

REVIEW OF "THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE" BY TONY ANNICONE

Opera Providence's current show at the historic Columbus Theatre in Providence is Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Pirates of Penzance". The show was their fifth collaboration together. It is wacky, irreverent and as entertaining today as it was when it first opened in 1879. It opened in New York on December 31, 1879 but a new version opened on Broadway on January 8, 1981 and ran for 817 performances. The show is a hilarious farce of sentimental pirates, bumbling policemen, dim-witted lovers, dewy-eyed daughters, and their eccentric Major General father who are all morally bound to the often ridiculous dictates of honor and duty. It tells the story of a young pirate apprentice named Frederic who has come to the end of his indenture period which was done by mistake. His half-deaf nurse, Ruth, had been instructed to apprentice the boy to being a pilot not a pirate. Upon turning 21, Frederic now rejoices that he has fulfilled his duties with the band of tender-hearted orphaned pirates and is now free to return to respectable society. Alas, he was born on February 29 remaining apprenticed to the pirates. Frederic who has never seen any woman except his old nurse, stumbles upon a bevy of beautiful maidens. He casts his eye on the loveliest one of all, Mabel, and falls in love with her immediately. Director Nathaniel Merchant and music director Anthony Torelli bring this 19th century show into the 21st century with topnotch performers who handle the tongue twisting songs and dialogue with ease while displaying their strong vocal prowess.

Nathaniel stages the two act show wonderfully, creating many comic moments in this merry farce. The twenty one piece orchestra shines under Anthony's direction. The voices blend in harmonic excellence under his tutelage. The two leads in this show are Joshua Collier as Frederic and Julianne Gearhart as Mabel. Joshua excels in this role. His strong tenor voice soars especially in "Oh, Is there not one Maiden Breast?" when he first meets the daughters and in the two duets with Julianne, "All is Prepared" and "Stay, Frederic, Stay". Joshua sings in over 17 numbers and acts as well as he sings with his comic reactions to the other characters as well as his loving expressions to Mabel and her sisters. Julianne is a gorgeous brunette. Her strong, magnificent, colatura soprano voice reaches the heights of perfection during all her numbers especially "Poor Wandering One", the two duets with Joshua and the finale where her obligatos soar off the charts. Julianne is a joy to watch and listen to all evening long. She has terrific chemistry with her leading man and is an excellent comedienne, too.

Ana Maria Ugarte is wonderful as the bawdy, comic Pirate maid, Ruth who lusts after Frederic. Ruth was his slightly deaf nursemaid who gave him to the pirates by mistake years ago. She is a mezzo-soprano and is hilarious as the man chasing pirate who Frederic finds out is 47 years old. Ana displays her voice in "When Frederic was a Lad" and in a trio with Frederic and the Pirate King. The trio is "Paradox" which reveals Frederic's birthday to him. Ryne Cherry splendidly plays the honorably roguish Pirate King. He commands the stage in this role and is terrific in all his scenes as the leader of these rogues. Ryne outdoes himself in the "I Am the Pirate King" where he displays his topnotch baritone voice. He also does a fantastic job in "Paradox" and his other numbers.

The biggest scene stealer of this show is Andy Papas as Major-General Stanley. His version of the "I am the very Model of a Modern Major-General" is perfect as he announces every word distinctly so you understand every comic moment of it. He is reminiscent of Buddy Hackett. The comic gem of his performance comes in the second act when he sings "Sighing Softly to the River" while dancing around the stage in his night clothes. Andy's strong bass-baritone voice and comic timing and antics also shine during his performance. Other comic performers include

Arielle Rogers as Kate and Kristen Charpentier as Edith, Mabel's flirtatious sisters are mezzo-sopranos who lead the girls in their numbers, Devin Morin as Samuel, the Pirate lieutenant who is a tenor and Jason Shealy as the leader of the Keystone Cops police force who is a bass-baritone. The girls most glorious harmonies occur in "Climbing Over Rocky Mountain" and "Oh Dry the glistening tear" while the men's voices soar in "A Rollicking Band of Pirates We" and "With Catlike Tread, upon our prey we steal". They and the whole cast have the vocal abilities to enthrall the audience all night long. Opera Providence also does a splendid job with their sets and costumes. So for a fun filled evening, be sure to catch "The Pirates of Penzance" at the beautifully refurbished Columbus Theatre which was built in 1924. It is fantastic to have this jewel of a theatre reopened to the public once again.

THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE (14 to 23 June)
Opera Providence, Columbus Theatre, 270 Broadway, Providence, RI
(401) 331-6060 or www.operaprovidence.org