

Michael Gray's Arts Blog

Witham Amateur Operatic Society at The Public Hall

25.04.16

There've been some pretty rum Pirates since copyright expired back in the 60s. All-male, Papp on Broadway, The Parson's Pirates[my favourite, from Opera della Luna]. And earlier this month a splendid Steampunk version at Brentwood.

WAOS went for the Australian version, with some modern tweaks, especially in the chorus numbers, some added business and topical asides, plus a lively megamix finale.

All the messing about did little for me. It seemed designed for a different company, a different audience. The "orphan" joke was made even less funny by being interrupted, General Stanley's character was not improved by what the Pirate King called his "flowers out the jacksie" moment. And the Fabulettes [Stanley's daughters] were allowed to upstage Mabel's aria, and encouraged to flirt outrageously with Frederick, in direct contradiction of the libretto.

But a cracking pace and many enjoyable performances produced an entertaining evening of alternative G&S.

Mabel was excellently sung by Jessica Edom-Carey, well matched by the equally youthful Frederick of Thomas Pleasant. Their wonderful Act Two duet is still echoing in my memory. Tom Whelan's staunchly traditional Major-General took his patter song at a brisk pace, well sustained until the lame encore. David Slater made a flamboyant Pirate King in his burgundy trousers; Anne Wilson was a superb Scots Ruth, the piratical maid-of-all work. And Stewart Adkins excelled as the Sergeant of Police – an interpretation which was hilarious both vocally and physically – at the head of his cleverly choreographed coppers. The Foeman number was the best thing in the show.

Fine ensemble work from the pirates too, and from the whole company in the Ode to Poetry, mercifully unimproved. The Fabulettes – a sexy sextet of smokers in beehive hairdos, led by Emma Loring's Chardonnay – enjoyed some nice harmony work.

The design could have been Pixar, with the towering cliffs of books, and the costumes were bright and stylish – lots of butch kilts for the Pirates.

Thomas Duchan directed – he was in the pit, too, playing an unsubtle keyboard reduction. The excellent soloists not always best served by generous decibels from the sound system. WAODS gave the show their all; a big, bold, irreverent take on a favourite Savoy Opera. But my advice to other societies would be save your money, stick to the original, or be like Brentwood, or Trinity, and steer your own course.