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Review: Passionate affair raw with emotion

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WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



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Raw, human emotions bubble through every scene of "Pagliacci," a gritty, tragic opera presented by Opera Omaha. The cast performed the tale of love, jealousy and vengeance with pathos and passion.

Opera Omaha's "Pagliacci" is no laughing matter.

This production of Leoncavallo's tragic opera — with its melancholy, murderous clown — takes itself very seriously.

In fact, Friday's opening night performance at the Orpheum Theater was remarkable both for its musical intensity and melodramatic acting. And that's exactly what Leoncavallo would have wanted.

His 1892 masterpiece is widely regarded as the crown jewel of verismo opera. It's an operatic style known for its gritty, even violent realism. Garnett Bruce, the company's stage director, clearly relishes the style.

He called on his outstanding cast to perform with pathos and passion. They deftly delivered the goods. At their best, they sang with voluptuous voices. Mostly importantly, they imbued their characters with a welcome degree of raw human emotion.

"Pagliacci" tells the story of love, jealousy and vengeance in a company of itinerant actors. The opera is arguably the theater world's best-known play-within-a-play.

In the first act, the aging actor Canio threatens murderous revenge after he learns that his much younger wife Nedda is having an affair. In the second act, Canio, Nedda and the other actors stage a play about (what else?) infidelity and murderous revenge.

The climax of the first act comes when an anguished Canio, realizing that the show must go on, puts on his makeup while singing the famed aria "Vesti la giubba."

Tenor Tonio DiPaolo took a sort of method-acting approach to delivering this classic tune. He didn't perform it as a virtuoso showpiece, belting out pristine, Pavarotti-like high C's. He didn't give us a concert rendition.

Rather, he integrated the aria into his acting, so that the theatrical weeping, half-singing and full-throated singing intermingled, becoming equal parts of a whole. I prefer the virtuoso version — I'm a sucker for high C's. But I concede that DiPaolo was effective.

Soprano Kelly Kaduce (Nedda) was without question the best of the singers. She was strong in every respect. Her voice was as plush as a feather pillow, her tone golden. Moreover, she created a character that was multifaceted and believable — her Nedda was both caring and callous.

Baritone Lee Gregory (as Nedda's lover Silvio) also distinguished himself with an expressive, velvety voice. Baritone Todd Thomas (Tonio) sang with a burnished, powerful instrument. And he created a character that was as ugly and spiteful as anything you'll find in Italian opera.

Conductor Richard Buckley, leading the Omaha Symphony from the pit, proved to be a sensitive and insightful accompanist. He was careful to bring out all of Leoncavallo's rich orchestral colors. His tempi were flexible and expertly matched the singers' phrasing.

The Opera Omaha Chorus, for its part, sang with bell-like purity and sweet lyricism.

Friday's performance was visually splendid. Roberto Lagana's set transforms the stage into a beautiful, ivy-covered Italian village. The production's costumes are colorful and believable.

The opera repeats Sunday afternoon. You'll cry bloody tears if you miss it.

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