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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: Gilbert & Sullivan Society's 'Iolanthe'

By Claire Croft | Sunday, June 14, 2009, 09:56 PM

"All hail the influential fairy" might be the best line of the Gilbert and Sullivan Society's production of "Iolanthe," which opened Friday at Travis High School's Performing Arts Center.

The members of the society, led by stage director and choreographer Ralph MacPhail, Jr., and music director and conductor Jeffrey Jones-Ragona, dedicate themselves with gusto and humor to one of Gilbert and Sullivan's less often produced operettas. "Iolanthe" chronicles the follies that ensue when the English lady Phyllis (Meredith Ruduski) falls in love with Strephon (Derek Smoot) a shepherd, who, unbeknownst to Phyllis, is half fairy, half man.

The story, like many Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, relies on a several twisting plot lines, most of which reveal the group of all female fairies and the all male peers (members of the upper-class British House of Lords) to be equally befuddled beings. I won't give away "Iolanthe's" moment of resolution, but the stage picture it creates makes sitting through the almost three-hour production worthwhile.

Gilbert and Sullivan lovers usually cite "Iolanthe" as some of Sullivan's best music. Several performers brought lovely voices to the Gilbert's speedy lyrics, which have to be sung almost too fast for projected subtitles to keep pace. As the intensely rigid Private Willis Russell Gregory nearly steals the show. Queen of the fairies Lisa Alexander, Earl of Mountararat David Fontenot, and Lord Chancellor Arthur DiBianca were among the show's standout voices. Fontenot and DiBianca, with Andrew Fleming as Earl Toller had one of the better-staged and funniest scenes, trotting and skipping to the song "If You Go In." The production continues through June 21.

Claire Croft is an American-Statesman freelance arts critic.

'Iolanthe' continues 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday. For more information www.gilbertsullivan.org.

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