

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

# Pagliacci



**Music and Libretto  
by Ruggiero Leoncavallo**

**Drama in  
Prologue and Two Acts**

**Location:  
A Calabrian village,  
near Montalto, in rural Sicily**

**Time:  
On the Feast of the Assumption,  
mid-August around 1870**

## Characters

Canio / Pagliaccio, head of a troupe of traveling actors (tenor) .... Plácido Domingo  
Nedda / Colombina, his wife (soprano)..... Teresa Stratas  
Tonio / Taddeo, a clown, also the Prologue (baritone)..... Juan Pons  
Beppe / Arlecchino, member of the troupe (tenor).....Florindo Andreoli  
Silvio, a villager and Nedda's lover (baritone).....Alberto Rinaldi  
First villager (baritone) ..... Alfredo Pistone  
Second villager (tenor)..... Ivan del Manto  
Chorus of villagers

*(Zeffirelli set this production in the 1920s, during the depression)*

Orchestra e coro del Teatro all Scala, Milano, Italy  
Conducted by George Prêtre  
Directed by Franco Zeffirelli

First performance at the Teatro Dal Verme, Milan, on May 21, 1892

# Synopsis

## Prologue

The opera opens with a prologue delivered directly to the audience by Tonio, one of the actors in the traveling troupe. Tonio outlines the purpose of the play and reminds them that, beneath the theatrical façade of the *commedia dell'art*, there are genuine emotions with real passions. He then orders the curtain to rise, and the performance begins.

## Act I

### Outskirts of a Calabrian village



Enrico Caruso as Canio  
in *Pagliacci*

Excited villagers mill about, as a small theatrical road company arrives at the outskirts of a Calabrian village. Canio, head of the troupe, teases and entices his audience about the upcoming play. When someone jokingly suggests that the hunchback, Tonio, is secretly in love with his young wife, Nedda, Canio warns that he will tolerate no flirting with his wife. As the vesper bells call the women to church, the men go to the tavern, leaving Nedda alone in the make-shift camp.

Nedda is concerned about on the potential danger of her husband's jealousy. Putting her fears aside, she rejoices in the wonders of nature and the glorious freedom of the birds flying overhead.

Tonio, who has remained behind to finish his chores, overhears Nedda's fanciful singing and declares his love for her. Nedda scorns and ridicules him. Tonio persists, but Nedda grabs a whip and strikes at him. As he angrily approaches her again Nedda grabs a knife and slashes him in the face. Holding his bloody cheek, Tonio finally leaves, swearing that he will have his revenge.

No sooner has Tonio gone off than Silvio appears. He is a young villager with whom Nedda has been having an affair. He wants her to leave her husband and run away with him that night. Nedda at first refuses, but finally she gives in to Silvio's impassioned pleading. Tonio, on his way to the tavern, catches sight of the lovers and, seeing the opportunity for revenge, runs off to find Canio.

Canio arrives at the camp just in time to hear Nedda promise to meet Silvio later that night. At Canio's approach, Silvio escapes unrecognized into the woods. Canio demands that Nedda reveal the identity of her lover, but she refuses. Canio, beside himself with rage, tries to force Nedda to reveal his name. Beppe, another member of the troupe, restrains him, reminding Canio that the villagers are assembling for the performance. Feeling frightened and confused at Canio's rage, Nedda finally decides to stay for the performance and begins to get dressed. As Canio puts on his makeup he is overcome with despair. He sings his famous aria, "*Vesti la giubba*" (*Put on your costume*). He must act as Pagliaccio, the clown, and make people laugh — even though inside his heart is breaking.

