

British Theatre Guide

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Pagliacci / Cavalleria Rusticana

Ruggero Leoncavallo / Pietro Mascagni & Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti and Guido Menasci

Opera North

Theatre Royal, Newcastle

8–11 November 2017

As the audience enters the auditorium, the curtain is up and we see a rehearsal room with lots of chairs, costume design drawings on the wall, some markings (gaffer tape, of course!) on the floor, a couple of full clothes rails, a set model, a piano and even a grandfather clock.

There are people coming and going with scripts, clipboards, a pianist with his score. Costumes are examined. Preparations for a rehearsal are obviously in full swing. The pianist sits at the piano and, as he starts to play, the orchestra begins the overture and the house lights dim.

It's not, as in Leoncavallo's script, a travelling *Commedia* company arriving in a village but the theatrical setting is a reasonable modern parallel, so you might say that we are to have a reasonably conventional performance.

Then the house lights come up and what looks like a safety curtain drops in. It's actually a front cloth and consists of a huge, proscenium-filling photo of the Opera North company. The overture continues and, when it finishes, the houselights dim out! And Tonio (Richard Burkhard), not only the designer of the *Commedia* show but also a performer in it, comes onto the forestage and sings the first aria, telling us that actors are people and they have feelings too. And he sings this and the final line (which here, I think correctly, is given to him and not Canio) in English; the rest of the opera is in Italian. He leaves, the cloth flies out and the show begins.

A double layer of theatricality!

There are strong performances, as one would expect from Opera North, with Peter Auty as Canio, who plays the Clown, Pagliaccio, in the *Commedia* piece, seeming from the start to be balanced on something of a knife-edge, as if already suspicious of his wife Nedda. There is a dangerous atmosphere whenever he is on stage, even when he is being the joking clown.

In the Newcastle performances, Katie Bird replaces Elin Pritchard in the role of Nedda and plays her with all the strength of feeling one would expect, passionate one minute, fearful the next.

Burkhard's Tonio, an Iago-like manipulator, dominates from the start. He may not be as charismatic as Canio but he has the same strength of feeling and desire for revenge. Like Auty's, his performance is powerful and his singing superb.

Powerfully performed, director Charles Edwards's production truly exemplifies the *Verismo* style, the flight from Wagnerian mythologizing and the focus on the passions of ordinary, everyday people which can be just as powerful as those of the Wotans and Siegfrieds.

I'm not sure, however, that the production really does work as well as it should, given the quality of the performances. It doesn't quite gel. I felt there wasn't sufficient distinction between the "real" world and the "performance" world. And that's a shame because I really did like the idea and that opening was terrific.

Cavalleria Rusticana, which chronologically precedes *Pagliacci* by two years, is described by its authors as "a melodrama in one act" and as such it does not disappoint. Its lush, sweeping melodies stir the romantic in us all and its powerful passions lead inevitably to death and a devastated heroine.

And as that heroine, Giselle Allen's Santuzza is little short of amazing. The power and passion with which she sings are almost overwhelming. She almost haunts the stage, a constant presence, every movement and every note suffused with pain, not just from being abandoned by her lover but for having herself abandoned her religious principles so far as to allow herself to be seduced in the first place.

Set by director Caroline Sofulak in Soviet era Poland, this change of place and time really does work. The changes are small—the wine shop becomes a butcher's but it is equally as poorly stocked and Alfio's cart becomes a taxi, the only one in the village—but the overwhelming sense of poverty and the dependence on the Church for comfort remains.

The set, designed by Charles Edwards, is spare and sparse: the counter of the butcher's shop stage left, a dominating huge cross stage centre at the back (with, next to it, a photo of Pope John Paul II) and Alfio and Lola's house stage right. The cold lighting, also designed by Edwards, complements it well.

The contrast between the poverty of the setting and the richness of the emotions adds to the melodrama and Turiddù's repentance gives the final touch.

Jonathan Stoughton (Turiddù), Rosalind Plowright (his mother, Lucia), Philip Rhodes (Alfio) and Katie Bray (Lola) give impeccable performances and this opera gives the Opera North Chorus their opportunity to shine and so they do.

Two powerful pieces which make for quite a harrowing night of opera.

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)