


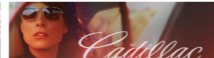


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**Jeanne Claire van Ryzin** is the arts critic for the Austin American-Statesman where she has worked since 1999. She moved to Austin from New York City in 1986. Her work has appeared in Architecture, Art Papers, Dwell and The Review of Contemporary Fiction, among other publications. When she is not busy seeing things in Austin, she travels to see even more things.

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## Review: 'Pirates of Penzance'

By David Mead | Monday, June 23, 2008, 10:33 AM

In 2003, when Ralph MacPhail first staged 'The Pirates of Penzance' for the Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Austin, he demonstrated a refined sense of the style and got sparkling performances from several of the cast. Returning to 'Pirates' the GSSA's show on Saturday evening at Crockett High School, again staged by MacPhail, lacked sparkle or any substantial dramatic or musical focus. It surely didn't help that it was everyone's second public performance of the day.

With Crockett's basic proscenium stage and no orchestra pit, even the stronger voices disappeared if their owners weren't downstage, and wind players in the orchestra consistently covered singers. Music director Jeffrey Jones-Ragona kept the music together and moving in a general way, but it never once took on dramatic life.

Most everyone had moments of sloopy singing: not simply notes out of tune, but notes that clearly had little to do with the musical context. David Fontenot as the pirate king was particularly glib. Carol Brown and Holton Johnson got all of their notes as the protagonists Mabel and Frederic, though those notes were not especially pretty. Janette Jones as Ruth and Russell Gregory as the police sergeant were vocally ragged, but Jones's words were clear and Gregory delivered the comedic goods. Arthur DiBianca as the major general, speaking and singing with a wisp of a voice, was simply inadequate.

Three women show in minor roles as other daughters of the major general, Lisa Alexander, Patricia Combs and Angela Irving. They sang pleasantly and accurately, slipping their lines and themselves in and out of the action adroitly.

Austin's Gilbert & Sullivan ensemble on a good night can achieve better than average community theater. Saturday was not one of those nights.

[David Mead is an American-Statesman freelance critic.]

'Pirates of Penzance' continues 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Crockett High School, 5601 Manchaca Road. \$25 (\$20 students). [www.gilbertsullivan.org](#).

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By Michelle Pettis

June 24, 2008 7:39 PM | [Link to this](#)  
 David, your critique disappointed me! I was at the Friday night performance, and it was very enjoyable! You said that you saw on on Saturday - I cannot imagine such a difference between the two nights. This is a fine production of the Pirates. The staging is tight, the singers, for the most part, are very good. Carol Brown and Holton Johnson are wonderful - the best Mabel and Frederic I have seen in Austin. Jeffrey Jones-Ragona did a very good job with his small orchestra. All in all, it is a very respectable production. Your review does not do it justice. I highly recommend it! In fact, on Friday I will go to see it again and take my 21-year-old son and his friend to see it...

By Derek Willis

June 24, 2008 5:09 PM | [Link to this](#)  
 This soreheaded reviewer must have seen a very different show from the one I saw on Thursday, the preview night.

"Don't listen to him - go and see it, and take your kids too. It's a load a fun, and the rest of the audience seemed to think so as well.

"kept the music together and moving in a general way"? I don't think this reviewer gets out much...

By A theater fan

June 23, 2008 3:56 PM | [Link to this](#)  
 Mr. Mead,

It's possible to be clever and scathing at the same time, Dorothy Parker did it, after all. However, Dorothy Parker was reviewing Broadway shows, not shows staged entirely by local people who have day jobs and are performing entirely for love of theatre.

I saw the Friday night performance and I can appreciate your points about how difficult it could be to hear the cast. However, I believe that you could have made your problems with the show clear without being cruel. Apparently you like being cruel.

Congratulations on your attempt you emulate Dorothy Parker - I wish you greater success in the future.

Cordially,

James

By a reader

June 23, 2008 3:12 PM | [Link to this](#)  
 Wow, David. At least give them credit for singing unamplified. They're the only musical troupe in Austin that consistently does it the old-fashioned way -- without microphones -- which means they're working much harder than anyone else in town is. Give them a break, bud. If you're going to fault the production, fault it for the lackluster staging and the lack of real style. (Ooops. You did fault it for the lack of style. My bad.)

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