

PAGLIACCI

Time: 1948

Place: A village in Calabria, Italy

Act I

Townfolk greet the arrival of a group of traveling performers: the leader Canio, his wife Nedda, and two other clowns, Tonio and Beppe. Canio invites everyone to a performance that evening, and the villagers invite him to have a drink. One man jokes about Tonio having a chance to seduce Nedda. Canio, suddenly grave, tells him that his wife's fidelity is not an appropriate matter for joking.

When he is gone, the frightened Nedda worries about Canio's violent jealousy. Entranced by the birds, she sings of how she envies their freedom. Tonio listens to her song. Consumed by desire, he begs Nedda to love him. She fights him off, and he leaves her in fury, just as her true love, a villager named Silvio, rushes in. Despite Silvio's passionate pleas, Nedda initially refuses to elope, fearing what Canio might do. Finally, she is convinced to escape from Canio.

Tonio, angry at Nedda's refusal to give in to him, returns and sees the lovers. He rushes off to fetch Canio. The two men arrive just in time for Canio to hear Nedda promise that she will meet Silvio at midnight. Canio attacks the younger man, but he escapes. Nedda refuses to give Canio her lover's name. She leaves to prepare for the show. Beppe tells Canio that he must prepare to play Pagliaccio. Consumed by rage and resentment, Canio prepares for the performance.

Intermission

Act II

The villagers gather for the familiar comedy about Pagliaccio and Columbine, in which a man is betrayed by a faithless wife. A tryst between Columbine (played by Nedda) and her lover Harlequin (played by Beppe) is interrupted by Pagliaccio (Canio). The performance proceeds as expected until an unhinged Canio appears onstage. He demands to know the name of Nedda's lover. She desperately tries to keep the play going but Canio is spiraling out of control. The audience applauds the realism of his acting. Nedda continues to defy Canio, crying that she will never tell him the name. Pushed beyond the breaking point, Canio stabs her. Silvio rushes onstage to try and save Nedda and Canio kills him as well. The horrified audience is informed that the comedy is finished.