

NATIONAL OPERATIC AND DRAMATIC ASSOCIATION LONDON REGION

Society ; **Starmaker**
Production ; **"PIRATES OF PENZANCE"**
Date ; **Friday 5th October 2012**
Venue ; **Wilde Theatre, Bracknell**
Report by ; **Henry Hawes - NODA Representative - Area 13**

"HMS Pinafore" was a great success when first shown, but at the time it was not protected by copyright with the result the Americans stole it so that when *"The Pirates of Penzance!"* opened at the Fifth Avenue Theatre, New York, on the 31st December 1879, it was not its first performance. In order to establish the opera's copyright in England, D'Oyly Carte had arranged for it to be played at a special matinee performance a day earlier at the Royal Bijou Theatre, Paignton. Why Paignton? Quite simply because one of Carte's companies was performing "HMS Pinafore" at Torquay, a fact that explains why the pirates of Paignton seemed unfamiliar with both words and music and wore navel uniforms decked out with a few coloured handkerchiefs. It hardly mattered; there were only about fifty people in the audience!

On Friday 5th October 2012, I was delighted to be invited to review Starmaker's latest production *"The Pirates of Penzance"*. This has always been one my favourite Gilbert & Sullivan operas, having directed it several times, performed in it and reviewed it more times than I can remember and I can honestly say this was one of the finest '*Pirates*' I have seen

Jacob Smith - (FREDERIC) - This character needs a good tenor voice to present the numbers he is involved in and a voice that can blend with others, and this we had on the night of my visit, in fact it was a joy to listen to. Jacob's characterisation of an indentured pirate who finds himself frustrated by virtue of being born in leap year was well shown and his eventual rejection of 'Ruth' after finding more attractive young ladies was good to watch - This character had impact - Congratulations.

Matthew Harcourt - (PIRATE KING) - I understand that Matthew had only recently joined Stamaker and that this was his first production and his first leading role. What a find. This young man gave us a 'Pirate King' that you would have to go a long way to find a better one. He was a dyed-in-the-wool pirate both in appearance and behaviour. Unfortunately his kindly heart and poetic leanings prevent him from doing little more than bluster, in fact just a 'sheep in Wolfs Clothing'. Matthew had enormous stage presence and controlled the stage whenever he appeared extracting all the inherent humour in the role, I particularly liked the short fencing exercise with the MD. Vocally Matthew sang very well in his numbers, a good 'Oh, Better Far to Live and Die', and I was particularly impressed with the two duets in the second act, both not particularly easy but they were sung with precision and a good balance of voices - Great - Congratulations

Josh Gwilt - (MAJOR GENERAL STANLEY) - After seeing Josh play a superb role as 'Fagin' in '*Oliver*' I was interested to see how he constructed this role, I needn't have worried as this characterisation was as good as his 'Fagin'. 'Major General Stanley' is an elderly General with a conscience who appears to have fought his battles from behind a desk in Whitehall rather than in the field, he is also responsible for a large brood of daughters. All of the facets of the character were well brought out by Josh. His bearing as an elderly military man was spot-on as was his movement, all aided by a superb make-up. Vocally we had the wonderful patter-song 'I Am The Very Model', not easy, but it was taken at just the right speed so that every word could be heard and his second number in the second act 'Sighing Softly To The River' we were presented with legato singing throughout with excellent diction - Congratulations a fine performance.

David Wallace - (SERGEANT OF POLICE) - This was a wonderful comic version of the Victorian 'Peeler' in charge of a group of timorous Policemen. David's performance could not be faulted, in fact one of the best 'Sergeant of Police' I have seen in a long time. Vocally he was a revelation, presenting a superb bass voice with resonance and power which is seldom heard in a young person and his number 'When a Felon's Not Engaged In His Employment' could not have been bettered - Congratulations.

Henry Bearman - (SAMUEL) - The 'Pirate King's' Lieutenant who tries to copy his masters piratical skills but has to employ a lot of bluffing to get away with it. Henry gave a good interpretation of this role making him a most believable character. His singing in the opening number was well sung and ensured the show started off on the right foot.

Beth Wright - (RUTH) - This was another good portrayal in this excellent show. As the piratical maid-of-all-work who brainwashes 'Frederick' into thinking that she is beautiful and the light-of-his-life, until he finds there are other ladies apart from 'Ruth'. Her anger and bitterness was well displayed when this came to light. Beth has a good contralto voice and she delivered her song 'When Frederick Was a Little Lad' very well. This song is not a favourite of contraltos as it lies awkwardly for the voice and would probably have been better had it been written a tone higher, but Beth managed it very well - Well done.

Ashleigh Payne - (MABEL) - As the 'Major General's' number one daughter who takes pity on 'Frederick', Ashleigh got the character just right. She demonstrated well her initial horror towards 'Frederick' to her eventual feelings towards him. Ashleigh's singing voice was a true soprano and her singing of her star number 'Poor Wandering One' was a delight. This is not an easy number to sing requiring good breath control with well sung coloratura passages which she seemed to sing with ease with a good tonal quality - Congratulations.

