

ENCORE OPERA



FOUNDED BY STEVE SCHWARTZ

For February 15, 2019

COMING ATTRACTI0NS & DISTRACTIONS

BY GENE MARTIN

In my intro to a Friday Encore performance, I mentioned that Encore Theater will close sometime this year to get new seats, a new rug, and a paint job. No technical changes were made nor, so far we know, budgeted for the future. My suggestions for technical improvements included stage flooring, replacing the back wall with a curtain, stage lighting, the control booth and adding back-screen projection. Oh well!

We don't know yet when the theater will be closed -nor for how long- for the cosmetic and comfort renovations. That's largely understandable since renovations rarely stay on schedule, but the ambiguity itself causes us problems. When we know anything more, you will too. If you learn anything, please share!

NEXT WEEK

On February 22, we will show Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, a *Singspiel*, or drama that includes both singing and spoken dialogue. Mozart's music is exquisite but as Steve says, the plot/libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder is confused, illogical and unrealistic I will add it also includes explicit racism and assertions that women are inadequate without male guidance. It may be *opera buffo* but that's no excuse; there is none for racism or misogyny. So, why play it? Or, why not? More on that next week.



This Week's Program

Cavalleria Rusticana *and Pagliacci*

BY STEVE SCHWARTZ

Runtime: 140 minutes • Filmed in Sicily in 1982 by UNITEL • DVD released 2005 by Deutsche Grammophon • MPAA NOT RATED • ASIN: B0007P0LNE

These two operas are so intertwined that they are usually presented as a double bill and often called the "Heavenly Twins." They are considered to represent the epitome of the *Verismo* school of opera. "*Verismo*" is from the Italian word for "truth" or "reality" and the *verismo* movement in opera was essentially born in 1875 with *Carmen*. *Carmen* shocked audiences with its peasant heroine and her murder on stage. *Verismo* in the arts is not easily defined, but an opera of that sort is typically a story about peasants or working class people. Their personal interactions were always depicted as gritty and passionate, usually, as in today's tales, with strong sexual overtones. By about 1910, the movement had run its course in the sense that 20th century operas usually have ordinary people in real situations.

I comment on each of today's twin-bill and identify their primary cast, individually. But they are alike in some specific ways.

Both were composed in their composer's youth, and neither man ever came close to matching his initial masterpiece.

Both are seen today in the form of films rather than stage presentations and both were the product of that creative operatic genius, Franco Zeffirelli.

Both were filmed in 1982, both star the then-young tenor who was at the peak of his long and brilliant singing career, Placido Domingo.

In both, the orchestra and chorus of La Scala are conducted by Georges Prêtre.

Finally, while I own several creditable versions of each opera, I think that none of them comes up to the standards of these two first-rate productions.

Cavalleria Rusticana (1890) is set in a small village in Sicily. The people are all poor and deeply religious Catholics. The opera's actions are driven by the passions aroused by sexual infidelity in defiance of express social norms which typically require the murder of the guilty adulterer(s).

The plot in the second opera, *Pagliacci* (1892) has a group of itinerant actors in a generic Italianate and even more bucolic setting. The story is also about marital infidelity, and the outcome is driven by the same code.

In *Pagliacci*, there is a secondary theme that adds a moralistic note. It's in the form of a 'play-within-a-play', where the skit on stage uses classic Italian *Comedia Dell'Arte* stock characters and we see life follow art.

CAVALIERIA RUSTICANA CAST

Placido Domingo, tenor: **Turiddu**, a young man and our anti-hero

Elena Obraztsova, mezzo-soprano: **Santuzza**, a young towns-lady

Fedora Barbieri, mezzo-soprano: **Mamma Lucia**, Turiddu's mother

Renato Bruson, baritone: **Alfio**, a carter (itinerant peddler)

Axelle Gall, soprano: **Lola**, Alfio's wife

The opera's title is Italian for "Rustic Chivalry", but there is nothing noble or chivalrous here. This small village is in a sparsely populated and unsophisticated area of Sicily in the early 1800's. The story moves quickly, everything happening in one day. To understand it, one needs to know what happened before it begins.

Turiddu is a young local who recently returned home after serving in the army. He had been engaged to **Lola**, but during his absence, she married **Alfio**. The unspoken sense of the story is that the sensual Lola was too hot to trot to wait for Turiddu, so she settled for Alfio who is a carter, traveling from town to town in his horse-drawn wagon. Thus Lola's husband is away much of the time.

