



Society : HLO Musical Company
Production : Pirates of Penzance
Date : Saturday, November 2nd, 2019
Venue : Hampton Hill Theatre
Report by : Des Wilby – Regional Representative (District 3)

Show Report

Once again it was a pleasure to have visited with HLO Musical Company (formerly Hounslow Light Opera Company - HLOC) for this, their autumn 2019 production. Thank you to Laurie Coombs for arranging my ticket and for the warm welcome, and chat, on arrival.

With its official premiere in 1879 'Pirates of Penzance' is perhaps the best known, and most widely performed, Gilbert and Sullivan opera. With sentimental pirates, blundering policemen, unlikely events and improbable paradoxes it's easy to see why this comic opera remains so popular with both performing groups and audiences alike.

The story begins with Frederick on his 21st birthday. Having been wrongly apprenticed to a pirate by his slightly deaf nurse, she mistook pilot for pirate, Frederick is about to be released and start a new life. He falls madly in love with Mabel, the daughter of Major-General Stanley, and commits himself to being an honest man. His future, and a life with Mabel, is suddenly crushed when Frederic discovers he was born on February 29th and was not 21 but still only a child. Frederic's honour demanded he return to a pirate's life and say goodbye to Mabel – but would things really end this way?

Congratulations must go to Gareth Bevan (Director) for delivering a thoroughly entertaining and successful production. It must have been pleasing to see all your hard work, and effort, come together in such a robust performance. The principals had been very well cast and maintained their believable characterisations at all times. Actual staging worked very well, all vocals were first-class and everything ran smoothly with no delays or distractions.

Lee Dewsnap (Musical Director) provided full musical accompaniment via his electronic organ. Together with Matthew Newton (Conductor) they combined to ensure a wonderful rhythm and beat that drove Sullivan's music precisely. All music was perfectly timed and the vocals were both well-rehearsed and first rate. The volume was always good and I particularly noted it was most sympathetic during Major-General Stanley's 'patter song'.

Once again Choreography was in the safe hands of Karen Munday and Fay Ellingham who added some lovely touches and ensured cast movements were precise and smooth. I particularly enjoyed the Policemen and their lack of coordination – something that clearly highlighted their unsuitability to face the Pirates. I also liked the use of the auditorium which added a further layer of interest.

Steve Taylor gave a strong performance as the Pirate King both looking and sounding very much the leader of his motley crew. This is a pivotal role and Steve showed plenty of attack giving his character plenty of depth. He also quickly delighted the audience with 'Oh, Better Far to Live and Die' and demonstrated his terrific baritone vocals.

Johanna Chambers gave a wonderful performance and Mabel and immediately set the standard with a fabulous rendition of 'Poor Wand'ring One'. To hear a Mabel who was capable of singing top notes that soared beautifully above the chorus was such a welcome change. Johanna continued to delight the audience with 'Oh! Dry The Glist'ning Tear' and 'Stay, Frederick, Stay' being exceptional.

Kevin Chapman was ideally suited as Frederick and gave an excellent performance. Kevin possesses a wonderful tenor voice and 'Oh! is There Not One Maiden Breast" was one of the best renditions I've heard in a long time. Kevin and Johanna quickly established a strong rapport and a believable romantic interest. Their rendition of 'How Beautifully Blue the Sky' was lovely.

Felicity Morgan was fabulous as Ruth and gave a very good interpretation of her character. I particularly enjoyed Felicity's rendition of 'When Fred'rick was a Little Lad' complete with some wonderful facial expressions and remorse.

Tony Cotterill took on the challenge of Major-General Stanley and his exhausting 'patter song' very well indeed. It wasn't just the excellent delivery that was impressive but also the humour and comic timing – both of which were noted. Too often this can be 'rushed' but I felt Tony clearly enjoyed the role and this wonderful number in particular.

In his first solo role, Paul Chambers gave an excellent performance as The Sergeant of Police. Leading his motley group of policemen. This is a lovely cameo role and one that combines humour with the terrific 'When a Felon's Not Engaged in His Employment' was Paul's 'big number' and he certainly didn't disappoint.

Andrea Wilkins (Edith), Anne Pringle (Kate) and Harriet Muir (Isabel) all sang and danced well as Daughters of Major-General Stanley. Paul Huggins gave a strong performance as Samuel and did well with both 'Pour, Oh Pour, the Pirate Sherry' and 'With Cat-Like Tread'. Whilst the male chorus of pirates was relatively small it should be noted that the male members of the Balcony Choir added a greater vocal depth to what are, after all, pretty rousing numbers.

Lis Guest, Karen Heyworth-Taylor, June Hume, Elizabeth Malone, Veronica Martin, Genna Martinez, Bobbie McNulty, Philippa Mukherjee and Helen Smith provided strong support as Daughters, Chaperones and Maids. I thought the vocals were excellent and I particularly enjoyed 'Climbing Over Rocky Mountain' which included a number of cameo performances of note.

Graham Bamping, Gareth Bevan, Chris Blackmore, Michael Greatorex, Patrick Hooper, Stephen Hopkins, Gwyn Jones, Andrew Lumsden and Berni Messenger provided strong support as the Pirates and Police. The two most notable numbers were, of course, the fabulous 'With Cat-Like Tread' and 'When a Felon's Not Engaged in His Employment'.

Diane Bamping, Christine Bellion, Beryl Bevan, John Chamberlain, Laurie Coombs, Maria Devaney, Suzie Grant, Clare Henderson Roe, Wesley Henderson Roe, Gerry McCarthy, Heather Monro, Dave Simpson and Rachel White all deserve special recognition as members of the Balcony Choir. Their fabulous voices added a depth and richness to the ensemble numbers and greatly increased the overall vocal impact.

Wesley Henderson Roe was responsible for Set Design and together with his Team created a simple, but effective, setting with raised platform and side stairs leading to the main stage area. This provided maximum Space for the cast and added additional entrances/exits. Playing to black cloths, and use of lighting projection to depict day/night, atmosphere was quickly added. As a result, there were no set changes or interruptions which allows the performance to flow.

Jane Bean took on the responsibility of Stage Manager and was assisted by Elizabeth Chamberlain. Together they ensured everything ran smoothly backstage and that the cast and props were all in the right place at the right time

Wardrobe were managed by Veronica Martin who assembled a high quality selection of costumes that were both appropriate for the time period and social setting. Likewise, Susan Mills gathered together a suitable array of Props which were also of a good quality, appropriate for the period/setting and well-used by the cast.

Lighting was run by Patrick Troughton with no 'glitches' or issues to mention. The quality was of a consistently high level throughout with all cast members being clearly lit when required. I thought the lighting effects at the start of act II were particularly effective and noteworthy. Sound was run by Ian Nethersell with everything worked well during the show and all speaking and singing being clearly audible.

Once again, Tony Cotterill and Anne Pringle ensured the programme was of a very good standard and full of much information for the audience to enjoy reading. Cast and Production Team biogs are always interesting to read but I reading about 'The Real Pirates of Penzance' and seeing the 2006 production photograph. The Awards for Ruddigore provided a nice touch and it's always pleasing to see the NODA logo prominently displayed.

Congratulations to all cast and crew involved in staging 'Pirates of Penzance' and good luck with 'The Roaring Twenties' in April 2020.

Des Wilby
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