

Pagliacci & Der Kaiser von Atlantis

ATLANTA

Atlanta Opera

10/24/20 & 11/1/20

MOST THEATERS IN ATLANTA remain dark due to the coronavirus pandemic, but the Atlanta Opera has

reimagined its 2020-21 season as an outdoor event presented underneath a gigantic circus tent. Executive and artistic director Tomer Zvulun pivoted toward small-scale operas and concerts, short in duration and well-suited to the circus-style venue. On October 22, AO opened its season with Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, alternating nightly in repertory with Viktor Ullmann's *Kaiser of Atlantis* at Oglethorpe University's Hermance Stadium. Both shows were directed by Zvulun. (Seen Oct. 24 and Nov. 1)

Two significant initiatives were taken in order to launch the season—the formation of a Health and Safety Advisory Task Force, with leadership from both Emory University's School of Medicine and Grady Hospital, and the establishment of The Atlanta Opera Company Players, a European fest model of twelve salaried opera singers who will perform in AO shows throughout this provisional season.

Masks were worn by all, including the singers. Health screenings via a new, improved app, timed tickets, and virtual stagebills were all part of the protocol in order to make the evening possible. The pared-down orchestra, under the direction of conductors Rolando Salazar and Clinton Smith respectively, was amplified from a second tent backstage, thanks to sound designer Jon Summers. Singers kept their distance from one another, sometimes singing from within vinyl-enclosed cubes where masks could be safely removed; audience members were seated in groups of four throughout the makeshift theatre. *Pagliacci's* reduced orchestra consisted of only wind instruments and piano. The villagers chorus was pre-recorded; a sea of faces appeared in Zoom gallery fashion on a screen above the stage. Just days after the remnants of Hurricane Zeta passed through Atlanta bringing storms that uprooted trees, we wondered if the show would go on. It DID, despite the menacing zephyr. Richard Trey Smagur, a recent graduate of the Houston Grand Opera studio, delivered a demented performance of Canio's "Vesti la giubba" while 20 mph gusts of wind cut through the circus tent. Smagur's supercharged tenor, fortified by a measure of baritonal heft, conveyed Canio's despair.

To see and hear world-class singers performing while constricted by enclosures and masks, unable to embrace or touch, was singularly bizarre. Baritone Reginald Smith, Jr. delivered Tonio's prologue from within a transparent cube, his godlike voice muffled. Talise Trevigne, last heard in March as Bess in Atlanta's abbreviated run of *Porgy and Bess*, returned to sing Nedda, offering a cool and careless demeanor in her rendition of the ballade "Stridono lassù"—and donning a mask. Trevigne's nuanced duet with Joseph Lattanzi's Silvio was sung as a cell phone conversation and capped off with a pantomimed kiss blown across stage. Beppe, sung by the lovely mezzo-soprano Megan Marino, hopped on and offstage, bringing Trevigne a blanket to insulate her from the November cold.

THE KAISER OF ATLANTIS, a chamber opera never before programmed by Atlanta Opera, was created by

composer Ullmann and his librettist Peter Kien while both were prisoners at Theresienstadt during WWII but was not heard until its 1975 premiere in Amsterdam. Set designer Julia Noulin-Mérat created a tidy, dystopian world, represented by piles of dilapidated shoes. Noulin-Mérat's set and the costumes, designed by Joanna Schmink, offered

a nice parallel to those of *Pagliacci*. The incorporation of *commedia dell'arte* garb alongside military uniforms—as well as the portrayal of Loudspeaker (Calvin Griffin) as the ringleader of this chaotic circus—reinforced Zvulun's concept: humanity must continue to create art, even amidst crisis and uncertainty.

Baritone Michael Mayes, heard previously in Atlanta as both Sweeney Todd and Joseph de Rocher, sang the role of Emperor Overall, the sociopath meant to resemble Hitler. Overall competes with Death (Kevin Burdette) for world dominance and destruction. Mayes excels at depicting intense antiheroes and was a perfect *Kaiser* villain, vocally and dramatically. Tenor Alek Shrader, sang Pierrot/Harlequin, his face completely obscured by a clown's mask, yet managed to give us a sense of his lyric capabilities. Soprano Jasmine Habersham (Girl) and Brian Vu (Soldier) gave strong performances as the young lovers.

Mezzo-soprano Daniela Mack made a strong impression as the Drummer, the opulence of her voice at total odds with her sinister characterization. Calvin Griffin defied acoustic odds as Loudspeaker, bringing forth a dominating “Hallo...” that resonated throughout the tent from the first. Ullmann's tonally ambiguous music, laced with meaningful musical quotations, spun on while circus performers sprang and juggled. It was pandemonium and beauty all at once until Overall succumbed to Death. —*Stephanie Adrian*