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OSJ PAGLIACCI And LA VOIX HUMAINE Received Standing Ovation on Opening Night

By Iride Aparicio
Photos by: R. Shomler





ALEXANDER BOYER as Canio

Photo: R. Shomler

SAN JOSE, California – Because PAGLIACCI, considered the most prominent and successful representative of the Italian *Verismo* (true to life) is very short, it is usually presented as a double-bill in most programs. This time, as the second Ópera of its 2011-2012 Season, OPERA SAN JOSÉ paired it with LA VOIX HUMAINE written by FRANCIS POULENC and librettist JEAN COCTEAU an “opera” which debuted in Paris in February 6 1959, and could be called “An Ópera” only if one considers a Mezzo-soprano singing as soloist a 50 minute long aria sang in French, with English subtitles, by such a name.

LA VOIX is represented in the living room of modern apartment. The apartment has a sofa, in front of it a table with an old-fashioned telephone on top, a bar against the wall on stage right, a mirror next to the door, and on the back of the room a large balcony which allows us to see only the roofs of other buildings, thus deducing that the apartment is located on a very high floor of a building in Paris.

The action takes place in the year 1950, and the protagonist is a young beautiful woman (described only as "the woman" in the program) represented on opening night by Mezzo-Soprano BETANY COFFLAND.

At curtain, wearing a gray silky nightgown “The woman” (COFFLAND moves around nervously in her apartment glancing at the old-fashioned black telephone on the table several times. She walks to the bar, pours herself a drink and smoking a cigarette waits for the phone to ring.

Unable to wait any longer, she picks up the phone and starts a verbal fight with an “invincible woman” on her party line. Finally, she gets the phone call she has been waiting for. The call is from her lover, which we only know as “Steve.” The audience never hears him or sees him but we

understand the conversation (sang) in which COFFLAND discusses with him a series of subjects.

Sadly, the too many different subjects is the “problem” of THE VOIX. The monologue in which “the woman” describes to her lover the color of the nightgown she is wearing, the things she did during the day, and how it feels for her to wake up alone in bed remembering the times when she could lay her head on his chest, go on and on leading to nowhere. At the end, the multiple-subject aria (if one could call it an aria) made the audience understand that in that phone call Steve is telling the woman that he is leaving her and he and the other woman are going (on their honeymoon?) to Marseilles. The revelation is painful to her because both of them had been in Marseilles. The part of the dialogue the audience hears does not explain the reason why he is leaving her now after five years of living with her, or describes the type of relation they both had which was needed for the audience to get to know and care for the characters.

At the end of the opera leaves the audience with questions: Who is this woman? What does she do? Where does she work? Where did she meet this man named Steve? Who is Steve? Is he single or married? Why is he jilting her now? The opera gives you no answers.

If the THE VOIX got the ovation and Bravos it got at the end, it was because of COFFLAND whose singing that night was excellent. Excellent also was the diction of the her French. COFFLAND sang in tune and she was capable to continue singing in a duet with the twenty-century style music of the opera which lacked arias. In spite of that, her instrument remained tuned for fifty minutes, and each of her words showed emotion.

Because this is a solo opera (A monodrama) a work that could be compared to a soliloquy in song and its subject very dramatic, the singer must also have the ability to act the nuances of her role using her facial expressions and body language to represent the whole ranged of emotions.

COFFLAND’s acting was excellent that night. Simulating a phone conversation but singing the words instead of saying them, and at most times holding an old-fashioned auricular in one hand and the phone in the other, she sang and demonstrate different emotions for almost an hour. Her presence commanded the stage. All the attention was on her as she sang in harmony with music that may be described as “20 Century” modern, directed by conductor BRYAN NIES.



In the process, she went through a whole range of emotions: we see her acting calm, laughing, drinking, smoking, walking around the room agitated, crying, losing her composure little by little, to start blaming herself for everything that went wrong in the relationship until emotionally, she crumbles. Now she hints of wrapping “the telephone cord” around her neck, of drinking all the pills, like the day before, trying to kill herself. Of not being able to go on living without Steve. Her last words are “I love you,” which she repeats over and over again as she walks towards the balcony.

BETANY COFFLAND Picture by: P.Kirk



LA VOIX is now a new work for OSJ is was previously staged with Mezzo-Soprano LAYNA CHIANAKAS singing the woman's role. CHIANAKAS is now back as director of the opera which will be sang by Soprano SUSAN HANSON in the second cast of singers (OSJ has two casts for each one of its operas) in alternate performances.

On opening night, with practically no sets, **PAGLIACCI** of OSJ was distinguished. by the voices of all the singers which were marvelous. With music written by RUGGERO LEONCAVALLO. the drama may be described as tale of anguish and heartbreak. The two-act Opera with prologue, set to a libretto also written by LEONCAVALLO, takes place in Salerno, Italy in the 1900's. **PAGLIACCI**, considered the prototype of the *Verismo* (works which imitate real life) premiered in the Teatro dal Verne in Milan in in May 21, 1892.

