

Pagliacci

Opera Preview

By
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On April 27 and 29, 2012, the New Orleans Opera Association will be performing “Pagliacci” by Ruggero Leoncavallo, a true icon of the Italian Opera Repertoire. Usually this opera is accompanied by Mascagni’s one act “Cavalleria Rusticana”, but Robert Lyall, the Artistic Director Of the New Orleans Opera, decided to substitute Carl Orff’s “Carmina Burana”, utilizing the combined choruses of Loyola University Opera Chorus and the New Orleans Vocal Arts Chorale, to create a truly spectacular operatic experience for New Orleans opera goers.

“Pagliacci” is considered “iconic” in the Italian repertoire, not only because it symbolizes a major shift in operatic music from the Romantic period to the gritty “verismo” of the late 19th century, but also because it draws upon the at least 500 year old traditions of the “Commedia dell’ Arte,” which some say originated in the Italian Renaissance, while others date the masques and some of the characters to comic playwrights like

Plautus (as rendered by the Broadway Play, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum”), from the time of Ancient Rome.

The “Commedia dell’ Arte” refers to the improvisational comedic performances of touring street crews of actors, utilizing “stock” characters (“tipi fissi”) with easily recognized costumes and masks, but with plot variations and symbolic gestures created by the actors themselves. So popular were these performances that much of Europe developed their own versions while basically retaining the “zaniness” (from Zanni or Jester) of the experience.

Eventually playwrights like Carlo Goldoni (“Il Servitore di due Padroni,” sometimes referred to as “Arlecchino” or Harlequin) and Moliere (Les Fourberies de Scapin) wrote specific plots and dialogues for their comedies, without destroying the improvisational preferences of many different types of performers over the years. (For example, Arlecchino’s slapping of two sticks together gave rise to the “slapstick” routines of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton in silent films; the humpback nastiness of Pulcinello influenced the “Punch and Judy” puppetry of children’s shows; and Pagliacci itself was reflected in the much darker

variations of actors like Lon Chaney in “Laugh, Clown, Laugh!” Some even believe that the character of Polonius in Shakespeare’s Hamlet was based on Pantalone, “il vecchio” or silly old man)

The “stock characters” from the Commedia dell’Arte that we see reproduced in Leoncavallo’s “Pagliacci” include “Pagliaccio” the clown, “Colombina” the lady’s maid, “Arlecchino”, the mischievous servant, and Taddeo, the fool. However, these are the standard characters of the “play within the play” of the opera. The “true” characters or actors, are Canio, the leader of the troupe who plays Pagliaccio; Nedda, Canio’s wife who plays Colombina; Tonio, who plays Taddeo; Beppe who plays Colombina’s lover Arlecchino; and Silvio who is actually Nedda’s lover.

But the opera itself is a tragedy, not a comedy. Leoncavallo was born in Naples in 1857, and spent most of his early life in Calabria. He returned to Naples, studied at the Conservatory there and spent several years teaching. After seeing Mascagni’s “Cavalleria”, he decided to write “Pagliacci”, his most successful work, and the only one which is still part of the standard repertory today. He set it in the environment he knew well,

among the “commonfolk” (not upper class), people of Calabria, based on a court case he claimed was adjudicated by his magistrate father.

The work premiered in Milan in 1892, two years after the debut of “Cavalleria”, and was an instant triumph. From 1893 on, it was most frequently performed on a double bill with the Mascagni piece (frequently referred to as “Cav and Pag”). Enrico Caruso’s version of the aria “Vesti La Giubba” (“Put on the Costume”) according to Caruso, became the first record to sell a million copies (from 1902-1907).

In the Prologue, the deformed Tonio, dressed as Taddeo the fool, addresses the audience with the phrase: “Si Puo`?...Si Puo`?...Signore! Signori!” He informs them that what they are about to see is based on an actual event (“a bleeding slice of life”), and that actors are human and have feelings too.

Act One opens with the troupe entering the village on the Feast of the Assumption and Canio telling the villagers that the commedia will begin an hour before sunset. As Nedda steps down from the cart, Tonio offers his hand but Canio brushes him aside to help her down himself. Several of the villagers

tease Canio that Tonio is planning an affair with Nedda. Canio protests that he may play the foolish husband in the comedy but would never tolerate such a thing in real life (“Un tal gioco”). When asked if he suspects her, he replies “no” and kisses her on the forehead.

He and Beppo go to the tavern leaving Nedda alone. Nedda is frightened by Canio’s reaction, and when Tonio returns and clumsily confesses his own love for her, she laughs and strikes him with a whip. Silvio, who is actually Nedda’s lover, returns from the tavern shortly afterward and asks her to elope with him after the performance. She agrees. Tonio who has been eavesdropping goes back to the tavern and tells Canio to return so he can determine for himself if Nedda is faithful. Canio and Tonio then go back to Nedda’s dwelling but Silvio escapes without revealing his identity. Nedda nevertheless calls out to Silvio, “I will always be yours’.”

When Canio insists that Nedda reveal the name of her lover she refuses. He threatens her with a knife but Beppo intervenes. Tonio tells Canio that her lover will reveal himself at the play. Canio is left alone to put on his costume, singing “Vesti la Giubba”, and trying desperately to get into the

mood for a comic performance (“...Ridi Pagliaccio!”, “Laugh, Clown!”).

