

Opera San Jose's Dramatic double bill

by Susan Steinberg

Two mirror-image love stories make up the current double bill at San Jose Opera, and both are equally gripping.

In a bold move, Leoncavallo's popular "I Pagliacci" is paired with an unfamiliar work: Francis Poulenc's *La Voix Humaine* ("The Human Voice").

Poulenc's dreamy clouds of impressionistic chords and progressions were reminiscent of Debussy's "Pelleas and Melisande," including some tense chromaticism at dramatic moments.

Described as a "monodrama," the one-act play/opera features just one woman, who must be both a strong singer and captivating actress to carry the entire 40 minute solo performance. Suzan Hanson was a marvel in the role of a distraught woman who has just been dropped by her lover of 5 years.

As the curtain rises, she is wandering around her apartment, disheveled and disoriented, recovering from a failed suicide attempt with sleeping pills. Many elements of the décor are obviously askew, a visual reflection of her distracted psychological state.

This has been a solo pantomime, incredibly detailed and realistic, engaging the audience in her silent suffering. When the phone rings she begins a heart-breaking one-sided conversation with her ex,

and everyone follows her words intently, imagining the unheard other side of the dialogue.

Why is this event so terribly painful? The time frame is the early 20th Century when a woman, whether wife or mistress, would be completely dependent on a man, both financially and emotionally. After a 5-year relationship, such a loss would be devastating.

But the pain goes far deeper. When the woman describes how difficult it is to suddenly be sleeping alone, her anguish is palpable. "Understand how I suffer...it's been 5 years that I've lived for you, breathed your air, had nothing to occupy me but you... I AM ALONE!"

Listeners winced at that naked cry of despair, realizing that abandonment of any kind is traumatic, leaving a legacy of unbearable misery.

The singer tries to reassure her ex with, "Don't worry, I'm better. If you hadn't called I would have died." By now, the audience is furious at his callousness. He has told her he plans to marry someone else and take her to their favorite vacation spot. She begs him to at least stay at a different hotel, as this would "hurt less."

Finally realizing that her situation is hopeless ("What is finished is finished"), she thanks him for his "kindness" in calling her. Reassuring him that he needn't worry

about her ("One doesn't attempt suicide twice"), she admits pathetically, "I was going to say, out of habit, 'See you soon'. Please hang up quickly."

Still murmuring "goodbye," she replaces the receiver, opens the large window, and stands poised as the lights go out. The audience sat in silent shock for a few minutes, and then exploded in a long ovation for a woman who had carried everyone so completely into her psyche, a rare tour de force from a world-class performer with incredible stamina. Also taking bows was Layna Chianakis (LVÖ's superb "Carmen"), directing a role she herself had sung.

The second opera needed little introduction. "I Pagliacci" is an overwhelmingly popular work, with its lush romantic melodies, well-known characters, and the realistic tragedy of a man who discovers his beloved wife is unfaithful. It's a story as familiar as the latest headlines in our daily papers.

But when it was written, such gritty realism (called "verismo") was uncommon in opera. To help the audience understand this new genre, (and to give the baritone a stunning aria), Leoncavallo composed the famous Prologue. Tonio, a traveling commedia player, steps forward and addresses everyone.

Instead of the usual reassurances that actors only pretend

to suffer, he insists that they are "humans of flesh and blood," like ourselves, and their tears and cries of pain are real, taken from the fabric of life itself. The author, he relates, began with an old memory, so painful that he wept while writing, with "his sobs beating out the tempo". (This claim, supposedly based on a murder case his own father had judged, actually helped Leoncavallo fend off legal charges of plot plagiarism.)

Whatever the truth of its origin, the story dramatically incorporates an exciting combination of jealousy, lust, love, rage, and murder – the usual ingredients of Italian opera – along with its beautiful musical score.

Jouvanka Jean-Baptiste as Nedda, the unfaithful wife, evoked sympathy as a young woman married to Canio, a "brutal" older man she cannot love, and tempted by Silvio to follow her heart and elope with him. Her gorgeous soaring aria to a flock of birds reveals her longing for freedom from a sordid life.

Alexander Boyer as Canio, the betrayed spouse, looked and sang like a young Caruso, especially in his famous "Vesti la Giubba" ("Put on your costume") aria, describing his terrible pain at having to make the crowd laugh while his own heart is breaking.

As he struggles to control himself and finish the play, Tonio, who

has been rejected by Nedda, uses sarcasm to goad his boss into a fury. Jason Detwiler was a superb acting singer with a rich resonant baritone. Krassen Karagiozov played a sturdy and passionate Silvio, while tenor Michael Dailey sang the helpful clown Beppe.

The finale focuses on Canio, who throws off his clown hat and declares, "No, I'm no longer Pagliaccio! I'm the poor fool who raised you, starving, from the gutter, who expected, if not love, at least gratitude, kindness, mercy."

Tension rises as the onstage audience (including Silvio) realizes that Canio is no longer acting, and that Nedda is in real danger. In wild fury, Canio stabs her and Silvio to death, brokenly announcing, "The comedy is finished."

