

Alan Brady's Other Show

'The Life and Love of Joe Coogan' in operatic form.

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Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

To Wotan and the not-so-merry band of deities who recently pranced about the \$16 million digital-age Valhalla rising up from the Metropolitan Opera House stage in New York, Rob Petrie and a cadre of television sitcom writers pratfalling around a modest Lehigh University theater in bucolic Bethlehem may appear puny, if not downright metrosexual. Yet *The Life and Love of Joe Coogan*, a comic opera based on a classic *Dick Van Dyke Show* episode, exudes a kindred epic mien—and not simply because it is so easy to imagine Laura Petrie and Fricka, Starbucks lattes in hand, commiserating over the colossal daftness of their respected men. Composer Paul Salerni and librettist Kate Light adroitly wed, albeit with a theatrically exaggerated wink, soaring grandeur to a venerable Everyman institution.

Tragedy (“Say, I wonder what my wife is burning for dinner?”) and treachery (“You know how [Mel] first knew he was going bald? A near-sighted ostrich landed on his head and tried to hatch it”); the boastful hero (“I don’t mean to sound immodest, but when it comes to acting oddest, I’m your guy”); his long-suffering *inamorata* (“You certainly get to live uncommonly when your husband writes for comedy”); and the marauding clique (“Not that we don’t love the things we do, but we love not doing them, too”)—all the usual canonical operetta conventions are, in alternating baritone and soprano, weaved into atypical modern set pieces.

Joe Coogan, like *The Marriage of Figaro*, concerns, more or less, *la folle giornata*: a day of madness sparked by a chance encounter. Rob and the writing room fellas are out on the links engaging in a little R&R, friendly banter, and four-part baritone harmonizing when they cross paths with Joe Coogan, an amiable man alone who becomes their missing fourth. The crew gets along famously until a casual post-game chat reveals that Joe is an old, hitherto unmentioned flame of Laura Petrie and author of a shoebox full of love sonnets hidden in Rob’s basement. Though not quite akin to what Verdi put poor Don Carlo through, this naturally sends Rob into an apoplexy of jealousy and self-doubt (“I could try a villanelle, it probably wouldn’t go too well”), which would be considerably less wrenching were Rob privy to Joe’s ecclesiastical calling. Alas, Rob, knowing not what he does, connives to set up his spinsterhood-fearing coworker Sally on an empyrean disaster of a blind date as a roundabout way of gauging Laura’s loyalty.

Hilarity, as they say, ensues.

Though the prime-time depiction of a priest as something other than a hypocrite surreptitiously attempting to make it with your spouse/offspring or the leader of a dangerous religious cult (or both!) may strike wised-up modern readers as hopelessly quaint, the iconic characters and familiar accoutrements of *Joe Coogan* leave the impression that, perhaps, Salerni and Light aspire to create a “gateway opera” to mind the gap between American pop culture and European go-for-Baroque classics. Replies Salerni:

That would be an unintended but desirable outcome. I would be very happy making some small contribution to increasing the audience for this wonderful art form ... You first need to get people in the door. If the subject matter accomplishes that, great. Then, no matter the material, it’s my job as a composer to effectively communicate some emotion, paint a picture, entertain. An attractive idea is worthless unless its execution and fulfillment are excellent.

And while the trend on Broadway is toward re-jiggering established vehicles with easily marketable cultural cache—*Spiderman*, *The Addams Family*, the truth-in-advertising poster child *Green Day’s American Idiot*—adapting an episode of a wholesome early Sixties sitcom into opera is nevertheless strangely, paradoxically transgressive, especially considering—(minor spoiler alert!)—the late revelation that it was in the rapturous throes of writing sonnets that Joe first felt compelled to dedicate his life to God, thereby setting his faux muse Laura free to fall in the arms of true love Rob. Indeed, amidst the gags, quips, and plays on words, Kate Light takes a nimble turn on her rhetorical heel to tie a very sweet, exquisite little bow on the show: Laura sings a Joe Coogan sonnet to Rob and the couple together realizes its transcendent implications for all.

“It’s a testimony to Carl Reiner’s genius,” Salerni says of the *Dick Van Dyke* creator who gave the production his legal and personal blessing, “that this rather lofty and sophisticated concept still lends itself to a pretty damn funny episode.” Though the *Joe Coogan* run was brief, there is enough buzz to entice the music publisher Theodore Presser to release the work, along with Salerni’s last one-act opera *Tony Caruso’s Final Broadcast*. In success, Salerni does not rule out future “sitcom operas.” You can almost hear the vibrato carrying indulgent exasperation across time from a certain suburban New Rochelle home: *Oh, Rob!*