

Review: Edmonton Opera's season opener

With Canadian tenor Richard Margison opening, Edmonton Opera offers classic double bill, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci*

By Elizabeth Withey

EDMONTON - You're in the thick of nowhere, driving the dulllest road ever. The CD player in the rental car is bust so you're searching for a radio station, any station, to kill the monotony, to keep yourself awake. All you get is fuzz, crackle, and you nearly resign yourself to silence. But then, as if the gods heard you grumbling, the radio tuner picks up the most stunning sound. It is so clear, so precise, so rich, you want to pull over and put duct tape over the dial for fear of ever losing the signal.

This is what it's like listening to Richard Margison sing. He makes everything around you fall away like a card house in the breeze. He pulls you to him like a fish that couldn't help but nibble the worm. You flop in the bottom of his boat, breathless, pathetic, grateful you were caught.

The celebrated Canadian tenor headlined Edmonton Opera's season opener of *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci*, a classic double bill with musical riffs familiar to even the most uneducated opera ear.

Opera fans here have been patient. Margison last appeared with this company 22 years ago in 1989 (though he did perform at the Winspear's grand opening in 1997). Edmonton won't want to wait so long again, especially now they've witnessed his brilliance as the legendary sad clown in *Pagliacci*, Leoncavallo's genius play-within-an-opera. Margison owned the role, killed it — quickly, without thought, a crime of passion. Like Canio's betrayers, the audience didn't have a chance.

Soprano Laura Whalen rattled me, too, as Nedda, Canio's cheating wife. She's a sneaky, adulterous tramp but I found myself seduced by her, by Whalen's ability to command our attention as both actor and singer. I could physically feel her vibrato, and was captivated by the scene of stolen kisses she shared with Aaron St. Clair Nicholson, as Silvio. Love can be so wrong, and yet so right.

The Pag was just reward for Cav, which started sluggishly, its weighty religious themes mirroring a somewhat leaden energy level. With the heavy brown set and costuming in this production of Mascagni's opera, I felt starved, visually, wishing for more movement to match the plot's extreme emotions. Lust, vengeance and rage make you think wild scribbles, not a straight line. At times there were 50 people on stage, but their moving mouths weren't enough to keep me committed.

Luckily, we got Margison in both operas; he's so good as a cold-hearted Turiddu, the jerk who dumps his pregnant girlfriend for an old flame. I felt some pangs of sympathy during *Mamma, quel vino e generoso*, the famed aria where Turiddu asks mother for one last kiss, but that was the blinding light from Margison's lungs. Frankly, Turiddu deserves it.

Gregory Dahl is a gem as the snake Tonio, though this baritone's gift for villainous characters can overshadow his vocals. And Dana Beth Miller clawed at my heart with her jaw-dropping vocal performance as Santuzza, who's been knocked up, then dumped. The mezzo was the embodiment of betrayal, physically curled over with pain, as if that jerk Turiddu were the most wicked menstrual cramp. Something about Miller's long brown hair, pulled off her expressive face, the way she owned heartbreak with her whole body, made me think of British songstress Adele. This Santuzza needs to make an album about her anguish; it's bound to go multiple-platinum.



Tenor Richard Margison playing plays Turiddu, and Dana Beth Miller playing Santuzza in *Cavalleria Rusticana*.

Photograph by: Greg Southam, Edmonton Journal