

NODA Review

Society: Witham Amateur Operatic Society

Production: "Pirates of Penzance" – Australian Version

Director & Musical Director: Thomas Duchan

Choreographer: Julie Slater

Venue: Witham Public Hall

Date of Review: Friday, 29th April 2016

Reviewer: Sue Hartwell NODA East District 7 Assistant Representative

I was delighted to be asked to review this Australian version of "Pirates of Penzance" on behalf of my NODA colleague Ann Platten. Having seen several performances of the original G&S operetta over the years, my curiosity was certainly aroused. This production, adapted by EssGee Entertainment in arrangement with Stagescripts Limited, for the sake of G&S purists, has kept all of the story-line and much loved harmonies of the musical numbers intact, but brings an up-to-date freshness to the script and energising feel to the musical. It's pure pantomime from beginning to end, with a delightful touch of burlesque and some wonderful opportunities for over-the-top characterisations.

Whilst some members of the cast were reprising favourite roles, for others, this was their first production with WAOS and without exception everyone seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves. Newcomer Thomas Pleasant, reprising the role of Frederic that he had played some ten years ago, had real stage-presence and a strong and true tenor voice, which was matched delightfully by young 19 year-old Jess Edom-Carey as Mabel, confident in her solid performance and reaching those very demanding top notes with apparent ease. As Ruth, Frederic's former nurse-maid, Anne Wilson, brought a real touch of humour and vitality to the role, a nice contrast to the swash-buckling performance by David Slater as the Pirate King, ably assisted by his side-kick Samuel, played by Michael Mundell-Poole, in his first G & S at Witham, having played many other roles in previous WAOS productions.

And then there were Mabel's older sisters – the Fabulettes – a bevy of bouncing beauties, who used every ounce of their feminine charms to entice and excite, posturing and performing discordant moves to their various musical numbers, all whilst dressed in Victorian costume – quite hilarious. Well done to Emma Loring as "Chardonnay"; Daisy Greenwood as "Daisy Doo"; Alice Mason as "Evelyn"; Rosie Clarke as "Izzy"; Linda Newman as "Lynda" and Michelle Jesse as "Trish" – you almost stole the show! As their long-suffering father, Tom Whelan also put in a fine performance as the Major-General - his patter song a high-light, particularly with the additional chorus in this adaptation, before the rousing finale to Act 1.

After the rather melancholic opening chorus 'Oh, Dry the Glistening Tear' with Mabel and the Fabulettes, set against the atmospheric moonlit backdrop of the ruined chapel, the fun continued in Act 2 with the arrival of the Sergeant of Police, comically played here by Stewart Adkins, with his Norman Wisdom style gait and whirling arms, who took centre stage with his troupe of reluctant policemen for one of the best known chorus' from the operetta "When a Felon's Not Engaged in His Employment', which the audience very much enjoyed. As the high-energy performance neared its end, the finale added a further twist – a megamix – when all the principals had the opportunity to reprise chorus' from their solos, accompanied by flashing gobo lights and pyrotechnics – a very different and celebratory ending from the original - which Gilbert & Sullivan would have welcomed, I'm sure, in ensuring that their operettas still have a rightful place in 21st century musical theatre.

During rehearsals for this production, WAOS suffered the tragic loss of their dear friend and mentor, Stephen Kenna, who had first joined the society way back in 1976 as a trumpet player in their orchestra. He went on to become one of the celebrated aficionados of G & S operettas, having won countless awards for his productions over many years. All credit to the cast and production team, under the direction of Thomas Duchan, who stepped into the breach during this difficult time, for producing such a high-quality and fun-filled performance. Julie Slater's experience as choreographer was evident throughout and the sword-fighting scenes were quite convincing.

The costumes were a delightful mix of Victorian and Scottish (particularly the pirates kilts!) The technical team produced some really effective lighting during the numerous scenes and the sound quality was well-balanced, with just a minor glitch during one of Mabel's scenes when her radio mic appeared to have been switched off. Overall, this was a thoroughly enjoyable evening's entertainment. Thank you WAOS!