Act Two opens with Nedda, dressed as Colombina, collecting the money for the performance from the assembling villagers, and whispering a warning to Silvio. In the play within the play, Pagliaccio has gone away until morning and Colombina awaits Arlecchino’s visit. While Arlecchino is singing under her window, Taddeo bursts into her room and announces his love for her. She mocks him and lets Arlecchino in through the window. Arlecchino in turn boxes Taddeo’s ears and kicks him out of the room. The audience laughs.

As Colombina and Arlecchino dine, he gives her a sleeping potion for her to drug Pagliaccio so they can elope. Taddeo returns to warn them that Pagliaccio is suspicious and is on his way home. Arlecchino leaves by the window and Colombina tells him “I will always be yours”.

As Canio enters dressed as Pagliaccio, he hears Nedda’s farewell to Arlecchino and exclaims: “Name of God! Those are the same words!” Unable to continue with the play, Canio loses control and demands to know her lover’s name. When Nedda tries to distract him by calling him

Pagliaccio, he replies: “No! Pagliaccio non son!” and states that if his face is pale it is not from stage makeup but from the shame she has brought upon him. The crowd cheers his emotional performance.

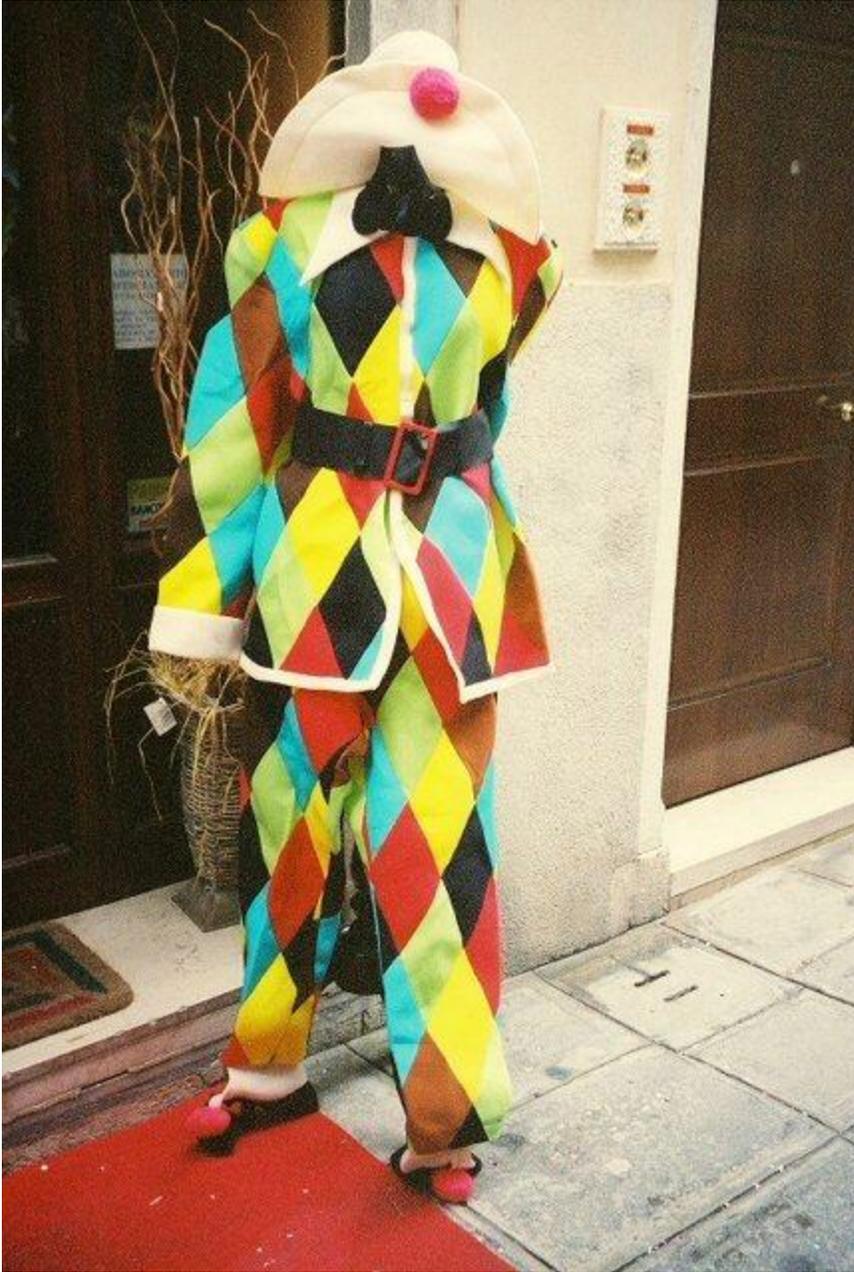
When Nedda announces that only the innocent Arlecchino has visited her, he demands to know the name of her real lover. She swears she will never tell him, and the villagers then realize that this is not the comedy they were expecting. Canio, in a rage, grabs a knife from the table and stabs Nedda who cries out to Silvio to save her. Silvio fights his way through the crowd but is too late. Canio then stabs Silvio, and with both now dead declares, “La commedia e` finita!” (The comedy is ended!)



Ruggero Leoncavallo, 1857-1919



Enrico Caruso as Pagliacci



**Arlecchino's Costume displayed during
The Carnival in Venice, 2003.**