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OPERA SAN JOSÉ



IS FORMIDABLE

By Iride Aparicio

Photos Courtesy: OPERA SAN JOSÉ

SAN JOSÉ, CA – OPERA SAN JOSÉ's Opening Night of LEONCAVALLO's opera PAGLIACCI ended with the spectators inside the California Theatre, standing in front of their seats applauding enthusiastically, and shouting *Formidable*. The performance was masterful.

The Orchestra, under the baton of Conductor CHRISTIAN REIF, interpreted the contrasting festive and sorrowful moods of LEONCAVALLO's melodies with feeling. It also managed to control its volume, allowing the audience to listen clearly, even the *pianissimos* tones in the voices of the singers.

The set, designed by ANDREA BECHERT, representing the plaza of the Calambrian Village, showing two of its houses, one with flowers and a three-arch balcony, the Pagliacci's wagon and the wooden platform at the center of the plaza where the clowns are going to present their show on that night, was both visual and creative.



The Cast of OSJ representing the Calabrian Villagers in the opera PAGLIACCI

Sprinkling the set with the bright colors of their costumes (Designed by CATHLEEN EDWARDS) and bringing it to life were the singer: from the OPERA SAN JOSE YOUTH CHORUS, the RAGAZZI BOYS CHORUS and the VIVACE YOUTH CHORUS. representing the town's peasants, and adding charm to the production the "SUPERNUMERARIES" which included dancers from THE NEW BALLET SCHOOL.

HISTORY OF PAGLIACCI

When the music and the Librettos of his two previous operas *Chatterton* and *I Medici* failed to attract attention, Neapolitan Poet/Composer RUGGERO LEONCAVALLO (1858-1919) decided to write his new work, *Pagliacci* in the *Verismo* (realistic) Style of MASCAGNI, (The composer of the opera *Cavalleria Rusticana*). The style portrayed realistic people with realistic problems, and used realistic dialogue. From Greek Literature, LEONCAVALLO borrowed the use of "The Prologue" for his opera. The word Prologue means *Before* and was used at the opening a story, (in poems and books) The purpose of the Prologue was for the writer to tell his audience his intention for writing the work. For his characters, LEONCAVALLO borrowed some of the characteristics of the clowns from the *La Commedia Dell' Arte*.

THE PROLOGUE

In his opera *Pagliacci*, which premiered at the Teatro Dal Verme in Milan on May 21, 1892, LEONCAVALLO uses a sang Prologue in which the baritone stands in front of the closed theatre's curtain, as he puts on his costume of Tonio, the hunchback he will represent in *Pagliacci*. He addresses the audience singing an aria in which he explains that he appears alone, because he is "*The Prologue*." He explains the purpose of the opera by saying that the people (we) and they (the actors) are similar, because we share the same emotions of love and suffering. And that in life, we all are actors, but that the only difference between them and us, is that when the actors act, they cover their faces with a mask, but when we "act" representing what we are not, we do not use a mask but hide our faces, behind our lies.

THE CHARACTERS.

Interesting for us to think about, is the reason why in his libretto for *Pagliacci*, LEONCAVALLO chose the characteristics of the actors from the Italian *Commedia dell' Arte*, who were stock

characters dressed as clowns, to represent the characters in his opera. Many believed that he may have create Canio, using the character of *Pantalone*, (who in the *Commedia* was an old wealthy merchant married to a young pretty woman who did not love him) and *Pierrot*, a stock character of the *Comedie-Italienne* in Paris, represented by a sad unmasked clown with a painted white face who wears a loose white blouse with large buttons and wide white pantaloons, and some times, a frilled collared hat (which is the character that Canio represents on his *Commedia* stage production, where he plays the role of *Pierrot*, whose wife is *Columbine*).

