

Cover Story: Opera in Omaha

Dazzling 'Pagliacci' from Opera Omaha

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Tonio DiPaolo as Pagliaccio, Kelly Kaduce as Nedda and Lee Gregory as Silvio

Opera Omaha's "Pagliacci"

October 16 and 18

Friday, Oct. 16 at 7:30 p.m.

Sunday, Oct. 18 at 2 p.m.

Orpheum Theater, 409 S. 16th St.

Tickets start at \$19

346-7372 or operaomaha.org

"The theater and life," Canio shrugs, "are not the same thing at all."

Turns out that he is wrong and tragically so, at least in the world of "Pagliacci," the towering Opera Omaha production on the Orpheum stage this Friday and Sunday.

Let's first dispense with a couple of tried and true axioms of opera. Yes, the 1892 Ruggero Leoncavallo classic revolves around themes of (you guessed it) love, betrayal and murder. And, yes, you can count on the fact that any knife flashed in the first act – even if done so impotently, so to speak – is sure to be bloodied in the second.

Tonio DiPaolo, last seen with Opera Omaha in 2000's "Tosca," plays Canio. The leader of a commedia dell'arte troupe, he becomes Pagliaccio the clown for village audiences in this play within a play. Canio is married to the much younger Nedda (Kelly Kaduce), a beauty who falls for the ruggedly handsome townie Silvio (Lee Gregory).

The chemistry between the young lovers is real. Kaduce and Gregory are fortunate enough to be a married couple landing the same gig in this must-see opera, one of my very favorites over a decade of sitting in the dark at the Orpheum.

Theater and life intersect when Canio, aware of Nedda's plans to flee with her dashing beau, breaks role in the company's evening performance to become her fate-in-face-paint accuser.

"People are pulled to reality shows," DiPaolo explained to the *City Weekly* in a telephone interview on a snowy Saturday morning, "and Pagliacci is perhaps the first reality show."

Adding a voyeuristic, hall of mirrors effect to the whole affair is the fact that we, the audience, observe the village audience observing the action on a stage atop a stage.

"It's so real," the stunned villagers sing, unaware that the enraged Canio is no longer acting.

Kaduce may well be nervous in her first ever turn as Nedda, but it didn't show during a rehearsal four days before opening night.

From the trills of her lilting "bird song" to the chills of her (spoiler alert) dying breath, Kaduce's piercing, crystalline soprano belies the notion that this is her debut in one of opera's most bewitching roles.

Spoiler alert? Sorry, but the idea of a soprano getting it in the end (add this to the list of axioms above) is no more a "reveal" than is the shaky longevity of the poor schmuck in a lowly red uniform on an away team in a "Star Trek" episode.

Nedda's rather plain, everyday garb in the first act of an opera updated to the Gatsby era gives way to a voluminous, sparkling, blindingly white tulle ensemble in the second act as her character, Columbina, takes the stage for the eager townsfolk.

Gregory's too-brief stage time in this unusually short opera had me pining for more and Todd Thomas is a delight as Tonio, the lumbering oaf of a man who bangs the drum to summon the audience just as he bangs the drum of jealousy that leads to the demise of our heroine (anti-heroine?).

And those familiar faces in the Opera Omaha Chorus? The ones who enchant with their sing-song, ding-dong intonations mirroring the campanile calling the town to vespers? That would be such community theatre favorites as Eduardo Millan, Judi Turneten and Becky Lowe.

It all plays out on a magnificent set, again one of my personal favorites. A multilayered expanse of speckled marble evoking a clinging-to-a-hillside Italian village provides an array of focal points for action dappled by Ben Percy's lush, variegated lighting design.

The New Yorker has lit everything from "Riverdance" to Broadway shows and his work here adds much to an airy, sun-kissed, infinite horizon August day before evening and the play within a play casts shadows as dark as the poisoned heart of the clown with murder on his mind.

Pearcy, an artist in the truest sense, is a frequent collaborator with James Turrell, the internationally acclaimed light artist now in preparation for a major 2012 retrospective at the fabled Guggenheim in New York. The installation-based exhibition will then set off to travel the globe.

It's unfair that any work of art is measured by a single moment. A clinker, for example, when trying in vain to hold the long note on the word "free" in the penultimate line of "The Star Spangled Banner" is a make or break event – the difference between success and a slowly deflating tire. And the fate of Puccini's "Turandot" too often rides on a single, equally critical and taxing moment in "Nessun Dorma."

And so it is with the Garnett Bruce-directed, Richard Buckley-conducted "Pagliacci" and its "Vesti la Giubba" (Put on the Costume), one of the most familiar arias in all of opera.

Not to fear. Tenor DiPaolo absolutely nails it. An unforgettable, frozen in time, mascara-smear-by-tears visage, one of the most revered in all of opera, is sure to have an emotionally drained house leaping to its feet as the curtain is drawn for intermission and murmurs of "Did you see that? Did you hear it?" reverberate throughout the lobby.

"It's Canio's realization, understood by everyone but him, that he is a clown," said DiPaolo. "Not just on stage as Pagliacci, but a clown in real life as well."

Comparisons are inevitable whenever one encounters a heard-it-a-million-times-before sound bite that has become such an oft-sampled slice of popular culture (we'll pause here while some of you launch YouTube to search for "Vesti la Giubba").

The youngest in the lobby, those whose parents are wise enough to introduce their children to the arts at an early age, will squeal with delight as they jabber about the "Sponge Bob Squarepants" song they just heard. Older kids will conjure images of the oddly quaffed Sideshow Bob doing the same number on "The Simpsons."

The TV Land generation will wink and nod while reminiscing of the Joker in the original "Batman" TV series. Others will debate the merits of DiPaolo's performance against the scene in "The Untouchables" where Robert De Niro as Al Capone wipes away his tears to allow a demonic smile to spread across his mug when a henchman interrupts the wistful aria to whisper in the mobster's ear news of a successful hit.

Seniors, for perhaps days on end, will sing the lyrics of the 1954 song "Mr. Sandman" featuring the line, "Give him a lonely heart like Pagliacci, and lots of wavy hair like Liberace" while their now mid-life offspring hum along to Smokey Robinson and the Miracles' "just like Pagliacci did I try to keep my sadness hid" from "The Tears of a Clown."

Now I've gone and done it! Three songs I can't possibly get out of my head!

Then there will surely be a whole subset of lobby chatter centering on ... well, you get the idea.

Suffice it to say that this reviewer won't soon forget DiPaolo's take on the piece that begins with a tortured laugh before crumbling into convulsive sobs.

And what exactly are the rules of etiquette for those Italiano pecks on the cheek? Should they be air kisses, or is full slobber in order? Is it left, then right? Vice versa? Decorum aside, my bet is that the dreamily delicious "Pagliacci" will have lucky opera fans from the Old Market to Wahoo adopting the Continental form of greeting.