



Arts: June 27, 2008

<http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/review?oid=oid%3A640020>

Arts Review

By Barry Pineo

The Pirates of Penzance

Forrest Kline Performing Arts Center at Crockett High School, through June 29

Running time: 2 hrs, 20 min

For more than 30 years, the Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Austin has delighted local audiences with a summer production of one of the 14 works of the original masters of musical comedy. While GSSA produced *The Pirates of Penzance* a scant five years ago, this G&S operetta, along with *H.M.S. Pinafore* and *The Mikado*, has proven to be among the most popular musical comedies ever to see a stage – and with good reason. Besides containing a tune that immediately found its way into the American zeitgeist (popularly known as "Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here," although you won't find those lyrics in any song in the show), as well as the most famous patter song ever penned ("I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General"), this absurd story of Frederic the honorable pirate, apprenticed to the Pirate King as a child because his hard-of-hearing nursemaid thought she heard the word "pirate" instead of "pilot," is perfectly matched with the witty, lovely poetry of W.S. Gilbert and the light, airy music of Arthur Sullivan.

Standing solidly at the center of the current production is Holton Johnson's Frederic, a pitch-perfect portrait of innocent, energetic earnestness. Johnson's accomplished tenor carries every word, spoken or sung, clearly over the music of the Gillman Light Opera Orchestra, conducted with dashing aplomb by Jeffrey Jones-Ragona, and into the auditorium of the Forrest Kline Performing Arts Center at Crockett High School. Johnson looks and sounds like he'd be perfectly at home with a sword and a sail or a scone and a cup of tea. While she does not have as much to carry as Johnson, Janette Jones as the hard-of-hearing Ruth allows us to hear two plot-laden numbers with such clarity that no one in the audience could possibly miss the plot-heavy story she tells. Add Carol Brown's gorgeous coloratura soprano in the role of Frederic's love interest, Mabel (I don't know world-class from run-of-the-mill, but Brown sounded world-class to me, especially when singing the difficult "Poor Wand'ring One"); Arthur DiBianca's adroit handling of the seemingly impossible "Major-General" patter; and Russell Gregory's utterly comic turn as the bumbling, cowardly Sergeant of Police, and you have a production that excels where it must: with the music.

Not quite working on the same level is director and choreographer Ralph MacPhail Jr.'s staging. Faulting MacPhail is difficult, as it would not surprise me if more than one of the original productions of *Penzance* had actors doing little more than standing in straight lines and delivering dialogue, and even

songs, in a primarily declarative, presentational manner, as they do here. But just because it's a 19th century comic opera doesn't mean it has to have 19th century staging. While some of MacPhail's choreography is outstanding – particularly "When the Foeman Bares His Steel," with its dynamic movement and multiple false endings – and he presents one truly stunning stage picture at the end of the first act, with a huge flag waving and a dozen pirate swords flashing, it would have been nice to see a bit more swash with the buckle.

But no matter. It is, after all, Gilbert & Sullivan, and besides, it looks like a good-hearted pirate musical; it sounds like a good-hearted pirate musical – it is a good-hearted pirate musical! For entertaining distraction on a summer afternoon or evening, who could ask for anything more?

Copyright © 2008 Austin Chronicle Corporation. All rights reserved.