



BOTH SIDES NOW

In his new production of opera's most popular double bill, David McVicar emphasizes the differences of *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci*, revealing new dimensions in each work in the process.

BY WILLIAM BERGER

The operas *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* together form opera's most celebrated one-two punch. The classic double bill has become an entity of its own, known more often than not (for better or worse) as *Cav/Pag*, an operatic compound that has become so essential to opera companies around the world that it is easy to lose sight of what these works actually are, separate from one another. But with his new production of opera's supreme pairing, director Sir David McVicar underlines their differences rather than the similarities. Marcelo Álvarez takes on the monumental task of singing both leading tenor roles, opposite Eva-Maria Westbroek and Patricia Racette.

Of the two operas, Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* came first (1890), setting the tone not only for Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* (1892) but for the whole genre of verismo opera that followed (including the operas of Puccini,





Álvarez also sings Turiddu in *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Photograph by Anne Deniau

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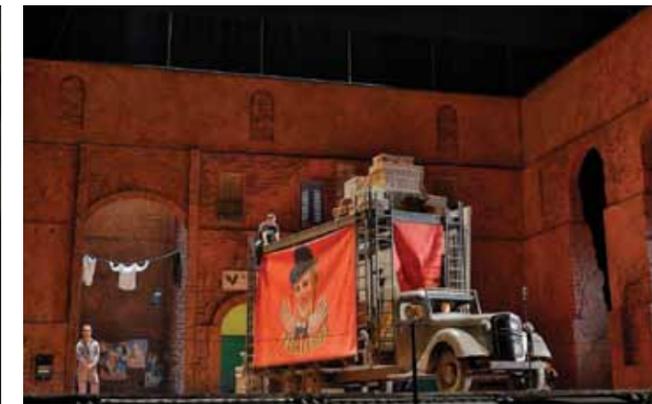
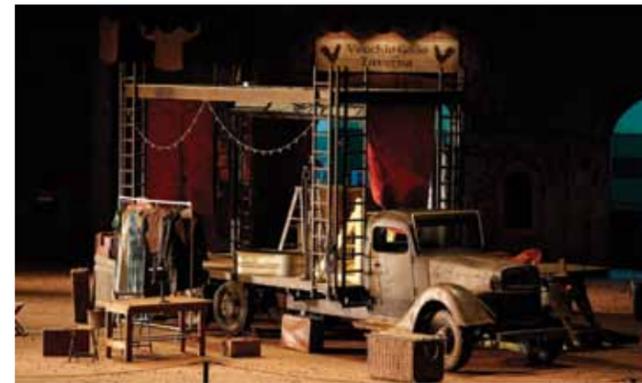
who knew both Mascagni and Leoncavallo personally, and not always on the friendliest of terms).

Based on the equally scorching and revolutionary four-page short story of the same name by Giovanni Verga, *Cavalleria* tells of adultery and murder in a remote Sicilian village on an Easter Sunday morning. The opening night of *Cavalleria* took its audience by storm, or rather, slapped it across its collective face with an entirely new way of presenting opera. The music was direct to the point of being considered violent—unencumbered by harmony, counterpoint, or other techniques that focused attention on the artifice (in both negative and positive senses) of the composer. This was “dramatic truth” told in a new way, including, as McVicar notes, “masses of orchestral storytelling where no one sings at all,” another mode to convey unadorned emotional truth. *Pagliacci* followed a year and a half later, conducted by the 25-year-old Arturo Toscanini (who did not like it much). This was the story (based on a true incident from his childhood, Leoncavallo claimed, although many have doubted him) of a husband murdering his wife while they were performing a commedia dell’arte routine. “It’s about drama and conversa-

tion, and it moves quickly,” McVicar says. “It needs color, vibrancy, light. It needs movement, because it’s about actors. It’s about clowns. It’s a show about a show.” Both works are short, and pairing them together has been traditional for a long time. In fact it was the Met that first presented them as a double bill in December 1893. “The effect of bringing the two operas together in one night was good,” was the biblical pronouncement of the *New York Times* review.

