

OPERA REVIEW: Unusual pairing of two gritty short works challenge Opera S. J. but audience raves

by Mort Levine

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Two fascinating examples of "real life" verismo are being mounted together currently as the second offering of Opera San Jose's 28th year. The opening work at downtown San Jose's California Theatre is the rarely staged "La Voix Humaine," in French for a single female human voice. She's a hysterical mezzo soprano whose last connection with a lover is a telephone. The work is from a Jean Cocteau's 1920s play set to the sensitively dramatic music of Francis Poulenc, which premiered in Paris in 1959.

Companion work is a turn of the century Italian lovers' triangle tragedy with two revenge murders by the aggrieved husband. "Pagliacci" (The Clowns) is set among a traveling troupe of actors in a backwater Calabrian village in southern Italy. The clowns perform an old time comedia del'arte but at the same time a real-life drama is taking place among the five principal singers.

Ruggiero Leoncavallo was one of those composers who is known essentially for a single work. His dozen other operas and 14 operettas fill the dusty archives of the unperformed. "Pagliacci," however, was a sensation and remains a frequently mounted show because of its splendidly melodic tunes and the swift meting out of a bloody climax. It also features a great ironic closing line: "La comedia est finita" ("The comedy is over").

Opera San Jose's resident artists met the challenges of the two works with intensity in their vocalizing and seriousness of the dramatic portrayals. In the Poulenc work, director

Layna Chianakas, herself a mezzo who sang this role earlier with Opera San Jose, proved insightful in shaping the atmosphere of fear, nervous exhaustion and desperation.

Betany Coffland was the gripping soloist on opening night last Saturday in what Poulenc has called a monodrama. He also admitted that his own awareness of rejection and separation from his lover made this work autobiographical. Coffland athletically roamed her handsome Parisian living room always with the phone within reach. When the final farewell comes from her departing lover, the suggestion of a suicidal leap from the apartment balcony comes as the inevitable climax.

Conductor Bryan Nies brought out a stunning performance from a smaller orchestra than Poulenc envisioned. His spare writing with many silences and changes of mood from utter calm to panic brought forth the writing talents that were shown in his best known work, "Dialogues of the Carmelites."

"Pagliacci," because it is so well known, posed extra challenges for director Cynthia Stokes making her Opera San Jose debut. She capably moved the large forces of adult and children's choruses in and about the spare functional set by J.B. Wilson. The down playing of the 19th century Italian village, at times left an impression the singers were a group of fledgling opera signers who get together to produce a show. Except for a few touches in the prologue, it could well have been set in a rehearsal hall of a regional opera company.

All of the principal voices were well balanced and supported by excellent choral work. The familiar arias came along as highlights of the verismo repertory, topped by the tearful clown's rendering of "Vesti la giubba." The audience appeared ready to sit back and enjoy them all responding with long

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applause. Leoncavallo expected that and wrote appropriate cadenzas to wrap up each of these set pieces.

The opening prologue sung by baritone Evan Brummel as the hunchback Tonio tells the audience they will be watching a drama which is taken from real life. Tonio's advances are rejected by soprano Jasmina Halimic who sings Nedda, wife of Canio (tenor Alexander Boyer) who suspects her fidelity. Matter of fact, Nedda has just agreed to run off with a villager, Silvio, sung by baritone Krassen Karagiozov. The other member of the troupe, Beppe is sung by tenor Michael Dailey.

The five resident artists at opening night made for a strong ensemble. One orchestral highlight, the intermezzo, was especially well performed as an overture to the second act.

Opera San Jose's remaining shows continue through the Sunday, Nov. 27, matinee at 3 p.m. An alternate cast takes on that performance as well as the evenings of Nov. 19 and 22 with Susan Hanson in "La Voix Humaine." The alternate "Pagliacci" cast includes Jason Detwiler (Tonio), Travis Jones (Canio), Jouvanca Jean-Baptiste (Nedda) and Isaiah Musik-Ayala (Silvio). Michael Dailey continues on with Beppe in the second cast.

The company's next offerings include Verdi's "La Traviata" (Feb. 11-26) and Gounod's "Faust" (April 21-May 6).

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