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OPERAVILLE

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Opera San Jose's "La voix humaine" and "Pagliacci"

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Passion is pouring from the California Theater these days, as Opera San Jose presents two of the most intense small operas in the canon.



The evening begins with Poulenc's *La voix humaine*, the operatic equivalent of a high-wire act. Take one mezzo soprano, add a telephone, and... well, what else do you need? The one-act opera, with libretto by Jean Cocteau, uses this minimalist approach to outline that classic romantic tragedy, the break-up call.

Our heroine, known simply as "the woman," is more desperate than most, a point that Betany Coffland takes to divine extremes. The air of manic-depression is there from the start; she enters in a long, jarring silence, letting one thought take her to laughter, the next to tears, and downs multiple drinks on the way to her enemy and friend, the telephone that looms at center stage.

Once Bryan Nies brings in the orchestra, Coffland begins a terrifyingly intimate conversation with her soon-to-be-ex-lover, sung in phrases of speech-like parlando. The orchestra answers her, like the inhales to her exhales, or perhaps the other half of the conversation, as well as providing representational atmospherics (the jangling ring of the phone, rough haunting pizzicatos from the strings).

Coffland's voice is well in its element (perhaps because of her skill with an earlier speech-based form, bel canto recitative), but it's her acting

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that compels. She and director Layna Chianakas (herself a wonderful singing actress) have framed the dialogue with bits of “stage business” that leave indelible images: Coffland spreading sleeping pills across her coffee table and dropping them, one by one, into a cocktail glass; arranging red carnations along the rug, perhaps as a suicide bier; staring into the mirror as she tells her lover, “I avoid looking at myself.” The phone becomes a dance partner, caressed as a lover, dragged around as a slave, its cord wound around her neck as a threat.

The setup magnifies the emotions. Phone cutoffs are treated as unimaginable tragedies. When the reality of the separation hits home, Coffland falls into a fit of lunatic sobbing that’s hard to believe. If you tried such a trick without the fullest commitment, you would surely fail – but fail she does not, and the spectator is left feeling like a voyeur, in awe of a performer who has the courage to expose such raw emotions in such a public forum.

The sensation translates into the voice, as well. Coffland takes the phrase “I was going insane” into a searing top note that bends upward into a scream, and later enters a dream-like nostalgia presented by Poulenc as a mock waltz. The parlando flowers into unexpected, crazy fortes, revealing surprising levels of power. Taken as a whole, the act is a devastating hour of pathos, and I don’t know if I’ve seen a more complete performance on an opera stage.



Not that the rest of the company is going to let you off the emotional hook. The evening continued with an intense performance of Pagliacci, a little rough at the edges but powered by forceful voices.

The first of these comes in the famed Prologue, introducing not just Leoncavallo’s opera but OSJ’s new resident baritone, Evan Brummel. Brummel delivers a solid, meaty tone and an natural stage presence, drawing his Tonio with inspired levels of creepiness.

Jasmina Halimic takes the darker fourth-act shades of last season’s Mimi and applies them to Nedda, showing the ability to produce bits of onstage thunder. Her performance of the birdsong aria, “Stridono



MICHAEL J. VAUGHN

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of eleven novels, including the recently released "Operaville," available through amazon.com. He is a regular contributor to *Writer's Digest*, an opera critic, and drummer for the rock band Exit Wonderland.

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lassu," is particularly affecting, as is the following duet with Silvio (baritone Krassen Karagiosov).

Tenor Alexander Boyer was born to sing "Vesti la giubba," and manages to put a personal stamp on a vastly overexposed piece of music. (I told my companion she would probably recognize it from various TV commercials, and, sure enough, found it the next day being used to sell the fine products of Taco Bell.) He has also conquered a previous tendency toward awkward onstage movement, making use of his impressive height and a surprisingly effective evil eye to project Canio's simmering rage.

Halimic and Karagiosov do not fare so well in this category; you can see them thinking about their blocking (except, in Halimic's case, when she adopts Nedda's commedia alter-ego, Columbina). This is a fine point, perhaps, but it does have the unsettling effect of breaking the illusion of character. Another fine example of a natural presence is tenor Michael Dailey, who plays the company manager Beppo with energetic authority and adds some wonderful physical humor to his stage persona, Arlecchino.

Director Cynthia Stokes, with the assistance of fight director Kit Wilder, has coached her players into a rough physicality. Tonio's gropings of Nedda are anything but subtle (and will surely dampen any ambitions for political office). Boyer arm-twists a villager to the ground while confessing his jealousies, and achieves the final double-stabbing with brutal elegance.

Faced with two such disparate styles, the orchestra plays wonderfully, particularly in Poulenc's arresting use of percussion and inventive stringwork, and the haunting double-bass of Leoncavallo's overture (which reappears at Canio's discovery of Nedda's infidelities). Nies conducts with a forceful energy, and is a pleasure to watch. Cathleen Edwards' black-and-white commedia costumes are a delight, especially Arlecchino's dazzling checkerboard suit.

Images: Betany Coffland as the woman in "La voix humaine." Michael Dailey as Arlecchino in "Pagliacci." Photos by P. Kirk.

Through November 27, California Theater, 345 S. First Street, San Jose. Alternating casts. \$51-\$101. 408/437-4450, www.operasj.org.

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