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TOP double bill a strong opener

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A tragic clown and a crippled shepherd boy tug at the heartstrings in Townsend Opera Players' season-opening double bill.

The Modesto company's polished production of "Pagliacci" and "Amahl and the Night Visitors" at the Gallo Center for the Arts is a treat featuring every emotion from despair to joy.

The piece with the "wow" factor is "Pagliacci" (Clowns), Ruggiero Leoncavallo's 1892 classic about a clown who takes revenge on his straying wife during a performance.

Presented in Italian with English supertitles above the stage, the show is exciting throughout thanks to California State University, Stanislaus, music professor Joseph Wiggett's masterful direction.

Tenor Vincent Chambers offers a deeply passionate portrayal of the angry clown Canio, showing off an exceptionally strong voice. He nearly brings the house down with his emotion-packed rendition of the opera's famous aria, "Vesti la giubba" ("Put on the costume"). A veteran of West Bay Opera and San Francisco Lyric Opera, Chambers gives a performance that alone would be worth the price of admission.

Soprano Elizabeth Russ, who plays his wife, Nedda, has plenty of spunk, while baritone Eric Graber, who plays Canio's devious friend, Tonio, is deliciously wicked. But Graber isn't fitted with a noticeable hunchback, which is distracting because he has lines that talk about how his body is misshapen.

Corey Strauss' storybook village set is quaint and comes with nice details like a well and hanging laundry. Cindy Defilippo's peasant costumes are charming.

The orchestra, conducted by Ryan Murray, sounds well rehearsed in this opera and the Christmas-themed "Amahl and the Night Visitors."

Composed for a 1951 NBC television special, Gian Carlo Menotti's "Amahl" tells the touching story of a poor, crippled shepherd boy and his widowed mother who host the three kings on their way to see the Christ child.

Though the show is performed in English, it's sometimes hard to understand all the words. It's too bad TOP chose to take down the supertitles for this opera.

Director Andrew Sutherland, a Stanislaus State theater professor, offers a sentimental staging that fits the gentle score. Strauss cleverly converts part of the set from the previous opera into Amahl's simple home, adding a starry sky, while Defilippo provides biblical attire for the cast.

Colin Gonzaga, an 11-year-old soprano, is engaging as the mischievous Amahl. Playful and upbeat despite his disability, Gonzaga's Amahl easily wins our hearts.

Russ is desperate as Amahl's mother. With no money or food, she isn't sure how she and her son will survive another day. Tenor Ricardo Campero, baritone Sascha Joggerst and bass-baritone Joshua Zanze are stately as the kings.

With so much variety in this production, opera fans who attend should have a top-notch experience.

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