

Opera San Jose's double-bill undertaking is thought-provoking

by [Anastasia Crosson](#) Nov 15, 2011 6:31 pm Tags: [Alexander Boyer](#), [Canio](#), [Jouvanca Jean-Baptiste](#), [La Voix Humaine](#), [Nedda](#), [Opera San Jose](#), [Pagliacci](#),

[Suzan Hanson](#), [The Woman](#), [Vesti la giubba](#)



[Wesley I](#)

(Left to right) Evan Brummel as Tonio, Jasmina Halimic as Nedda and Michael Dailey as Beppe in Opera San Jose's "Pagliacci." Photo courtesy of Opera San Jose

Opera San Jose's double-bill production of "La Voix Humaine" and "Pagliacci" tells two very different stories of the human condition through a veil of tragedy, betrayal and a few bitter laughs.

With minimalist sets providing no distraction on-stage, viewers' attention is focused in on the protagonist's relatability. Surprisingly, the vulnerability of a woman scorned, as is The Woman in "La Voix Humaine," and a heartbroken entertainer, as is Canio in "Pagliacci," gives these characters a true-to-life quality at a depth that draws in the viewer.

Though the two operas could not be more different in style, story and language, the protagonists' humanism give the visually and musically contrasting productions

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La Voix Humaine

Suzan Hanson in the role of The Woman makes her first appearance on-stage in a silk nightgown that floats across the floor of a dark foyer as she sobs and rubs the sleep out of her eyes, calling for an unnamed “darling.” With one glass of whiskey poured, The Woman finds herself in a staring contest with a silent telephone. The phone finally rings and although the audience never does hear the voice of this unnamed “darling,” it soon becomes apparent that The Woman is spending a sleepless night waiting for a lover who never showed – a lover, who it is later revealed, has found new love elsewhere.

The Woman holds onto a telephone call as though it were her last thread of life. As the call is repeatedly disconnected or interrupted, which the audience is led to believe is customary of telephone connections in this 1950s Paris backdrop, The Woman comes closer to the brink of self-destruction with leering thoughts of suicide. Hanson's performance keeps viewers on the edge of their seat – will she do it?

“La Voix Humaine” forces viewers to reflect on their own moments of digital heartache with Facebook pictures of a significant other with an unknown object of affection or a texted end to a relationship.

As The Woman says, the telephone (or “this apparatus” as she calls it) can be a weapon in the hands of someone wanting to do harm to another.

Though the corded “apparatus” is now obsolete, our connection to the human voice behind the cellphone, text or tweet is still a part of our collective conscience.

The Woman personifies that connection and, in her case, dependence to that connection meets a bitter end. In what is essentially one very long monologue, Hanson demands the audience's attention and in the case of at least one, she got it. It surely takes a captivating vocalist to hold the imagination and interest of an audience in a character with a limited emotional range from lucidly depressed to inconsolably tormented.

Pagliacci

The story of “Pagliacci” is no less haunting. Set in a village in southern Italy in the early 1900s, Canio, played by Alexander Boyer, is an entertainer who performs under the guise of Pagliaccio the clown. As the chorus line tells the audience early on in the production, Pagliaccio is beloved because his jokes and tricks make them forget about their worries and cares of the day.

Viewers are reminded of the human condition to seek companionship as a means to escape the dull or

worrisome. In “La Voix Humaine,” The Woman’s way of escaping her solitude is to hear a familiar voice and the villagers in “Pagliacci” likewise escape the mundane with shared laughter.

Boyer puts on a good show as the boisterous clown, an even better show as Canio’s darker side is revealed. Canio is a jealous man driven to madness when he finds that his wife Nedda, played by the dynamic Jouvanka Jean-Baptiste, has been unfaithful in taking a lover. Canio’s heartbreak is so genuine in Boyer’s performance of “Vesti la giubba” that as he sings those words, “Put on your costume,” Pagliaccio’s chalky facepaint does not in the slightest hide the dark despair underneath.

Stand-alone, “La Voix Humaine” and “Pagliacci” are worthy undertakings. Yet together, Opera San Jose renders a great performance of them both. This is a production where the conversation at intermission is of nothing but the thought-provoking sentiments of the opera, and that in itself is worth heading to the opera house for. Opera San Jose’s double-bill production of “La Voix Humaine” and “Pagliacci” tells two very different stories of the human condition through a veil of tragedy, betrayal and a few bitter laughs. Opera San Jose’s double-bill production of “La Voix Humaine” and “Pagliacci” tells two very different stories of the human condition through a veil of tragedy, betrayal and a few bitter laughs.

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