On his return, finding Lola married, Turiddu took up with another young lady of the village, **Santuzza**. She was an innocent until then but soon becomes pregnant. Then Lola, who is really the heavy in this drama, seduced Turiddu, whereupon he unceremoniously dumped Santuzza, leaving her alone, pregnant and desperate. Thus the scene is set for a torrid and passionate tale of "honor", Sicilian style.

As written by Pietro Mascagni the opera began with Turiddu offstage singing the praises of his beloved Lola. However, taking advantage of the extra dimensions that a film production can provide, and to avoid any doubt about the story, Zeffirelli opens the movie by showing Turiddu waking up in Lola's bed before dawn and getting ready to leave before her husband Alfio returns from his latest marketing trip. It is Easter morning, and everyone knows he will be back in time for Easter Mass services.

But Turiddu has dallied too long. (By now, most of you have heard my opinion of operatic tenors: they're always portrayed as brave, passionate and stupid.) So before the day is out, this tenor will pay for his delay.

Outside, we see a young woman skulking about, and we can guess she is Santuzza. She sees Turiddu sneaking out of the house where Lola is supposed to be home alone. It's clear that this is not the first time he and Lola have taken advantage of her husband's extended absences. Lola is even shown standing on the balcony in her flowing white nightgown, waving goodbye as Turiddu rides away on his horse. As he rides across the Sicilian countryside (displayed beautifully in Zeffirelli's film) he encounters Alfio returning home. Alfio notes that Turiddu comes from the direction of his house, but says nothing.

Back in the town square, with the town's sole church in the background, the townspeople are getting ready to attend an Easter Mass. Mascagni combines ecclesiastic harmonies with dark passages that bode the unhappy events that we know will not be long in coming.

As the townspeople are shown airing out their bedclothes on this lovely spring morning (another Zeffirelli touch) we see Santuzza go to the wine shop run by **Mamma Lucia** to inquire about her son Turiddu. He is supposedly in another village, so when Lucia learns he was seen this morning near Lola's house, she can sense trouble brewing. After Lucia leaves, Turiddu arrives.

Santuzza and Turiddu have a long and emotional scena; she begs him to return to her, and all his attempts to evade her confrontation are fruitless. Finally, when she won't relent, he throws her to the ground making it clear that she's now entirely on her own. She remains on the ground, sobbing, as he enters the church. Lola, the cause of the tragedy, appears. Before she enters the church, she mocks the unhappy girl about her situation knowing Santuzza has been excommunicated for her unmarried pregnancy.

This conflict adds to the drama felt by the audience in a stage presentation where there is no movement on-stage. (The part of Santuzza is a tough role, for it calls for a mezzo with great singing artistry who must also convey her character's total helplessness. As you will see, Mme. Obraztsova carries it off beautifully.)

Zeffirelli again deviates from Mascagni's script to display his deft directorial touch, shifting the camera to outside the town to show a panoramic view of the Sicilian countryside. Santuzza walks about silently, and we see a long shot of the village in the distance. As the camera returns to the town, we see the townspeople filing into the church.

The townspeople await the traditional Easter procession of the devout carrying centuries-old religious icons into the church for the Easter services inside. During this time, while we hear Mascagni's soaring *Intermezzo*, not a word is spoken. In another Zeffirelli touch, Santuzza enters the church and stands silently, watching as Turiddu and Lola exchange telling glances. Obviously, none of this could have been shown in a stage setting, but the dramatic effect is nothing short of electric.

Typically, at this point, the curtain would end the first act, then rise to begin the second with the Easter Mass which soothes the audience and ready them for the second act's violent conclusion.

But this opera was composed by Mascagni in a competition for one-act operas. So he came up with a simple but dramatically effective solution: he composed the famous *Intermezzo*, perhaps the best known piece in the entire opera, during which no action takes place on stage, thereby qualifying his entry as a one-act opera.

As written by Mascagni, Santuzza remains where Turiddu threw her during the *Intermezzo*, further emphasizing her plight. In the film, she leaves the church and encounters Alfio while she is feeling most vulnerable. In her grief, Santuzza reveals that Lola and Turridu are lovers and Alfio has been cuckolded.

The church bells ring out wildly to announce that the services have ended, and the townspeople exit the church and gather outside to enjoy the conviviality of a lovely Easter afternoon. Turiddu, however, only wants to get drunk, and sing about the joys of wine.

