

The Mid-Hudson Opera deserves our applause for granting us the pleasure of seeing and hearing not just one opera but two, in one evening, a sizeable double feature. However, it is regrettable that judged on an overall scale, we could only rate "Cavalleria Rusticana" as "poor". The second opera "Gianni Schicchi" was "excellent".

"Cavalleria Rusticana" is an opera that is full of Italian fire. It must be ably acted as well as sung. To attempt to present it without polished actors and without an orchestra is like trying to scale Mt. Everest without prior mountain climbing experience. Do not expect to get to the top on that first try.

Mascagni's "Cavalleria Rusticana" was an instant success when first presented in Rome in 1890, because the audience saw it as an elemental Greek tragedy. Although the title translates as "Rustic Chivalry", it is an ironic title because there is no chivalry in the play. It is a grim, tragic tale of unrequited love, adultery, revenge and ultimate death of the hero. The plot revolves around an ex-soldier, Turidda.

Turidda was engaged to Lola before he left to serve in the army. During his absence she up and married Alfio. Upon his return to the village, Turidda takes up with another girl, Santuzza. But he decides he doesn't go for Santuzza and starts having an affair with Lola behind her husband's back.

All this takes place before the play opens and is explained by the author, Mascagni, in the songs and acting that follow. Thus "Cavalleria Rusticana" is really the third and most violent act of a Greek tragedy, with the first two acts only alluded to.

Santuzza seeks the help of Mama Lucia, Turidda's mother, but is rebuffed. She then tries to make up with Turidda but he spurns her advances. So Santuzza goes to Alfio and reveals the adultery of his wife Lola.

Alfio realizes that he has been cuckolded and vows revenge. It is a pleasant Easter afternoon and the townspeople are gathered at Mama Lucia's cafe. Turidda offers Alfio a glass of wine and Alfio refuses it exclaiming that he fears the wine is poisoned. This is taken as a public insult and the two men agree to a duel. Turidda, knowing that he has wronged Alfio, is resigned to die like a dog. He begs his mother to take care of Santuzza after he is gone and then proceeds to the duel (off-stage). Shortly word is received that Turidda has been killed by Alfio as the play ends.

The theater has a curtain but for unknown reasons the curtain was not used. This was disconcerting, especially at the end. The setting, which alluded to a church at Easter Sunday, was striking. However, the chairs and tables used for the outdoor wine shop can only be described as "early backyard patio" and subtracted from the authentic Italian feeling that the director was attempting to achieve.

The singing was generally very good. The female chorus was excellent, the male chorus off-key at times and other times lacked unison. Catherine Booth as the heroine, Santuzza, has a superb singing voice and is a pleasure to hear.

Tony Angelo as Turidda, did a great job, both singing and acting. However, the overall cast performance was marred by woodenish acting, a common fault in operas. There was also some mis-casting, especially that of Mama Lucia sung by Katherine Montgomery. Miss Montgomery has an excellent trained voice but she was much too young to portray Turidda's mother.

Immersion into a play is a form of hypnosis. The viewer is transcended into a distant higher plane. If this heavenly plane is stretched to the breaking point by miscasting and poor acting then the magic is puff-gone and reality intrudes.

The second opera, "Gianni Schicchi", is a hilarious comedy, whose theme is the greed and rapacity of heirs. The hamming, the broad over-acting of the chorus and principals was just right for this opera, in fact it added to the hilarity! Obviously, everyone on stage was having a great time and the audience loved it. Because it was sung in English the audience grasped every subtle innuendo.

"Gianni Schicchi" concerns itself with a wealthy relative who has just died. When the will is read the heirs discover that the deceased has left his worldly goods to a monastery. In desperation the heirs call in Gianni Schicchi, a lawyer to help them break the will. He concocts a crazy scheme with some surprise twists. Like the ending of a mystery, the surprise end is best not revealed. Let us hope for a repeat performance of "Gianni Schicchi" so that those who missed it, will have a second chance.

The setting was appropriate though simple. The scene was an Italian bedroom and it could have used more furniture. The stage direction was excellent. If I were to single out two of the actors - one would be Michael Handy as Rinuccio. Mr. Handy has a marvelous voice and is a good actor besides. And of course, kudos to John Ericson as Gianni. He played the role to the hilt!

And of course, Drew Kopf deserves praise for his marvelous direction.

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