

The Pirates Of Penzance - Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society at the Civic Theatre (26th February) 2009 Review by Cheryl Rogers

Ahoy me hearties! Yes, this pirate stuff is certainly contagious, especially when you've just been treated to a whole evening of swashbuckling sword fighting, pantomime thigh slapping and vibrant pirate costumes. CAODS production of the Broadway version of this show had all these and more. The moment the curtain opened to a scene of rocky shoreline and choppy sea on which a distant ship was bobbing in cartoon style, we knew that this company was really going to milk all the comedy it could from this performance. The stage immediately erupted with a whole gang of fabulous pirates, each one a stereotype. There were hooks and buccaneer hats, principal boy style lady pirates in fishnets and of course the pirate king resplendent with dark curly hair and dashing beard. The whole scene was a stunning display of dazzling colour and the lighting (that just seems to get better all the time at The Civic) brought it all to life to great effect. The action from the very outset was energetic and non-stop, one scene spilling into another and the stage always filled by a host of people, cleverly directed by Ray Jeffery who can make a crowd scene into an art form!

So, having set the scene I must tell you about the actual performances. I've already mentioned the splendid pirate king, played with huge panache by Jonathan Davis. He looked every inch the character and carried this demanding role with ease. To perform the sword fight scenes, sing a big number and play comedy all at the same time must have been testing to say the least but he had the ability to deliver it all with confidence and conviction, obviously enjoying playing this part enormously. The bevy of girls, daughters of the Major General, were a lovely foil to the 'rough' men and their performances were also full of humour, they looked delightful in their beautiful costumes and wigs. Mabel was our heroine here, played by the talented Christie Hooper, she and the young, handsome Frederic (Thomas Harper) were the love interest and made an excellent couple. He, with a smile to die for and she, looking pretty and delicate with – as they say – the voice of an angel. Then there were more. The Major General was played to great effect by Patrick Tucker who has a gift for comedy and whose rendition of the incredibly fast patter songs left us breathless with admiration. His diction was excellent and his stage experience quite obvious, a lovely portrayal. Ruth (Jenny Hockley) was fun and sang well. Then there were the 'Keystone Cop' constabulary complete with modern day policewomen.....I could go on.

If there is a criticism about this production it is that the diction in the ensemble numbers was a little garbled and especially in the opening scenes that told the story, if you weren't familiar with the plot already I doubt that you'd have entirely understood it. The music in this show is very fast but in my opinion if it had been taken at a very slightly slower pace, it would have been possible for the chorus to enunciate their words so much better and we wouldn't have missed so many of the clever lyrics. Speaking to other people in the audience this was a common observation. There are always aspects of a production that could be improved in hindsight but unlike the West End companies that have preview nights before an opening and have time to iron out the things that don't quite work, amateur companies like CAODS do not have this luxury and therefore to present such a spirited and enjoyable performance like this is to their great credit.

Photograph by Christopher Yorke - Edwards