

## Review: Opera's double bill wonderful mix of comedy, tragedy

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Nedda (Kelly Kaduce) fears her husband's jealousy in Cincinnati Opera's production of *Pagliacci* and *Gianni Schicchi*, which opened Thursday in Music Hall. / Provided/Philip Groshong



Written by  
**Janelle Gelfand**

“La commedia è finita” – “The comedy is over,” cried Canio, the tormented clown *Pagliaccio*, at the end of Leoncavallo’s “*Pagliacci*.” But in fact, the comedy was just beginning in Cincinnati Opera’s exuberantly staged and beautifully sung double bill, “*Pagliacci*” and Puccini’s comedy “*Gianni Schicchi*.”

The company opened its 92nd season on Thursday night in Music Hall with a winning production of this double bill, starting with a riveting tale of “*Pagliacci*” (Clowns), a “*verismo*” (true-to-life) opera about a traveling *commedia dell’arte* troupe. In the second half, the opening night audience laughed out loud in “*Gianni Schicchi*,” as relatives squabbled over the inheritance of their deceased rich relative.

Although these two short operas are not paired as often as the conventional “Cav-Pag” – “Cavalleria Rusticana” and “Pagliacci” – this pairing made for an engaging evening of theater. Two impressive casts – each with standout singers – were headed by Italian baritone Roberto de Candia, whose performance as both Tonio in “Pagliacci” and the title role of “Schicchi” could only be described as a tour-de-force.

Director Alain Gauthier’s concept that linked the operas was wonderfully inventive. Created with scenic designer Olivier Landreville for Opéra de Montréal, the production was seamlessly updated to 1950s Florence, Italy. The Prologue of “Pagliacci” opened on a bare stage with only theatrical lights, and soon an expansive backdrop of the Florence cityscape flew in. It was followed by the sight of an actual Volkswagen beetle pulling the acting troupe’s wagon into town.

As Nedda, who is jealously guarded by Canio, desired by Tonio but in love with Silvio, Kelly Kaduce was the ideal combination of a singer with enormous vocal beauty and superb acting ability. She danced on the VW’s rooftop, was charming in the role of Columbine in the little play with Harlequin, and feisty as she rejected the advances of Tonio (de Canda). Her rooftop aria, “Stridono lassu,” recalling the birds of her childhood, was poignant and golden-voiced.

Frank Porretta was riveting as her husband, Canio, the tragic clown. His two grief-crazed arias were delivered with a convincing mix of sobbing pain and the powder-keg emotion that resulted in the opera’s violent final scene.

In the Prologue, de Candio projected an arrestingly dark timbre and powerful top notes, and was menacing as the deformed clown, Tonio. Ljubomir Puskaric was properly ardent as Nedda’s swain, Silvio. And one of the evening’s most delightful characters turned out to be Thomas Glenn’s Beppe.

The opera featured an outstanding chorus, prepared by Henri Venanzi. The Bell Chorus, calling the faithful to Vespers, was radiant.

The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, led by Richard Buckley, echoed the ardor and angst of this “play within a play,” despite some problems between stage and pit in the first moments.

Gauthier’s alert staging captured the drama and sense of inevitability of “Pagliacci,” and he handled the crowds of townspeople well.

The Florentine backdrop, **enhanced by Thomas C. Hase's magical lighting**, stayed for "Gianni Schicchi." Puccini's one-act opera places the greedy Donati family around the corpse of their deceased relative (Northern Kentucky University student Jeremy Plott), in a plot to rewrite his will with the swindler, Schicchi, who dupes them all.

Here, it was all about the superb ensemble cast and Gauthier's staging for maximum comedic effect. But first, the evening's most memorable moment came in Maria Luigia Borsi's breathtaking "O mio babbino caro," pleading as Lauretta to her father Schicchi, to make her marriage possible, or she'll jump off the Ponte Vecchio. It was heartfelt and beautifully paced and she projected a voice of singular beauty.

As her lover, Rinuccio, Edgaras Montvidas made his American debut with a robust tenor in his eloquent praise of Florence and youthful ardor in his lovely final duet with Lauretta. In the title role, de Candio knew how to balance the comic antics around him, and projected his lines with impressive focus.

The cast of characters was very funny indeed, starting with Catherine Keen's Zita and Thomas Hammons' Simone. With William McGraw (Marco), Stacey Rishoi (La Ciesca), Thomas Glenn (Gherardo), Alexandra Schoeny (Nella) and Kenneth Shaw (Betto di Signa), they wailed over large white handkerchiefs, bickered and schemed. Gauthier choreographed the ladies' trio à la Supremes.

Buckley propelled the opera well, and it was a joy to hear the Cincinnati Symphony in the pit, swelling for Puccini's glorious melodies.

In the end, the bedroom walls flew apart for a charming final duet with the lovers, and Schicchi addressed the audience, alone again on a bare stage.

Cincinnati Opera's double bill repeats at 7:30 p.m. Saturday in Music Hall. Tickets: 513-241-2742, [www.cincinnatiopera.org](http://www.cincinnatiopera.org).