## Act II

### Stage in the Village Square

A primitive stage has been erected in the village square. It is evening and the villagers, Silvio among them, have taken their seats to watch the performance. Coincidentally, the play, presented by Canio and his troupe, becomes a mirror of the previous events. Tonio plays the part of the stupid servant, Taddeo, who declares his love for Columbine (played by Nedda). She scorns him to make way for her real lover,



Arlecchino “Harlequin” (played by Beppe), who arrives for an intimate supper. This comical scene is interrupted by the unexpected arrival of the husband, Pagliaccio (played by Canio). Harlequin escapes as Nedda promises to meet him later that night, using the same words she called to Silvio earlier that afternoon.

As Canio proceeds to play his part, the tragic reality of the situation begins to overshadow the play-acting. He grows more and more frantic, insisting that Nedda name her lover. She laughs him off and tries to continue the comedy. But Canio, carried away, reproaches her for her ingratitude and her betrayal. The audience is enthralled by the increasing intensity of the performance and begins to whisper excitedly among themselves.

Nedda reminds Canio that she has never been a coward and persists in her refusal to name her lover. Behind the scene Tonio takes his revenge and slips Canio a knife. Canio is now pushed beyond his breaking point. He demands that Nedda name her lover. When she again refuses, Canio stabs her with the knife. With her last breath Nedda cries out for Silvio, who has been watching the play in the audience. He runs to the stage to help her. Canio, now aware that Silvio is his wife’s lover, stabs him as well.

Amid the agitation of the horrified onlookers, Canio stands as if in a trance, letting the knife fall at his feet. Tonio then murmurs one of the opera’s most chilling and ironic lines, “*La commedia è finita!*” (*The comedy is over!*)

## Ruggiero Leoncavallo

**Born on April 23, 1867 in Naples, Italy; died August 9, 1919 in Montecatini, Tuscany**



Ruggiero Leoncavallo is best known for *Pagliacci*, a violent opera exploring the limits of social tolerance. He studied in Milan, Italy, but was influenced early in his career by Wagner and the Wagnerian idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, total theater created by one person. He was known for his temper and passion for life, and was fired from a university post over a controversy involving art and personal aesthetic. After his dismissal, he joined the Foreign Service and spent time in Egypt. He then settled in Marseilles, France, where he lived a bohemian life, teaching music lessons and composing.

While there, he received a commission from the Italian publishing house, Ricordi, to write an opera. However, the opera he wrote was patterned after the German model established by Wagner and was not well received in Italy. After his marriage to a singer, Berthe Rambaud, he moved to Paris, and then returned home to Milan. Leoncavallo wrote the libretto for all of his own operas, and many considered him to be the greatest Italian librettist of his time after Boito. Among his librettos for other composers he collaborated with Puccini on the libretto of *Manon Lescaut*. In 1898, the composer Mascagni wrote the blockbuster piece *Cavalleria Rusticana*, which paved the way for Leoncavallo to write *Pagliacci*. This new style of opera, called “verisimo,” was direct, passionate, violent and reflected real life.

## *Pagliacci*

*Pagliacci* (*Clowns*) is an opera in two acts written and composed by Ruggiero Leoncavallo, his only successful opera. It is the tragedy of a jealous husband in a *commedia dell’Arte* troupe. The title is

sometimes incorrectly given as *I Pagliacci* (*The Clowns*). According to *Opera America*, *Pagliacci* is the 14th most performed opera in North America.

Around 1890, when Pietro Mascagni's opera, *Cavalleria Rusticana* (*Rustic Chivalry*), premiered, Leoncavallo was a little-known composer. After seeing the success of that opera, another story of love and jealousy, Leoncavallo decided to write a similar opera, also in the *verismo* style.

Most modern-day critics say that the libretto to *Pagliacci* was inspired by an 1887 play of Catulle Mendès, entitled *La Femme de Tabarin*. Leoncavallo was living in Paris at the time of the premiere, and he most likely saw the play. However, according to Leoncavallo, the plot of this work was actually a real-life court case. He claimed that a servant had taken him to a commedia performance in which the events of the opera had actually occurred. He also claimed that his father, who was a judge, had led the criminal investigation in 1865, and that he had documents supporting these claims. No evidence has ever appeared, and most critics believe that Leoncavallo was trying to make the opera seem more realistic.