Rachel Warrick-Clarke - (EDITH)

Lili Reakes - (KATE)

Ariel Ramchand - (ISABEL) - These three daughters of 'General Stanley'

were well presented, who, together with the numerous other relatives of 'General Stanley', interpreted their roles beautifully. Their movements and posture could not be faulted and their fear at being confronted by the 'Pirates' was well portrayed.

PIRATES

Ben Tait, Max Jefcut, Callum Hopcutt, Joshua Holder-Brown, Matthew Snape, Nathan Isaac, Lawrence Maguire, Austin Grigoleit, Bruce Williams, Lemar Clarke, Erik Haxhilari, Rianne Thompson, Bonita Trigg. - This was a wonderful bunch of nefarious Pirates who obviously enjoyed their roles and who made an impact from their first entry through the galleon to their confrontation with the Police and their eventual discovery that they were all noblemen who had 'Gone Wrong'. This group presented tremendous enthusiasm and who entered fully into the spirit of the production - Well done.

POLICE

Jack Jennings, Ashley Wilson, Max Mander, Grace Poynter, Zoe Longhurst, Emilie Grigoleit, Phoebe Jackson, Rianne Thompson, Bonita Trigg, Sophie Harvey, Gabi Harris. - In all my years I have not seen such a good Policeman's Chorus, absolutely hilarious from their first entrance to the end. Their temerity on having to face the Pirate Band was well portrayed. Movement about stage was together and the choreography was hilarious, but at the same time precise which gave it the humour. Singing was of a high standard and gave a good support to the 'Sergeant of Police' - Well done.

GIRLS

Alex Ramchand, Naomi Doran, Freya Foster, Sophie Harvey, Libby Sinclair, Phoebe Jackson, Noella Doran, Hollie Watts, Jade Chaplin, Saffron Harrington, Stephanie Ridge. - This group of young ladies playing the various relatives of the 'Major General' were a delight, they looked good on stage with colourful costumes. Their fear at being confronted by the Pirate Band to their eventual acceptance of them as Noblemen was well portrayed. Singing of the various numbers presented good voices which blended well with good harmonisation, all coupled with dancing in the choreographic routines which was some of the most precise I have seen in a long time - Well done.

Alexander McWilliam - (DIRECTOR) -
Ben Smith - (ASSISTANT DIRECTOR) - I have nothing but praise for Alexander's interpretation which did nothing to detract from Gilberts ideas, but in fact enhanced them and I am sure he would have approved most heartily. Of all the '*Pirates*' I have been involved with over the years in some form or other, I don't think I have enjoyed one as much. From the outset I forgot they were young people performing the various characters, being adult in their presentation. The casting could not be faulted with the right characterisations being brought out which coupled with energetic stage

movement throughout ensured the show went at a good pace from beginning to end. My abiding joy I took away with me, was the wonderful amount of humour which had been brought out which I had never experienced before - Congratulations.

Christina Harris - (CHOREOGRAPHER) - This talented choreographer had devised some super routines for the cast, from the rumbustious 'Pirates' to the gentle 'Sisters, Cousins and Aunts' and the group of hilarious 'Policemen' in the second act, all danced with absolute precision, in fact the finest choreography I have seen in any '*Pirates*' and I would imagine a lot of hard work had been put into this aspect, and it showed - Congratulations.

Anton Gwilt - (MUSICAL DIRECTOR) - Anton had gathered round him twelve excellent musicians who played the music which was not only sympathetic to the performers but which I am sure Sullivan would have approved. All members had been well rehearsed in the music with precise entries and well balanced voices in the various concerted numbers. All principals sang their various solo's, trio's etc; with confidence and voices of maturity (by the way, I think you lost the fencing match with the Pirate King!) - Well done..

Stage Manager & Crew - This was a well managed stage with no visible hitches.

Lighting Design & Operation - A well thought out lighting design which ensured the right atmosphere was generated in both acts. Control on the night of my visit could not be faulted.

Sound Design & Operation - A good sound plot which was set at the right level and not over-amplified so that every word could be heard without distortion and was well cued throughout the performance.

Properties - A good selection of properties had been sourced looking most effective on stage and fitted the various actions.

Set - Supplied by Proscenium of Rochdale - I was impressed with the set supplied by **Proscenium**, from the opening sequence of Men-o-War and other items travelling across stage behind a gauze giving an ethereal effect, to the Pirate Galleon appearing on stage with the Pirates, to the ruined chapel in the second act, all eye catching and most effective from the front and gave a lot to the overall excellence of the show.

Costumes - This was a good set of costumes, all in the traditional mould. They were colourfull and well fitting.

Make-up - All make-up, including character make-up had been well devised and looked authentic under the stage lights - Well done.

Programme - A good programme of the right size. It contained all the necessary information well laid out with interesting cast biographies, all printed on good quality

paper. Thank you for the article relating to NODA. One small point, the address for NODA Headquarters has changed and is now at 15 The Metro Centre, Peterborough. PE2 7UH, Tel/No 01733374790, e.mail info@noda.org.uk. (It shows I do read the programme!)

Front of House Staff - As usual, staff were friendly. helpful and easily identifiable.

Thank you for inviting me to review your latest production and thank you for such an excellent performance, this was entertainment of the highest order. I certainly look forward to your 25th Anniversary productions starting with "*Les Miserables*" and wishing you all success with it.

Henry

NODA Representative - London Region - Area13