

Director's notes

When I was first commissioned to direct and design *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci*, the idea of molding the double bill into a tribute to the Italian immigration of early 1900s Argentina quickly prevailed. The spirit of these two emblematic works of the *verismo* movement —both excessive and timid, light and dark, affectionate and brutal— seemed very applicable to those uprooted Italian ancestors. Thus La Boca, the Italian quarter of Buenos Aires, for all its history and picture-perfect, multicolored beauty, was the ideal setting. To fit the libretto, I had to resolve to add spaces to the set which do not actually exist: a canteen, a church, Alfio and Lola's house, etc. The rest of the scenery —the square, the windows laced with clothes lines, the parish— all came to be while developing it.

I bombarded my costume designer, Fernando Ruiz, with ideas for costumes which, in my opinion, need not be the gray palette with which *Cavalleria rusticana* is usually identified, but rather colors and that sense of "improvisation" which can happen when a group of people from humbler backgrounds put on the best clothes they own. The revelation came when I found a photograph of the *Mural escenográfico* of Buenos Aires' parque Lezama. Finished in 1999, this piece of street art, which marks the entrance to La Boca, depicts a series of characters that I could perfectly associate to *Pagliacci*.

Cavalleria rusticana and *Pagliacci* are based on the literary tradition of *il verismo italiano*. Both Giovanni Verga and Ruggero Leoncavallo found their literary inspiration in events created by life itself (the playwright of playwrights). There are two versions explaining the origin of *Pagliacci*. The first is that Leoncavallo himself, as a young child witnessed the murder of the comedienne Nedda at the hands of her acting partner (and husband) Giovanni D'Alessandro, who had caught her red-handed in the arms of her lover. The second says that Ruggero Leoncavallo's father, who was a policeman or a judge (in those days, the two roles were sometimes embedded in the same person), related to his son a similar crime which he himself had to handle. To add more complication, there are musicologists who have insinuated that Leoncavallo's piece is "dangerously" similar to a play by Spanish playwright Manuel Tamayo y Baus, entitled *Un Drama Nuevo* (1867). I believe that accusing Leoncavallo of plagiarism is going a little too far. I would rather "accuse" him of having been very well versed in the trends of the theater, which means he was likely aware of Tamayo's work, and was thus influenced. Traditionally, that has always been the case in the creative world and will continue to be. Shakespeare teaches...

In principle, the plots of *Pagliacci* and *Cavalleria rusticana* are fairly similar to one another: The illicit relations of a married woman trigger the jealousy of a betrayed husband. But the relevance of Canio's character to today, is overwhelming: An artist in decline, crushed by life and alcohol.

Never before today have we seen so much talent being thrown away once its “novelty” has worn off: actors who fall from grace after two films, or worse, giants of the stage and screen being relegated to play bit parts so they can keep food on their tables —effectively, background decoration to the briefly shining “star of the moment.” What’s more, we see great actresses who, once the freshness of their early years has passed, turn into caricatures of themselves, patched by the scalpel so they can keep working. The list of victims is tremendously long and not only includes actors. There are singers thrown into dizzyingly fast-moving careers without preparation and athletes who under the pressure to win resort to doping. The list can be made even bigger; we only need to look carefully around us. The “Canio syndrome” prevails today more than it ever has: *“Instead of only our costume, consider our souls, as we too are men of flesh and bone,”* pleads the author in the Prologue.

I have always been convinced —but this is a very personal opinion based on my experience more than on proving documents—, that the only reason for Leoncavallo to put the Prologue in Tonio’s lips was budgetary. Having to engage a singer just for five minutes is something that could jeopardized the commercial success of the piece and so the composer simply gave the Prologue to Tonio, the naughty clown. Other hypothesis could be that Leoncavallo gave Tonio the Prologue as a justification of what this negative character was about to do: “It is not me, guys, but the role I am to play”... Whichever the explanation for the production in Liege my dream was to pay tribute to Belgian legendary baritone Philippe Rouillon, impersonating the composer. The Prologue remains one of the most touching moments of the show for me, with its words heard and felt only by the beggar and the newspaper seller. The use of the characters’ to narrate a united story in terms of theatrical consistency, animates an essential part of the production: The presence of the two casts during both operas. Having chosen to inhabit the same set in both pieces, the challenge was to establish the fact that we are in front of a socially structured town, with its priest, its major, its mechanic, its bar, its barber, its grocer, its children, etc. We see Nedda and the clowns pasting the company poster at the beginning. We see Santuzza sporting her seven months belly in *Pagliacci*, or Mamma Lucia still managing her tavern, assisted by her waiter, Silvio, the formerly arrogant Lola, reduced to a beaten woman, detained in her house, and perennially awaiting for her traveling husband, the moment of commiseration shown by Lucia to Canio, two elders facing their decadence, etc. But my favorite moment remains the very ending: Hearing old Lucia —the moral keeper of the town’s synergies, almost an “oracle” on her own right—, shouting *La commedia è finita*, never fails to move me to tears. It is not just the voice of an old woman, but the voice of Earth, the voice of Creation, shouting “basta!” to the entire world.

(1028 words)