By José Cura

DIRECTOR'S NOTE


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Tango dancing in Buenos Aires' La Boca.

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 during the planning stages.

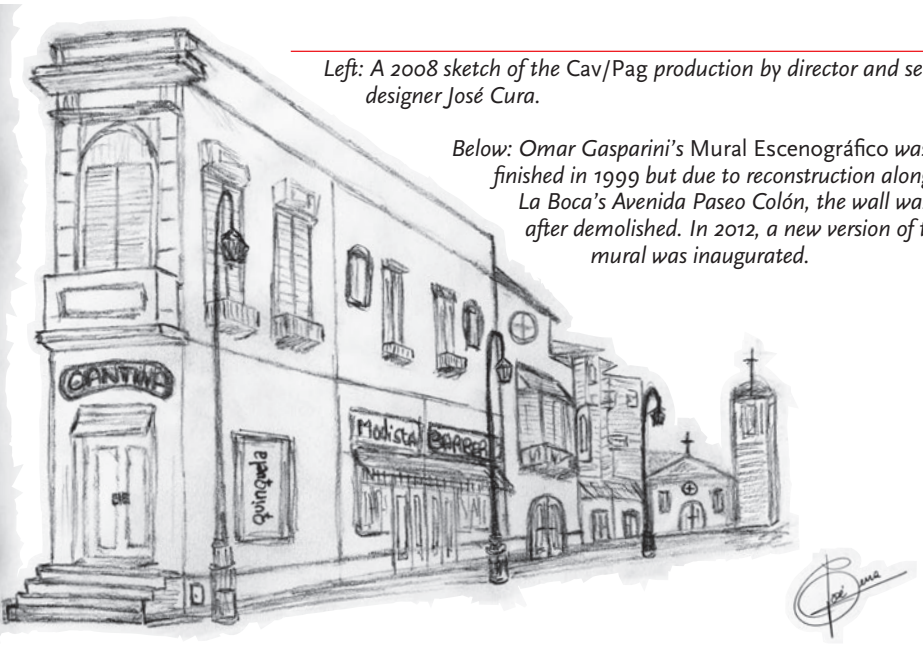
I bombarded my costume designer, Fernand Ruiz, with ideas for costumes which, in my opinion, need not be the gray palette with which *Cavalleria Rusticana* is usually identified, but rather colors and that sense of "improvisation" which can happen when a group of people from humbler backgrounds dress in the best clothes they own. The revelation came when I found a photograph of the *Mural Escenográfico* in Buenos Aires' Lezama Park. 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 with *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 related to his son a similar crime which he himself had to adjudicate. 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.

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 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." 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.

The Prologue remains one of the most touching moments of this production for me, its words heard and felt only by the beggar and the paperboy. The use of these characters to narrate a united story animates an essential part of the staging: the presence of the two casts during both operas. With the choice of both operas sharing the same set, the challenge was to establish a socially structured town with its priest, mayor, bartender, barber, grocer, children, etc. So, we see Nedda and the clowns posting the company poster at the beginning of *Cavalleria*, we see Santuzza sporting her seven-month belly in *Pagliacci*, as well as Mamma Lucia still managing her tavern, assisted by her waiter, Silvio. But my favorite moment remains the ending: hearing Lucia—almost an "oracle" in her own right—shouting "La commedia è finita." It is not just the voice of an old woman, but the voice of Earth, the voice of creation, shouting "Basta!" ("Enough!") to the entire world.



Left: A 2008 sketch of the Cav/Pag *production by director and set designer José Cura.*

Below: Omar Gasparini's Mural Escenográfico *was finished in 1999 but due to reconstruction along La Boca's Avenida Paseo Colón, the wall was soon after demolished. In 2012, a new version of the mural was inaugurated.*

First performances:
Cavalleria Rusticana Rome, Teatro dell'Opera di Roma; May 17, 1890;
Pagliacci Milan, Teatro Dal Verme; May 21, 1892.

First performances in the U.S.:
Cavalleria Rusticana Philadelphia, Grand Opera House; September 9, 1891;
Pagliacci New York City, Grand Opera House; June 15, 1893.

First San Francisco Opera performances:
Cavalleria Rusticana September 24, 1927;
Pagliacci October 6, 1923.
Cavalleria Rusticana has been performed in 16 previous seasons at San Francisco Opera; *Pagliacci* has been performed in 22 previous seasons. For complete casting and other information, visit archive.sfopera.com.

Personnel: 11 principals, 60 choristers, 18 children choristers, 2 dancers, 17 supernumeraries; **108 total.**

Orchestra: *Cavalleria Rusticana*
2 flutes, 2 piccolos, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, 1 tuba, 2 percussion, 2 harps, 1 organ, 40 strings (12 first violins, 9 second violins, 7 violas, 7 cellos, 5 basses); **65 total.**
Pagliacci 3 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 3 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 3 clarinets (1 doubling bass clarinet), 3 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, 1 tuba, 2 percussion, 2 harps, 40 strings (12 first violins, 9 second violins, 7 violas, 7 cellos, 5 basses); **67 total.**

Backstage: *Cavalleria Rusticana* 1 harp; *Pagliacci* 1 trumpet, 1 oboe, 1 bass drum, 1 violin.

The children singing in this production (listed after the artistic profiles) are members of the San Francisco Girls Chorus and San Francisco Boys Chorus. The San Francisco Girls Chorus is led by Artistic Director Valérie Sainte-Agathe. The San Francisco Boys Chorus is led by Artistic Director Ian Robertson.

Background: The Italian Quarter of La Boca in Buenos Aires is known for its colorful buildings and lively arts scene.

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