This gay aura quickly changes when Alfio arrives and insults Turiddu by refusing to drink with him. Words quickly lead to a traditional Sicilian challenge to a duel to the death: Turiddu embraces Alfio and bites his ear. Turiddu, overcome with guilt, agrees to meet Alfio behind the town square. Being drunk, Turiddu knows he will lose the fight so he sings one of the most famous tenor arias in the repertory, "Addio a la Mama", bidding his mother farewell and begging her to take care of Santuzza.

The knife duel is over quickly. Those who have watched the movie *Godfather III* have seen a long-view camera depiction similar to what we see here. On stage, the fight is never depicted, but is announced by blood-curdling screams by a townswoman who shouts from off-stage that Turiddu has been injured and then, a few seconds later, that he has been killed. In Zeffirelli's film, we see a long-view shot of two men in a tragically brief duel. With that, the tragedy is over, and the camera pans back to the townswomen left to console one another.

I PAGLIACCI CAST

Placido Domingo, tenor: **Canio**, leader of the troupe

Teresa Stratas, soprano: **Nedda**, his wife

Juan Pons, baritone: **Tonio**, second banana in the troupe

Florino Scalla, baritone: **Silvio** a villager and Nedda's secret lover....

Alberto Rinaldi, tenor: **Beppe** third banana of the troupe

I PAGLIACCI

The title is Italian for "The Players" or "The Clowns," a name given to many of the numerous bands of actors, usually mimes and comedians, who traveled to small towns across the Italian peninsula playing one or another of a group of trite stories about stock characters who were familiar to everyone in the audience: a woman, Columbine, and two men, Harlequin and Pantalone.

In this opera set in the mid-19th century, the composer, Ruggero Leoncavallo, uses the familiar dramatic device of a play-within-a-play. The play-acting on the troupe's portable stage is a case of art imitating life, because the husband Pantalone (or Clown) is being deceived by his stage wife, Columbine both on-stage and off.

After a brief cinematic introduction, **Tonio**, dressed in his clown's outfit, comes from behind the stage curtain to sing his famous 'Prologue', in which he tells the on-stage audience and us that the playwright-composer has given him the task of recounting the heart-breaking tale of what it's like for a comedian to suffer the pains of real life, having to hide his pains from his audience and to pretend to be laughing.

ACT ONE

A troupe of itinerant actors arrives in a small Italian village to perform a hokey play where the wife is cheating on her unsuspecting husband. **Canio** bangs on his bass drum to announce that the show starts at 11:00 P.M. as the other players, dressed in their costumes, do various shtiks to increase the crowd's interest. The crowd disperses to go to church.

We meet **Nedda**, Canio's wife. They're the stars of the opera, and are sung by two first-rate artists: Teresa Stratas and Placido Domingo. Trust me when I tell you that the roles could not be played any better, either musically or dramatically.

As Canio climbs down from the troupe's cart, Tonio helps Nedda alight. But his attentions are a little too familiar, and the jealous Canio roughs him up. Tension is already in the air. Tonio is a hunchback and unappealing physically. He has a chip on his shoulder and is in lust with Nedda, who has no use for him at all. The stage crowd sees this, but assumes it's part of the build-up for the evening's performance.

Some townsmen invite Canio to join them for a drink. He accepts, throws aside his donkey whip, and enters the tent to change out of his costume. Canio invites Tonio to join them, but he declines. A villager jokes that Tonio wants to stay behind to make love to Nedda. This enrages Canio, who says that in the role of Pagliaccio, were his make-believe wife to do that, he would trounce the lovers or else make the best of it. But if he were to catch his real-life wife, Nedda, in such a situation, the end of the play would be very different.

We see that Nedda is clearly alarmed, and we can guess why. Repeating that he adores his wife, Canio accompanies the villagers to the tavern. Alone, Nedda sings of the joys of being a bird, free to fly about the sky unhindered. We know she is unhappy with her life but feels trapped. Seeing her alone, Tonio makes a play for her. She rejects him, saying, save your advances for the stage.

When he continues, she rejects him more forcefully. But he won't stop until Nedda seizes Canio's whip and strikes Tonio. His wound is minor, but, worse, his pride has been hurt. He leaves, ominously telling her she will regret her action.

Nedda is again alone when **Silvio** enters. He is Nedda's secret lover and she tells him of her encounter with Tonio. Silveo begs her to run away from her boorish husband and unhappy existence to start life anew with him. She is tempted, but she hesitates, knowing her husband's temper and his intense jealousy,. Silvio presses his case in a sensual encounter that Ms. Stratas plays beautifully under Zeffirelli's astute direction. However, before they become too romantic, Canio suddenly shows up. He has been brought back by Tonio, eager for revenge against Nedda.