The story within a story, represents Canio's traveling troupe of actors who present shows around the Italian towns, using the stereotypical clowns from the Commedia Dell' Arte: Pagliacci (a clown) Columbine (his wife) Arlecchino (the debonair clown) and Taddeo (the Fool or buffoon).

In **PAGLIACCI** the opera, Canio's troupe had just arrived in a town and is preparing the towns' people for tonight's show. Their show is a farce in which Columbine, which is represented by Nedda, (Canio's wife), who is married (in the show within a show) to Pagliacci (represented by Canio) flirts with Arlecchino (represented by Beppe another clown) while her husband is away.

The problem is that in this case with reality imitating Commedia, Nedda (Canio's wife) has a lover in real life and when she rejects the advantages of Tonio (a hunchback clown who had on that day declared his love for her and she had lashed his face with a horse lash when he tried to approach her) appears to be aware about it and now wants revenge. He fetches Canio from the tavern in town and bring him back home when Nedda is with Sylvio (her lover) The action allows Canio to hear Nedda's promising to Sylvio that after the show, she is going to run away with him because she loves him.

PAGLIACCI the opera opens with a Prologue sang by Tonio (EVAN BRUMMEL) in which after introducing himself, as "THE PROLOGUE" he tells the audience that he comes to tell them that the story they are about to see is a slice of life, which will prove to them (the audience) that it is not true that the tears of an actor are not real tears and that actors have no heart. *"Is not the actor a man like yourselves?"* he asks them, and then as if emphasizing the brotherhood of men he adds, *"all actors are like you."*

The dark timbre of Baritone BRUMMEL's voice singing the prologue sounded powerful, and he sang his aria in a perfectly-modulated Italian and with a lot of feeling.

BRUMMEL also represented well his part as Tonio, the hunchback clown secretly in love with Nedda (JASMINA HALIMIC) Canio's wife. Observing her silently as she sings looking at the birds flying overhead, a song in which she wonders what would CASIO do if he discovers that she has a lover, and expressing her wishes to be free, Tonio (BRUMMEL) approaches her and reveals to her that her singing bewitched him. Nedda laughs at him and tries to ignore him, but when he

to her that her singing bewitched him. Nedda laughs at him and tries to ignore him, but when he approaches her with lust in his eyes, she takes a horse lash and lashes his face. *“I know that you hate me,”* sings Tonio *“And laugh in derision, for what is a clown? He plays but a part. Yet he has his hope and his dream and his vision. The Clown has a heart.”*

He then leaves to go to town to fetch CANIO from la cantina and returns home with him. When a few minutes later Nedda meets her lover Sylvio (KRASSEN KARAGIOZOV) and promises him to run away with him that night. CANIO hears it. He runs after Sylvio ready to kill him but Sylvio runs away.



As Canio (playing the role of Pagliacci in the Commedia) ALEXANDER BOYER, (left) was superb in his dramatic role of a betrayed husband. We can say that on that night, the tenor mastered in his singing and acting every one of his multiple emotions.

At the mere thought of Nedda cheating of him he was enraged. At the sight of Nedda laying with her lover, he was hurt to the point to burst into tears. Then in his role as Pagliacci during the Commedia, he managed to look wild when he shouted at Nedda who was representing Columbina. *“His name, His name”* as holdind a knife in his hand he launches on her.

As he sang his arias, his tenor’s voice was well tuned and his Italian well pronounced. His *Vesti la giubba*, the aria in which he tells himself: *“you are not a man, you are just a jester who the people pays to make them laugh. Go hide with laughter your tears and your sorrow. Laugh, clown, for the love that ended. Laugh, clown, even when the sorrow is eating your heart”* was interpreted with such feeling that it brought tears to our eyes.

PAGLIACCI the opera, however, could have been better if in her role as Nedda, HALIMIC had acted better. On opening night she sang her arias well and her voice was tuned, but the soprano showed no feeling playing her role and acted her as if she was acting. The result was that her very

dramatic role of Nedda and her zany role of Columbine (the farce role she represents in LA COMMEDIA) blended into one, in other words she acted her comic and her dramatic role using the same expressions. Another problem with the soprano was that her face showed no emotion a fact that made HALIMIC unable to portray the dramatics required by the role of Nedda.

The rest of the voices of the singers of PAGLIACCI were wonderful, and both the adult and children's' choirs sounded magnificent. Conductor BRYAN NIES managed to get the best of his orchestra. Both LA VOIX HUMAINE and PAGLIACCI that night got an standing ovations.

Both operas with two different casts will be presented at the California Theatre in San Jose.