He obviously created the character of Nedda after young beautiful *Columbine*, who in the *Commedia's* skits was not always a virtuous woman. And because *Columbine* was the lover of *Arlecchino* (Arlequino) A young and handsome clown who sings, and does all types of tricks to seduce a woman, but whose sole purpose in *La Commedia* was to bring laughter to the audience with his antics, LEONCAVALLO created Silvio

(The photo bellow represents the clowns' skit from *La Commedia*, in which *Pierrot* is gone and pretty *Columbine*, *Pierrot's* wife, waits at a table on the stage for *Arlequino*, her lover, who arrives in a horse playing a guitar and singing her a love serenade)



Columbine (MARIA NATALE) Listens to Arlequino's (MASON GATES) serenade

Because in this Opera, the singers, play both the role of characters, and clowns of the *Commedia Dell' Arte's* touring show, they must sing and act well to be able to play their dual role

The characters in *Pagliacci* are Canio (A middle-age producer of a clowns' travelling troupe, who is married to Nedda, a young woman, who plays the role of *Columbine*, in *La Commedia* and who like the character that she plays on the stage,, is in love with somebody else. And to complicate matters, in the "real story" there is Tonio, a hunchback who is also in love with Nedda and longs for her, Silvio, Nedda's lover, and Beppe, another actor, friend of Canio.

Opera San José's casting of the singers/actors for *Pagliacci*, needs praising. The quality of their voices is magnificent, and under the direction of Stage Director CHUCK HUDSON their acting was superb. Every singer on the stage that night, acted his or her role with the realism that was required for this opera.

If the singing as *The Prologue*, was not enough to convince the audience of his voice's quality, and talent, Baritone ANTHONY CLARK EVANS's acting, as Tonio managed to show the audience his concealed emotions: his loneliness, his frustration, his hatred, and above all his longing for Nedda,

He demonstrated his passion when confessing his love to her and his pain after her rejection. At the end, the diabolically expression in his face, was enough to warn us of his impending revenge.



As Nedda, Soprano MARIA NATALE was able to use the marvelous timbre of her voice to communicate her different emotions: she used her expressive eyes to flirt, and her body to represent her passion. Sadly, her passion was not for Canio, her husband, but for her lover.

(pictured left soprano MARIA NATALE as Nedda and Baritone EMMETT O'HANLON singing the role of Silvio)

Her best aria on that night and the one that was followed by applause, was *Ballatella* in which she simulates seeing birds flying in the sky, with the different instruments in the orchestra imitating their chirping.

Singing it, in her role as Nedda, she first expresses her fear that her husband may discover her thoughts about her lover. After that, looking and listening to the chirping of the birds, she express her desire to fly away (like the birds) defying the storms.

Acting her role as *Columbine* for the Italian audience in the Opera, she was able to mimic the mechanical movements her character required, and put a doll's expression on her face. At the end, she showed terror in her eyes when she becomes aware that enraged Canio knows about her lover and is going mad with jealousy. She can detect it because instead of following the script of the *Commedia* that both are representing on the stage, he is pulling her by her arms and pushing her against the stage's platform as he shouts to her: *What's his name?*

Tenor GATES, who is playing the role of Arlequino, (In *The Commedia*) immediately becomes aware that Canio is beyond himself he tries to stop him but is unable to do so.

The role of Sylvio, in *Pagliacci* is short, but O'HANLON played it convincingly in a passionate scene. with Nedda in Act I The lovers plan to run away together after tonight's performance, but as they kiss they are discovered by Canio, Sylvio runs away. On the night of the performance, Baritone O'HANLON who is among the Italian peasant watching the show runs to the stage to defend Nedda from Canio but he cannot.

And that brings us to Tenor COOPER NOLAN who played the role of Canio with professional veracity.



Tenor COOPER NOLAN

In his acting, NOLAN displayed clearly to the audience each one of his emotions. His great love for Nedda, the young orphan he found on an Italian village street one day, trained to act, and made her his wife. His fears, because he is aware that other men, including Tonio, desire his young wife. His horrible pain when he realizes that his wife loves another man and is going to run away with him that night. And the rage that caused his vendetta.

As a singer, NOLAN's *Vesti la giubba*, the aria that he sings as he puts her clown costume before his show (after realizing that his wife has a lover) at the end of act i, was masterful. It made the audience feel every word.

Smearing white painting on his face he sings that he is not a man, just a clown with a painted face and white powder, that the audience pays to make them laugh. If Arlequino steals your Columbine, (as he did in *La Commedia's* show he represents with Nedda on the stage) the laughing audience shouts *Bravo*. So laugh, clown, hide your tears Be merry, Sing, continue playing your part. Laugh, for the sorrow that is eating your heart.

There is only one word to define OPERA SAN JOSÉ's production of LEONCAVALLO's *Pagliacci*: FORMIDABLE.

PAGLIACCI will be performed at the CALIFORNIA THEATRE until December 2 For tickets you can go online to www.operasj.org/ or call (408) 437-4450.