Leoncavallo wrote both the libretto and the script for *Pagliacci*, all in just a few weeks' time. The premiere took place in Milan on May 21, 1892, conducted by Arturo Toscanini, and was an instant success, gaining popularity throughout Europe and America. Within two years of its premiere it had been translated into all major European languages, including Swedish, Serbo-Croatian, and Hebrew. Leoncavallo was a prolific writer, with 21 other operas and operettas to his credit; however, none of his other works ever matched the popularity of *Pagliacci*.

*Pagliacci* remains one of the best-known operas in the repertory, containing one of the most famous and popular arias, "*Recitar! ... Vesti la giubba*" (*To perform! ... Put on the costume*). Tonio's Prologue before the play is often played as a dramatic concert piece. Harlequin's serenade, "*O Columbina*" offers an element of irony, while Canio's "*No, Pagliaccio non son*" (*No, I am not Pagliaccio*) brings the drama to its climax, ending with the famous line, "*La commedia è finita!*" (*The comedy is over!*). [Originally, Tonio had the final line, but it has traditionally been given to Canio, which Leoncavallo sanctioned himself, and that is how it is usually performed today. In some productions, the earlier concept has been revived, and the line is spoken by Tonio.]

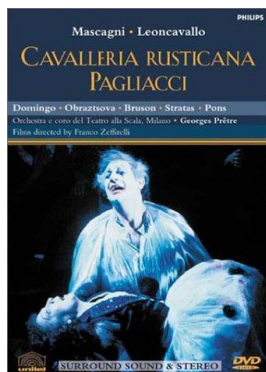
In 1907, *Pagliacci* became the first entire opera to be recorded. One of Enrico Caruso's recordings of "*Vesti la giubba*" was the first record to sell one million copies. Since 1893, because of its short length, *Pagliacci* is usually performed in a "Cav-and-Pag" double bill with Mascagni's short opera, *Cavalleria Rusticana*.

## Commedia dell'arte

*Commedia Dell'Arte* is the ancient Italian improvisational masked comedy. It was born in the Renaissance in Tuscany, Italy around 1545 and continued until the middle of the eighteenth century. Troupes traveled from city to city earning their living by performing comedies, farces, parodies and political satires in the streets, markets, and at carnivals and fairs. The performers drew from everyday life material for their shows, harping on every class, custom and law. The stock characters were universally identified by their individual costumes and masks and never changed, regardless of what the scenario developed. The masks, usually made of leather, were inseparable from the actor throughout the performance, even if the character changed costumes. The mask was the driving force behind each character's unique movements and dialect. The scenarios usually centered around the misfortunes of Pantalone, the senile old man, or a love triangle between the lovers and another character (Il Capitano, Arrlechino, or the Il Dottore). Traditionally, children followed their grandparents' and parents' footsteps, each inheriting a certain character, and then performing that same character all their lives.

## Pagliacci: The Video (1982)

Starring Plácido Domingo, Teresa Stratas and Juan Pons; directed by Franco Zeffirelli



Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* is one of the *verismo* cornerstones of the Italian repertory. Franco Zeffirelli directed his 1981 La Scala production with Plácido Domingo and Teresa Stratas for a 1982 television airing, bringing his usual genius and flamboyance to the screen. The movie's soundtrack received a Grammy nomination for Best Opera Recording.

This performance does justice to the hot-blooded score with magnificent singing by tenor, Plácido Domingo and Teresa Stratas. Their singing and acting are spectacular, and Plácido's "Vesti la giubba" is gut-wrenching. Zeffirelli has enhanced the production with insightful close-ups, such as when Nedda is putting on her make-up, because "the show must go on." It's a ghostly parallel to "Vesti la giubba," as she looks into her mirror and sees a ghostly white reflection. In this production the last line, "*La commedia è finita!*" is spoken by Tonio.