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Focus on role, not on greats who've played it

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From left, Tonio DiPaolo as Canio, Kelly Kaduce as Nedda and Lee Gregory as Silvio in Opera Omaha's production of "Pagliacci."

Tenor Tonio DiPaolo feels the pressure whenever he stars in "Pagliacci."

Every great tenor from Enrico Caruso to Luciano Pavarotti specialized in this work, which opens Opera Omaha's 2009-10 season this weekend at the Orpheum Theater.

Caruso even made history with it. His 1907 recording of "Vesti la giubba," the opera's most famous aria, became the first record in history to sell more than a million units.

How does DiPaolo compete with the likes of Caruso, Pavarotti and other legendary "Pagliacci" singers?

"There's no way to compete with legends," DiPaolo said during a break in rehearsals. "I try not to think about those guys. Instead, I focus on my character."

DiPaolo, an Opera Omaha guest artist, plays Canio, the aging, controlling and ultimately homicidal leader of an itinerant acting troupe.

When Canio discovers his young wife, Nedda, is having an affair, he begins applying his clown makeup while singing "Vesti la giubba" ("Put on your costume"). He becomes obsessed with murderous revenge.

And yet, DiPaolo seems to think Canio is a sympathetic character.

"Canio has devoted his whole life to an art that's lost its favor with the public," DiPaolo explains. "Unfortunately, he also neglected his wife."

DiPaolo is quick to point out that Canio is the one betrayed.

True enough.

But does that justify murder?

DiPaolo's young daughter wondered the same thing when she first saw the opera.

"She just couldn't understand why Canio didn't get a divorce instead," DiPaolo said.

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