

The libretto in brief

Traduzione di Rodney Stringer

Prologue

Tonio comes to the stage curtain and asks the audience to meditate on a new theme which the Author has invited him to enact. In reintroducing the time-honoured masks of the *Commedia dell'arte*, it is not his intention, he explains, to follow the old custom of maintaining that their sentiments are purely fictitious, without any bearing on reality. On the contrary, their passions and tears can at times be all too realistic. The Author therefore wishes to affirm that the artist is a man and must write for men. Aside from theatrical conventions, it is up to the audience to enter into the profoundly human spirit of the characters whom they are about to see upon this stage. This prologue may thus be considered the manifesto of verist opera.

Act I

The events (inspired by a true crime) are laid at Montalto, a village in Calabria, around 1865. It is a hot afternoon in mid-August, on the Feast of the Assumption of Mary. Just outside the village, a troupe of strolling players have pitched their tent and around it a crowd of curious villagers has gathered. To the sound of trumpet peals and the beating of a big drum, the clowns' cart arrives with Canio standing on it. Though frequently interrupted by festive vociferation, Canio attempts to call public attention to a grand performance, due to commence "at twenty-three hours". Meanwhile Tonio, the company's hunchbacked factotum, gallantly helps Nedda to step down from the cart. But her jealous husband, Canio, slaps him and chases him off. Tonio vows to himself to make Canio pay for this affront, while one or two bystanders make joking insinuations about Tonio's attentions to Nedda. Canio does not find this funny, and mutters darkly that "some games are better not played", reminding them that theatre and life are two separate things. As a husband deceived on stage, he is prepared to endure humiliation and to let the audience have their laugh, but if Nedda were to be unfaithful to him in real life, the comedy would end in tragedy. After saying this, he goes off to the inn with a group of friends, while the church-bells ring for vespers. The crowd, followed by a few bagpipers from a neighbouring village, drift away towards the church. Left by herself, Nedda muses uneasily

on the glint of jealousy caught in Canio's eyes, almost as if her husband had read her heart. When about to re-enter, she notices Tonio spying on her and rebukes him scornfully. But again Tonio addresses her amorously. Carried away by passion, he makes a pathetic declaration of love and finally, despite Nedda's gibes and rejection, attempts to embrace and kiss her. At this point Nedda picks up a whip and strikes him with it, angrily threatening to report his advances to Canio. "You shall pay for this", hisses Tonio, as he slinks away like a wounded beast. At this moment Silvio, Nedda's lover, appears and begs her to break away once and for all from Canio's jealousy, to abandon her husband when the troupe leaves the village the next day and elope with him. Nedda reminds him to be prudent. She is afraid of Canio and implores Silvio not to tempt her, but to leave her only with the heartrending memory of their love. But in the end, won over by his ardent and persuasive insistence, she gives in. Tonio, unseen, surprises them and hurries off to warn Canio, who bursts in just in time to hear Nedda promise: "Till this evening, and I will be yours forever". Canio flings himself at his wife but fails to catch sight of Silvio's face as he leaps over a low wall and escapes down a path. Mad with despair, Canio raises a knife to kill Nedda, commanding her to reveal the lover's name to him. But Nedda proudly holds her ground and further provokes his rage. Just as Canio is about to strike the blow, Peppe intervenes to restrain him, begging

him to desist. The villagers are coming out of church. Let all explanations be put off until later, for in the meantime the play must begin. It is necessary to dissemble, insinuates Tonio with fierce relish: Nedda's lover is bound to return and when he does he will find Canio on the alert. Canio's fury suddenly subsides, the theatre imposes its law. The Clown succumbs to discomfiture and resignation: "Now must I act, though mad with grief..."

Act II

Late in the evening the audience assembles festively in front of the tent stage. Peppe sets out benches for the women while Tonio invites the audience to take their seats and Nedda goes round collecting the money. Among the spectators is Silvio, to whom Nedda furtively recommends caution, though Canio has not recognized him. The performance begins, with Peppe (Harlequin), Nedda (Columbine), Tonio (Taddeo) and Canio (Pagliaccio) playing the lead roles. The scene represents a room with a table laid for two, two chairs and a window at the back. Columbine is listening enraptured to the serenade which Harlequin sings to her from outside, but Taddeo enters and declares his love. When rejected he makes heavily ironic comments on the fair lady's chastity. Harlequin climbs through the window and sits down for an intimate supper with Columbine, after handing her a sleeping potion to give to her husband. Just then the unexpected arrival of Pagliaccio is announced by Taddeo, who looks shaken. The dramatic situation of the afternoon seems to repeat itself in theatrical pretence. Columbine quickly sends off Harlequin with the same promise of love made to Silvio. Her words from the script ring with tremendous force in Canio's breast. For a few moments he sticks to the play, but identifies himself ever more intensely with the role of the cuckolded Clown, until he finally lives the part utterly. With mounting violence he hammers out the question

written in the script. Nedda-Columbine guesses the ambiguity of Canio's accents, while the audience follows the performance with bated breath, though still not suspecting the drama enacted before their eyes. When Columbine, still according to the play, implores: "Pagliaccio, Pagliaccio!", Canio suddenly unleashes all the wrath of his desperation ("No, a Clown I am not"). By now beyond all theatrical convention, he orders the woman to confess her lover's name. The audience, too, have begun to sense that something unusual is happening on stage. Beside himself, Canio screams for the last time "His name, his name!" and stabs Nedda, who drops on her knees calling out Silvio's name. Silvio rushes in dismay onto the stage but Canio plunges the same blade into his heart. Tonio turns towards the audience and cynically proclaims: "The comedy is over!"