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Arts Review

By Iris Brooks

Ruddigore, or The Witches Curse

Texas School for the Deaf Auditorium, through June 24

Ruddigore, or The Witch's Curse is the 10th collaboration between Arthur Sullivan and W.S. Gilbert, which, in addition to having the misfortune to follow directly on the heels of the unquestioned genius and popular success of *The Mikado*, has often been criticized for the subject of its satire, namely the brand of gothic melodrama popular among 19th century audiences. A critic at the time defined the problem as such: "The Transpontine drama was an institution which only existed in the south suburbs of London. Any parody of its peculiarities would consequently be mainly relished by those who were locally acquainted with its peculiarities." And while the conventions of the Victorian melodrama have since spread far beyond the south side of the Thames, the play remains problematic for modern audiences, if in an entirely unexpected dimension.

By an unlucky turn of events, many of the tropes of the genre being satirized have come to be considered shibboleths of their own work. Out of an oeuvre already replete with choruses of maidens, hapless heroes, and sailors, it can be difficult to place just exactly how far into his cheek Gilbert's tongue is lodged, and thus some of his trenchant satire on a ridiculous genre unknowingly passes as typical Gilbertian ridiculousness. An additional irony that one suspects its author would not take remiss.

That said, *Ruddigore* is a rollicking good time. Evil baronets, a chorus of professional bridesmaids, a family curse, madwomen, ghosts, jolly jack-tars – all are hilariously undermined in Gilbert's inimitable fashion. The baronets long for lives of staid respectability; the heroine's virtue resides in a blind, rigorous adherence to a book of etiquette; the blushing hero brags loudly and repeatedly about his diffident nature. Many of the songs themselves are hilarious subversions of the moral instruction typically proffered in this genre of theatrical fare: A fickle trio admonish us to always follow the noble dictates of the heart, a call to duty is sung by a flagrant opportunist, and we are told to shy from crime because it makes one physically unattractive.

The Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Austin has put forth an impressive production. Ralph MacPhail Jr. directs an accomplished cast, thankfully resisting the urge so tempting to American companies to mug and grimace when faced with Gilbert's sly humor while also not shirking an entirely appropriate silliness. As a choreographer, he gives us plenty of the droll, self-consciously stilted bits of business that have become something of a Savoyard tradition and then, with equal aplomb, orchestrates a minuet with a cast of 30. The voices are excellent, most particularly from the women in the cast. As Rose Maybud,

Glady Marie Posch sings with a strong, clear voice, consummately professional and delightful. Patricia Combs, as Dame Hannah, delivers a song beautifully in the third act. And Janette Jones as the lovelorn Mad Margaret possesses a full and satisfying alto. Trey Deason has great fun as the shy youth forced into a life of evil as the baronet of Ruddigore, and Frank Delvy brings to the character of his predecessor a witty and knowing comic touch. Russell Gregory is a perfect recently deceased baronet and shows off a remarkable command over his jowls.

The highlights of the evening are many. After some understandable apprehension at the start of one of Gilbert's nerve-racking patter songs, the singers bring it to a raucous and crowd-pleasing conclusion, and Michael Borysow, the man-o'-war's man Richard Dauntless, admirably displays his character's acclaimed agility. It isn't often in this day and age that one is presented with a hornpipe in its entirety.

On a recent Sunday matinee, which turned out to be family day, there was a large and enthusiastic audience of patrons ranging in age from 6 to 80, a heartwarming indication of the wide appeal of this production. Whether you favor the arch satire, the lovely music, or the sheer fun of watching a picture gallery of dead gentry come to life, the Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Austin has provided a rare and welcome opportunity to experience one of the less seen works of the G&S canon performed with aplomb. In the words of Bunthorne being auctioned off to a chorus of eager brides in *Patience*, "Such an opportunity may not occur again."

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