

Pagliacci

Pagliacci (*Players*, or *Clowns*) is an opera consisting of a prologue and two acts written and composed by Ruggero Leoncavallo. It recounts the tragedy of a jealous husband in a commedia dell'arte troupe. *Pagliacci* premiered at the Teatro Dal Verme in Milan on May 21, 1892, conducted by Arturo Toscanini. *I'm not an opera fan, but I have this one, and I love the music, especially performed by Placido Domingo!*

Around 1890, when *Cavalleria Rusticana* premiered, Leoncavallo was a little-known composer. After seeing *Cav*'s success, he decided to write a similar opera. It was to be in one act and composed in the verismo style. A lawsuit was brought against him for plagiarism of the libretto. Leoncavallo's defense was that the plot of the opera was based on a true story he had witnessed as a child. 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, a judge, had led the criminal investigation, and that he had documents supporting these claims. None of this evidence has ever appeared. Today, most critics agree that the libretto 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 it's likely that he saw the play.

In any event, *Pagliacci* was an instant success, and it remains very popular today all over the world. It contains one of opera's most famous and popular arias [*and my favorite!*], *Recitar! ... Vesti la giubba* (literally, *To perform! ... Put on the costume*, but more often known in English as *On with the motley*). One of Enrico Caruso's recordings of *Vesti la giubba* was the first record to sell one million copies. In 1907, *Pagliacci* became the first entire opera to be recorded by the Puerto Rican tenor Antonio Paoli. In 1931, it became the first complete opera to be filmed with sound, in a now obscure version starring the tenor Fernando Bertini, in his only film, as Canio, and the San Carlo Opera Company.

As a staple of the standard operatic repertoire, it appears as number 14 on Opera America's list of the 20 most-performed operas in North America. [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pagliacci>] And any opera star who's anyone just *has* to be able to sing *Pagliacci*!



Cover of the first edition of *Pagliacci* published by E. Sonzogno, Milan, 1892.



Enrico Caruso as Canio in *Pagliacci*, one of his signature roles