Silvio runs away just in time, telling Nedda he'll return to take her away after the show. Canio follows him but soon returns, explaining that Silvio, as a local, knowing the backwoods trails, escaped. In a blinding jealous rage, Canio demands Nedda's lover's name. She refuses. He menaces her with a knife, saying she is his, now and forever. And we know he means it.

But another member of the troupe, **Beppe**, arrives just in time to wrest the knife from Canio's hand and tell him that the audience is arriving so he must get ready to do the show.

Now we have come to what arguably is the most famous tenor aria in the opera firmament: "*Vesti la giubba*" (Put on your costume) with the even more famous line "*Ridi Pagliaccio*" (Laugh clown).

As Cannio puts on his clown costume, he heartbreakingly voices the tragic fate of every clown who must go on stage, laughing on the outside, while his heart is aching. The orchestra repeats his theme to end Act One and plays an intermezzo that, while not on a par with that in *Cavalleria*, is quite lovely.

ACT TWO

On the stage is the temporary stage where the players will perform roles that are like their real-life relationships. This irony is central to the opera, and adds greatly to its pathos. Beppe blows his trumpet and Canio bangs his drum while members of the stage audience sing of their excitement as they take their temporary seats to watch the show.

The set consists of a minimal household with a small table and two chairs. Nedda, plays the role of the wife, "Columbine", singing that she is waiting for her husband, implying that he's expected to be late. Tonio, singing the role of "Taddeo", enters carrying a basket. She asks if he brought the chicken she ordered. He tells her to look in the basket, and when she does he tries to grab her. She gets free and goes to the window to signal to her play lover, "Harlequin," sung by Beppe.

In tones rife with sardonic inflection, "Taddeo" sings that she is innocent and pure. Beppe as her play lover, "Harlequin," arrives with a bottle of wine and kicks "Taddeo" out. "Taddeo" goes quietly, saying he'll stand guard outside. As the make-believe lovers, "Columbine" and "Harlequin" begin to eat, "Taddeo" bursts in to warn that her husband is coming. "Harlequin" leaves hurriedly, just as Canio, now "Pagliaccio," arrives.

Up to now, the action on stage has been part of the script. But, now there is an edge to the on-stage husband's words when he demands to know the name of his wife's lover. We know that Canio is now functioning as her real husband, but the stage audience (including Silvio) is not sure whether they're watching reality or good acting. Nedda, as "Columbine" is also unsure, and struggles to stay in her role while becoming ever more fearful. "Pagliaccio" utters the same demands he made that afternoon when, as Canio, he demanded that his wife reveal the name of her real lover. As we hear Tonio again sing that "Columbine" is pure, Nedda, still confused by the situation, continues to address her husband as "Pagliaccio". Listen as Placido Domingo's voice becomes harsher as he replies that he is no longer the Clown and his honor as a MAN has been defiled. How, he wonders, could he have loved one so vile as this cheating wife. Angrily, he demands vengeance.

Nedda tries telling him that if she is so worthless, he can send her away. But he says she will not escape until she reveals her lover's name. Hoping desperately that staying in character will save her, Nedda sings to "Pagliaccio" that nothing amiss occurred.

But Canio is completely out of control and will not be dissuaded from his quest. The tension is palpable and even some in the stage audience realize that this may not be play-acting.

Beppe bursts onto the stage and tries to get between the now-battling couple, hoping to prevent disaster. But he is restrained by the opera's villain, Tonio, who is happy to witness a tragedy.

For the last time, Canio demands the name of her lover and when she refuses, he stabs her. Dying, she calls for Silvio to save her and when Silvio rushes to try to help her, Canio also kills him.

Standing in the midst of confusion and carnage, Canio utters the opera's famous closing line: "*La Comedia e finita*" (the comedy is ended).

That great curtain line was written to be spoken by the baritone, Tonio. Since he sang the *Prologue*, that would have given better symmetry to the opera. But since tenors have always held sway in back-stage opera politics, some early Canio appropriated the line for himself, and it has remained Canio's ever since.

Either way, the audience, both in the film and in the opera's venue, sits in stunned silence. The story is indeed over.

Steve Schwartz 

OPERA NOTES FOR :

This Friday at 1:00 PM at Encore Theater

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