand for the name of Nedda’s lover. The final blowup is bracingly physical. Canio gives Nedda a knockdown slap that sends mothers and children dashing from the square. Canio kills his wife with a Psycho-style overhead stabbing, then turns to pierce Silvio in mid-air. Finally, Canio is killed by a constabulary’s gunshot and falls roughly to the floor. (This may be the only opera cast that needs its own personal trainer.) It’s all very riveting, in the way that Pagliacci truly can be, and leads to the best final line in opera, Tonio announcing, “The comedy is over.”

Cathleen Edwards’ costumes are lovely, especially the gem-like colored triangles of Nedda, Beppe and Beppe’s “horse.” The village scenes carried a pleasant boisterousness, thanks in part to



the Ragazzi and Vivace youth choruses. Christian Reif and orchestra played with power and elegance; I particularly enjoyed the intermezzo,

especially the passage featuring harpist Karen Thielen as Tonio contemplates Nedda's handkerchief. The upper terrace of Andrea Bechert's village square set allowed for artful backlighting, notably as Tonio and Canio spy on the illicit lovers.



Maria Natale as Nedda, Emmett O'Hanlon as Silvio.

Through Dec. 2, California Theater, 345 S. First Street, San Jose.  
408/437-4450, [www.operasj.org](http://www.operasj.org).

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of 21 novels, including [Gabriella's Voice](#) and [The Girl in the Flaming Dress](#).

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