

Production of folk opera stunning

By WILMA SALISBURY
PLAIN DEALER MUSIC CRITIC

"Stabat Mater: Donna de Paradiso" generated the raw energy of primitive rituals Friday night at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Based on the eloquent poetry of 13th-century Franciscan monk Jacopone da Todi, the vivid folk opera about Jesus Christ's passion and his mother's grief was performed by I Giullari di Piazza (The Players of the Square). Artistic director Alessandra Belloni adapted, staged and choreographed the stunning production; musical director John La Barbera composed the explosive score.

Throughout the 90-minute show, the singing was throaty, the dancing earthy, the music propulsive, the speaking impassioned. Exhilarating rhythms borrowed from folk dances of Spain, Italy, North Africa and the Middle East were sparked by the virtuoso drumming of guest artist Glon Velez. Infectious tunes reminiscent of Southern Italian folk song were sung by a strong cast of amplified singers-actors headed by Belloni as Mary and guest artist Chris Van Cleave as Jesus.

Belloni's bold staging and wild choreography incorporated ancient Holy Week traditions, mostly from Southern Italy. The 16-member cast looked ominous in the opening procession of hooded figures. Slowly swaying from side to side, they were accompanied by the low drone of a

MUSIC REVIEW

I Giullari di Piazza

rubbed hand drum and the measured rhythms of drums and rattles. Later in the production, a couple of Penitentes violently beat themselves with ropes, and several trance dancers whirled until they collapsed in exhaustion.

Van Cleave played Jesus with a raspy voice and resigned expression as he was roughly tied up with ropes, beaten with sticks, crowned with thorns and shoved to the ground beneath the weight of his cross. The weird-looking angel who comforted him was portrayed by a clumsy male stilt-walker in a long gown, feathery wings and huge black pointed shoes.

The Madonna fended off the blood-thirsty crowd with the desperate beat of her tambourine, and she encouraged Mary Magdalene to express her love for Jesus in a seductive dance. After the crucifixion, the bereaved Mother became the exorcist who presided over possessed figures writhing on the ground, and she also led the spinning dance that sent mourners into a cleansing trance.

Small and dark in voluminous black robes, Belloni looked like a gypsy and sounded like Mother Earth's voice pulled up by the roots. When her Son was taken down from the cross, she cradled

his broken body in her arms and sang a heart-rending lullaby. Later, she stood before the empty cross weeping with grief.

Belloni's all-stops-out performance set the emotional tone for the cohesive cast. Narrator Mark Greenfield provided dramatic English-language introductions to the poetic texts, which were sung in Latin and Southern Italian dialects, and he threw himself into his roles as Judas and a Penitente. Soprano Alessandra Tartivita gave Mary Magdalene a penetrating voice. Dancer Sharon Li Vardo performed the Magdalene's movements with sensuous arms.

The versatile instrumentalists created a medieval tapestry of sonorities drawn from guitars, flute, piccolo, recorders, violin, oboe, double bass, drums, bells and tambourines.

The unique production culminated in the thrilling moment when the risen Christ appeared in a golden spotlight. Walking down the aisle with his arms outstretched, he sang an ancient chant of praise to the rising sun. The chant swelled into an overwhelming finale as singers and instruments joined the triumphant voice and the full cast

broke into an exuberant dance.

The crowd's enthusiastic response was as spontaneous as the performance, which concluded with raucous singing, buoyant drumming and cartwheels in the aisle. Presented as part of the museum's Vatican Treasures Series, the astonishing production has never before been performed outside the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, where the folk company is in residence. The success of the performance proved that the work can be as effective in a secular space as it is in the cathedral.

CORRECTION

Play director's name incorrect

A review published last Thursday of "The Last Stand of the Polish Sharpshooters," playing at Ensemble Theatre through April 15, incorrectly named the director as Lucia Colombi. The comedy's director is Lucia's twin sister, Licia Colombi.