

CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA and I PAGLIACCI

Virginia Opera Company
Harrison Opera House
Mar.9-16 (757)623-1223

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large. Broadway has not found its way to Chrysler Hall this year. On the other hand, musical matters are very much alive and well at the Harrison Opera House. In an overall season of striking productions, Virginia Opera puts the final gem in place with CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA and I PAGLIACCI. These Bobbsey twins of opera are often done together. What is unique about the pairing in this production is that they both take place in the same Sicilian village. The highly inventive stage director Lorna Haywood came up with the idea and it works extremely well.

There is a stellar cast, a perfect cast in fact, to help her bring her concept to triumphant fruition. Jan Dutton, Santuzza, fresh from the Metropolitan Opera, is a vibrant mezzo-soprano with a voice of many colors and shadings. It's a thrilling performance as she vocally soars above the large chorus and orchestra seemingly without effort. The philandering Turiddu, as sung and superbly acted by Gustavo Lopez Manzitti, is a lusty, handsome fellow, with a dark side, who probably looks in the mirror a lot. Lopez Manzitti has a full bodied rich tenor that fills the hall with glorious sound. We don't hear tenors like him very often in Hampton Roads. Super baritone Andrew Oakden is excellent as a lively clever carter who suffers betrayal by his wife, Lola. Kristin Rothfus makes her an appealing but naughty, saucy slut. Genevieve Despres is a warm, compassionate Mamma Lucia. Chorus master Joseph Walsh has produced a wonderful ensemble of singers. They rise far above the usual peasants in the village square. The large set is by scene designer Ron Keller. It works most effectively for both operas.

CAVALLERIA brought instant fame to composer Pietro Mascagni and was the beginning of naturalistic opera. The 1930's critic John Erskine, amusingly to us today, dismisses the work as crude and brutal with melodies of no great distinction. Leoncavallo sensed the commercial potential of verismo opera and came up with I PAGLIACCI.

The set is slightly rearranged for this opera. The scene is dominated by a truck that functions as a stage for a group of second rate strolling players. The action occurs one year later.

Gustav Lopez Manzitti is a superior Canio in every aspect of his performance. There's something very middle European in his demeanor. He's a sort of shabby dandy and his ultimate fate as a betrayed husband is shattering. Cristina Nassif is a sensual and highly physical Nedda. She and fine baritone Michael Todd Simpson as her lover Silvio, make very real the chemistry of passion that engulfs them. Nassif is a soprano with highly pleasing lightness and great strength

existing side by side. She is an exceptional actress as well. The total package is mighty impressive. Zachary Stains is a delightful Beppe and baritone Andrew Oakden captures the humor and pathos of Tonio in a richly textured performance.

Peter Mark guides the orchestra with a keen sense of the highly theatrical qualities that define the music of these two works. Whether the songs are music of distinction or merely common place matters not to me. I found the opening night an absolutely joyous feast and I highly recommend that you partake of it. This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.