

Michigan Opera Theatre closes season triumphantly

By PATRICIA BEACH SMITH

Everyone, they say, has their problems — opera companies notwithstanding. Problems seemed inevitable when the Michigan Opera Theatre announced its final productions of the 1978-79 season, "The Emperor Jones" by Louis Gruenberg and Leoncavallo's "I Pagliacci."

But when the MOT presented these works Friday night at Music Hall, there was little evidence of problems. Apparently they had all been solved and admirably by stage director Rhonda Levine. Both of these one-act operas appear to have been the director's dream and she seized the opportunity to be triumphant through her vivid imagination and clever inventiveness.

"The Emperor Jones" was practically virgin territory, visually and musically. It hadn't been performed since 1933 when the Metropolitan Opera gave it a debut. And it has never been recorded. Even though O'Neill's play of the same name is well known, Gruenberg's musical setting of it is practically unknown.

"I Pagliacci," on the other hand, usually suffers from overexposure. By this time everyone knows what to expect from it visually and musically. The music is so engaging that few directors are wont to mess with a good thing, so they opt for putting singers in good position to see the conductor and little else.

THERE MIGHT HAVE BEEN easier ways for MOT to mount these two operas (after all, the Met gets away with it with Pagliacci every time it is brought to Detroit), but they wouldn't have been as effective or spellbinding. People would go home thinking, well, there was just another avant garde opera and Pagliacci was as beautiful as ever. But that won't sell tickets from year to year.

"I Pagliacci" is one of those operas this reviewer hoped never to sit through again. The MOT production convinced me there is more than one way to skin a Calabrian cat. Sitting through this one was pure pleasure despite the melodrama.

Of the two operas offered Friday, "Pagliacci" was the superior presentation. It was vital, not only musically but theatrically, which is hardly ever the case.

For once the chorus was an integral part of the action rather than a dead-end group of observers called upon in-

frequently to sing a note or two. The chorus action kept the play going. There was a stage curtain to be unstuck, a weeping child to be toted home and even a reluctant bride, which helped set the scene in the small Calabrian village.

MS. LEVINE CHOSE to update the action and placed it in the 1940s rather than the classic 1800s. It worked because she didn't have to rely on music and costumes alone to carry the opera. Even so, the music was there and so were the costumes and set. A circa 1940 streetlight hung over the street scene, a vintage truck brought the players into the town and period costumes were familiar and funny.

Incidentally, the singing was stupendous and can't be forgotten. Jon Frederic West was a convincingly jealous Canio. His voice was dramatic and powerful, almost frightening, in the role. To his credit, his acting has improved immensely since his last appearance with Michigan Opera Theatre. All contributed to his personal success with this peach of a tenor role.

Alongside him, the convincing Tonio, sung by Charles Long, was a splendid match for West's Canio. Long's singing of the popular prologue foretold that the entire production would be original and enthralling.

MARIANNA CHRISTOS was saucy, seductive and musical in her role of Nedda. Her rendition of the role provided some thrilling musical moments, matched only by West and Long in their respective arias.

In attendant roles were Jerry Minster as the peckish and delightful Beppe, David Parsons as Silvio. Neither seemed to be in their best tatters, but their acting was convincing and added much to the overall effect. Silvio and Nedda's duet was, however, a beautiful interlude, calm before the storm in the middle of the action.

As in "I Pagliacci" the lighting in "The Emperor Jones" was extremely effective. With genius, Neil Peter Jampolis created the lighting schemes, sets and costumes. It was masterful in both operas. The little details, often missing, were there.

Jampolis' job in "Emperor Jones" was more difficult than for Pagliacci. In Emperor, he had to create illusions which are generally off limits to the le-

gitimate stage — movies maybe — but on the stage, nearly impossible.

He succeeded, however, in making the audience think there was a forest/jungle on stage by using nothing more than long sticks stuck into the stage floor. To change the scene, the poles were moved to different holes. It seemed the simplest (usually the best) solution to a difficult problem.

As the forest, as well as the crowd and memories, began closing in on the Emperor, the poles were moved in closer to the center where he brooded. Outside the perimeter circle of the forest, the natives were ever present.

THEIR PRESENCE WAS paramount to maintaining the tension so necessary to this work. Where the music failed to convey the tension, the physical presence of the dancers, comme native slaves, did so. Not enough good can be said for Clifford Fears' company which danced and act-

ed through this difficult opera.

As the haunting apparitions of the Emperor's mind, they were also remarkable. Fears' company of dancers/singers played a major role (albeit silent) in making the work come alive. They proved themselves to be a remarkable group, showing that Detroit has its own talent to exploit. It was clever of MOT to use the Gruenberg vehicle to exhibit such admirable talent.

More singspiel than opera, "The Emperor Jones" as MOT presented it was a fantastic piece of theater set to music. Metropolitan Opera import Andrew Smith played the grueling physical role with aplomb. He had to begin from beginning to end with little break — an amazing demand on a singer. His physical presence was astounding and he is a marvelous actor. Because of the music, however, his voice wasn't given a real chance to be heard, and thus didn't match his other two attributes.

NOTWITHSTANDING THE production

was stunning and effective. It's not an opera to be heard at home on Sunday afternoon, because there is very little to carry it musically. The score is incredibly difficult for the musicians and it, frankly, isn't all that appealing for those who prefer their opera melodic.

Contributing to the success of the MOT production were Daniel Boggess as trader Henry Smithers and Frances N. Brockington as a musical native. Boggess sang and played the conniving, sinister white man to a tee. He struck one as a slender, athletic Sidney Greenstreet. Ms. Brockington was appropriately terrified and subservient to the Emperor, but not to the music which she had obviously mastered.

Altogether, the evening couldn't have been more interesting. The translation into English of Leoncavallo's work was intelligent, for once.

"The Emperor Jones" was blessed with the words of the great playwright of course. The orchestra was a good accompaniment under conductor David Daniels for "I Pagliacci" and Robert Willoughby Jones for the Gruenberg work.

The chorus was uncompromisingly good in all respects, except in the Emperor, which is understandable. Their music was very strange, as often is the case with choruses of modern operas.

The final MOT offerings are works to be reckoned with. If you are expecting the traditional Pagliacci, you probably won't like this one. You don't know what to expect from Emperor Jones, but it can't help but make a lasting impression. Both will play again Friday and Saturday at the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts.



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