

PIRATES OF PENZANCE

Music by Arthur Sullivan

Libretto by W.S. Gilbert

Virginia Opera Company

Nov. 9-Nov. 18

For times and tickets call 623-12223

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

Gilbert and Sullivan liked to stick a pin to two in the balloons of the pretentious "grand" aspects of opera and lampoon its often illogical conventions and downright silliness. At the same time they respected opera's distinctive beauty and emotional power. They take on Victorian society from A to Z with their sharp and witty pens. Even Victoria must have been amused as are we some 130 years later.

While this offering of PIRATES, directed by William Theisen, has far more hits than misses, it gets off to a rocky start. Chris Clapps scenery is overpowering, dark and heavy as are the costumes. Like blotters, they seem to soak up the virility of the male ensemble headed by a rather cryptic, roiling Pirate King as sung by Dominic M. Aquilino. Lighting designer Kenneth Steadman's nervous sky is, unfortunately, a distraction.

The gloom is quickly dispelled when the warm, silken tenor William Ferguson's Frederic takes stage. He is charismatic. He is an actor with charm and simplicity and has a fluid vocal apparatus with a palette of many colors and shadings. I should think he has a promising career ahead of him. His wannabe lover, Ruth, sung by New York City Opera veteran, Myrna Paris, is appropriately bold and brassy and quite funny and even touching, when she doesn't try to hard.

Enter the ladies who are sisters and the daughters of the Major General Stanley. They show the boys what Gilbert and Sullivan are about and how their music should be done. They are delights, each and everyone. Mabel, is the girl Frederic is smitten with. The attractive Alicia Berneche with her clear, highly pleasing soprano, and talent for finding fun in musical ornamentation and other soprano antics, makes it easy to see why. Erin Sanzero and Kimberly Smith Markham are amusing when they join voices with her.

Now, the best of all, the one performer who is stylistically perfect and captures every note and nuance of G&S timeless brilliance is the Major General of Gary Briggie. His name rhymes with giggle. One does for more than giggle, however. He makes you laugh until it hurts. He can bring the house down with a single gesture. It's a classic, definitive performance that will linger in one's mind long after the curtain has fallen.

It seems to me that Director Theisen failed to find the fun of the police who come to save the major. Their scenes never quite come to life They are hard to understand as well. For the most part, however, he brings lots of humor to the goings on, especially when the performers don't work to hard at being funny

Conductor Joseph Walsh has the right touch and flair for the period sounding orchestra.

To reiterate, this production has far more hits than misses. Opening night appeared to be sold out. I have a feeling it's going to be the hottest ticket in town and you should take immediate action to see it.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.