McVicar, for his part, is not satisfied with the point of view that labels both works as “veristic” and leaves it at that. On the contrary, it may be the differences that make these two operas work so well together. “You’re talking about two very different composers working in quite different styles, although they’re contemporaries, and telling the stories in very, very different ways with very different compositional techniques,” the director notes. In terms of tone and subject matter, he is struck by how *Cavalleria* looks back in time. “Mascagni’s opera is very formalized, even in the title—‘Rustic Chivalry.’” *Cavalleria* is heavy with religion and with codes of honor, with rituals of life and death; it’s about an ancient form of living. In McVicar’s production, “we treat *Cavalleria* as though it’s a piece of communal, ritual storytelling. We see the community gather in the prelude to perform a ceremony about themselves. How many times they’ve performed this ceremony, we don’t know. But it’s a kind of ritual that they are locked into that will probably be repeated and repeated and repeated for generations.” *Pagliacci*, on the other hand, seems to look ahead. The blurring of boundaries between private emotions and public personae is an old idea, but it takes on new resonance in the modern world of celebrity culture (not to mention “reality television” and the whole phenomenon of social media, which have further confused the spheres of public and private).

That Álvarez will be the featured tenor in both operas is nothing short of a “mammoth, Herculean undertaking,” according to McVicar. While both lead roles are jealous and violent men, their disparate motivations will be explored in the new staging. Turiddu, like the closed society in which he lives, acts out ancient imperatives whose original purposes he



Rae Smith, of *War Horse* fame, designed the sets for the production. Eva-Maria Westbroek sings Santuzza (bottom left). Patricia Racette is Nedda (bottom right).

only dimly understands. In *Pagliacci*, there is the “play within the play”—the commedia dell’arte performance that encases the tragic climax. In order to achieve the full level of searingly ironic pathos inherent in the opera (these are the archetypal clowns who must make people laugh while they themselves suffer), this commedia dell’arte must be truly funny. “No clown was ever funny just by pratfalling around in a circus ring,” McVicar says. “They have characters.” A brief but telling bit of dialogue between Canio and his wife, for example, reveals much of what is happening in this marriage. She asks if he is drunk... “again.” “Yes,” he answers bluntly. “Since midday.” The production uses this as a cue to model his character on a mid-20th century vaudeville comedian famous in the UK and Europe, Freddie Frinton, whose persona was a clown who drank. It isn’t necessary to know Frinton’s work to appreciate the character delineation. The point is that in *Pagliacci*, characters have motivations that are specifically modern and augmented by the prism of “show business.” In *Cavalleria*, by contrast, the motivations are ancient, primal, and often subconscious.

A single set designed by Rae Smith (*War Horse*) will underscore both the unities and the differences in the works. McVicar turned

to actual Sicilian villages (the setting of *Cavalleria*, while *Pagliacci* was originally conceived as set in nearby Calabria) to create a town square that would act as an “envelope” for both operas. The difference is the time setting. McVicar places *Cavalleria* around 1900, while *Pagliacci* is set around 1948, with the same buildings but now with electric light and telephone wires. (Interestingly, 1948 is also the year of such films as De Sica’s *Ladri di Biciclette*, or *Bicycle Thieves*, Visconti’s *La Terra Trema*, and other masterpiece films of the “Neoverismo” genre—so-called because they were a “new” look at the genre originally explored by Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Puccini, and others.)

In other words, while *Cavalleria* focuses on a primitive milieu to explore human issues that never change, *Pagliacci* presages today’s world to see how those issues play out now. “If you want to see it as a story of the same community, separated by two generations, that’s absolutely fine,” McVicar says. “What I’m trying to do is find a different method of storytelling that is appropriate to what these composers are saying and to the way they’re telling the stories.” ■

WILLIAM BERGER, a Met staff writer, radio producer, and commentator, is the author of *Puccini Without Excuses*.

New Production Premiere April 14, 2015

MetTalks

Peter Gelb and David McVicar discuss the double bill with members of the cast, on **April 8 at 6pm** in the Bruno Walter Auditorium.