A full house cheered the triumphant cast, stage director Cynthia Stokes, and energetic conductor Bryan Nies. The double bill touched many hearts with truthful depictions of love and betrayal, and the tragic results.

The production continues through November 27 in the lavishly restored "Hollywood Moorish" California Theater, 345 South First Street in downtown San Jose. For tickets call 408-437-4450, or visit www.operasj.org. Arrive 1-1/2 hours early for the Bay Area's best pre-curtain talk, and the magical music of the lobby's rare "Mighty Wurlitzer" organ.

by Sarah Bobson

There's a scene in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* that makes me nostalgic for the 60s.

In the 1967 film, Spencer Tracy as Matt Drayton, a highly regarded San Francisco newspaper man, drives his wife, Christina, an art gallery owner, played by Katharine Hepburn, to a drive-in soda fountain to get a particular flavor of ice cream he remembers fondly from years past. The parking lot is studded with Volkswagen beetles, pickup trucks, and teenagers sitting atop T-bird convertibles listening to loud jukebox music. A young gum-chewing waitress holding a small horizontal tray atop her palm strolls over to his car and asks what he would like to order. He says, "When I had ice cream before, I had a special flavor I liked very much, but I can't remember what it was." She rattles off some flavors: Daiquiri Ice, Honeycomb Candy, Coco Coconut, Jamocha Almond Fudge, Mocha Mocha Peanut Butter and Jelly, and Cinnamon Banana Mint. He recognizes none of them. He's ready to leave when she says, "Fresh Oregon Boysenberry Sherbert." That's it! That's the name that rings with familiarity, so he orders a dish, but when he tastes it, he scrunches his face and

Yesterday into Today

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

puckers his lips in disappointment and says, "This is not the stuff. I never had this before."

I understand that disappointment. Like Matt Drayton, I too long for a taste from the past. For me, it's the taste of that perfect hot fudge sundae I used to get after attending a high school football game.

In the crispy fall air in Miami, Florida, my friends and I would sit on backless bleachers high up in the back of the Orange Bowl and scream our guts out, cheering our team to victory. Afterward, we would pack into cars and head over to the ice cream emporium. Some of us would order banana splits, but for me there was only one choice. Sitting on a stool at the counter, I would watch the waitress drop three scoops of vanilla ice cream into a tulip-shaped dish. Next would come the part I was waiting for: She would top the ice cream with a thick blanket of hot, rich fudge. She'd bring the delight

over and push it in front of me. The fudge would still be steaming. Steaming! That first bite into the contrasting textures and temperatures would send me into a state of near-nirvana. Today's version just doesn't cut it. The ice cream isn't nearly as smooth and rich, and what is labeled as hot fudge tastes more like cold chocolate syrup. I've checked with my brother and he corroborates my findings (no wonder we're related). I think ice cream parlors ought to come clean and call it like it is: just rename the damn dish Cold Chocolate Syrup over Vanilla Ice Sundae.

One reason Matt Drayton longs for a certain flavor of ice cream is that he wants to freeze time. His life is changing, but in far more serious ways than just ice cream flavors. Matt's daughter, Joanna, nicknamed Joey and played by Katharine Houghton, Hepburn's real-life niece, has brought home the man she intends to marry, Dr. John Prentice. Sidney Poitier plays

the brilliant physician who is, of course, black. This landmark film, produced and directed by Stanley Kramer, was groundbreaking in its treatment of interracial marriage.

The sparks begin to fly when Matt and Christina must confront the liberal ideals they instilled in their daughter as she was growing up. The ideals by which they profess to live are further put to the test when Joey invites not only her intended, but also his parents, to dinner.

When I first saw the film shortly after its release (I've seen it many times since), it made me feel uncomfortable. Intellectually, I delighted in its message, that skin color shouldn't matter, and that a person's character and talent are what counts, or should. But this was, after all, only three years after enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Seventeen southern states still made miscegenation, sexual relations between a Negro and a white, illegal. So, while I gave

lip service at the time to being a liberal, and I would have given my prized collection of Elvis Presley records (well, maybe not the whole collection), to have the opportunity to hug and kiss Mr. Poitier, on the inside, where vestiges of my conservative, southern upbringing still resided, I felt uncomfortable seeing a black man and a white woman embracing and kissing on the screen.

I felt even more uncomfortable seeing a black man and a white woman married to each other in real life. Martin and Sally (not their real names) were friends of good friends of mine. We hung out socially, and in time they became my friends too. Martin, tall and slim but not skinny, had the finely sculpted features one would imagine of an Ethiopian prince. He was the blackest person I had ever seen. A statue carved out of ebony. Sally, on the other hand, also tall and slim, had the very white, creamy complexion of a porcelain doll. Martin was from the north and Sally was from deep in the heart of Dixie. When they married, Sally's parents disowned her.

The couple chose to live in Manhattan because they felt the metropolitan area's melting pot of

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