

## National Operatic &amp; Dramatic Association

## London Area



Society : Savoy Singers  
 Production : Pirates of Penzance  
 Date : Friday 2 June 2006  
 Venue : Licensed Victualler's School, Ascot  
 Report by : Kim Halliday,  
 Regional Rep., London Area 14

## Report

The Savoy Singers have only recently joined NODA and I would like to start by thanking them for doing so and for inviting me to review this production thus providing them with their first NODA report! I have not previously seen 'Pirates' performed, although I had heard some of its more popular musical excerpts before— most, sadly, in television commercials!

**SALLY SMITH (Mabel).** Sally was perfectly cast as the lovesick *Mabel*. She had a beautifully-trained soprano voice which was a joy to the ear and phrased each of her musical numbers most excellently, especially 'Poor Wand'ring One' which requires a huge amount of breath control. She paired up well with Alan as *Frederic* and was able to convey the flirtatiousness yet naivety of her character throughout. A well thought-out and beautiful characterisation, Sally!

**ALAN EVERETT (Frederic).** Similarly, Alan was also well cast as the pirate apprentice who has known only his nurse *Ruth* as a female, giving us some comical facial expressions and mannerisms, especially when meeting the Major General's daughters for the first time! Alan had good stage presence, projected well and although obviously a lot older, his cheekiness did manage to convince us he was only 21! Alan possessed a fine, clear singing voice, which he used most expressively throughout, and his voice blended well in the many duets and trios in which he was involved. Another strong performance – well done!

**DAVE ECKENRODE (Major General Stanley).** This was another good interpretation of the ageing, yet proud mustachioed *Major General*. In particular, I thought Dave coped admirably well throughout his rendition of 'I am the Very Model of a Modern Major General', delivering a lot of very complicated words at speed and with astounding clarity, and the most fantastic breath control whilst maintaining good projection. A difficult piece but done to perfection. Dave also managed to convince us of his 'advancing years', through his stooped body mannerisms and gestures, and had a lovely line in 'Victorian Melodrama Asides to Audience'. A sterling performance, Dave!

**GEOFFREY HORTON (Pirate King).** Geoffrey treated us to a very flamboyant *Pirate King* and it was obvious from the start that we were witnessing a 'seasoned pro' at work. Geoffrey commanded attention whenever he was on stage and his powerful and controlled singing voice needed no amplification. He brought out the comedy well, as he swaggered around the stage, using his expressive face to good effect. Well done, Geoffrey – you understood your character perfectly!

**ABIGAIL COMBER, SUZANNE ANDREWS & VALERIE RYALLS (Edith, Kate & Isabel).** Although these 'giggling maidens' were relatively minor players in the overall storyline, each played their parts perfectly well, remaining in character throughout. They also possessed some fine voices, which blended together smoothly in the harmonies. I did wonder whether Suzanne's glasses might have been a little bit too modern for the setting, but apart from that, these were very commendable performances.

**RICHARD BATCHELER (Samuel).** This was Richard's first major role and I thought he did an impressive job as the *Pirate King's* side-kick. He moved well, was suitably authoritative and proved to have a good sense of comic timing. His voice also held well in his solo with the policemen 'With Cat-Like Tread'. Another commendable performance.

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**JULIA GARVEY (Ruth).** The part of the ageing nurse who has ‘affections’ for her young ward is a wonderful character actress role for a ‘woman of a certain age’ and I think Julia portrayed her perfectly. Her facial expressions, comical gestures and mannerisms brought the character alive and the slight Scottish (?) lilt and infectious laugh meant the audience took her to heart right from the start. Superb!

**PETER HARRIS (Sergeant of Police).** And here is the equivalent character role for the men! Peter, like Julia, was perfectly cast in his comical role, with his keen sense of timing well-aimed during ‘When The Foeman Bares His Steel’ and ‘When a Felon’s Not Engaged In His Employment’ – among the highlights of the show! And as for the ‘updates’ to the lyrics... definitely chuckling-material! Peter’s movement was very stylised, and it took me a while to trace it to source... a combination of Terry Gilliam’s animations in the Monty Python shows, and Graham Garden in ‘The Goodies’!

**CHORUS (of Pirates, Policemen, Governesses and Daughters).** The chorus’s contribution is both important and necessary as it is the foundation on which a production is built and holds it all together. Tonight’s chorus did just that, embellishing the action as necessary, and displaying some very fine voices and strong harmonisations. Everyone appeared to know their words and their parts, and what they were supposed to be doing, and movement around the stage was with purpose. The younger members of the chorus in particular are to be especially commended, as they all behaved confidently on stage, focusing well on the action around them. And full marks to the policemen’s chorus for that impressive can-can!

**DIRECTION (John Woodward-Roberts, assisted by Karen Echenrode).** I thought that John had chosen his cast well, putting together some strong leads, and that the overall effect was a very slick and enjoyable production. There didn’t appear to be much in the way of ‘upstaging’ or blocking and everyone moved with a purpose and understood their characters and what was expected of them. Direction makes or breaks a show, and this production had all the symptoms of good and competent direction. Well done both!

**MUSICAL DIRECTION (Chris Goodwin).** The orchestra worked together very well, and performed the score to a very acceptable (and, from where I was sitting, a very high) standard. The balance of levels between orchestra and cast was equitable. The cast (principles and chorus) were well schooled in their various parts. Chris has obviously got a very talented group to work with and really seems to push them quite hard... with some very satisfying results!

**CHOREOGRAPHY (Jen Hansford).** There didn’t appear to be any ‘specialist’ dancers in this particular production, so Jen had wisely kept things simple and worked to the abilities of the cast she had. Although movement was fairly limited when the full compliment of cast were on stage, there were some nice, simple patterns occurring. The policemen’s routine during ‘When the Foeman Bears His Steel’ was particularly effective.

#### **LIGHTING and SOUND.**

**Sound:** Was it really necessary to leave the radio mics turned up quite so high for the dialogue? Radio mics should be used as sparingly as possible – the absolute minimum – as they are a tool to reinforce the actor’s voice, not a substitute for projection. The art of vocal projection is one of the many acting skills that is often overlooked in amateur theatre, but is vitally important – especially during the more ‘intimate’ scenes, when clashing mics produce feedback. Look out for the NODA Summer Schools and other workshops that are available – they are a very real and positive help to many societies. Back to sound: the eq. on the radio mics had rather unnatural-sounding sibilance – too much high frequencies – or, rather too much ‘Rock’ and not enough ‘Theatre’. The sound FX were good and nicely on cue, if a little on the quiet side.

**Lighting:** Oh dear... it’s the ‘Curse of the LVS Theatre’... There are no lights beyond the front edge of the stage, and this presents problems for every group using the venue. You did the best you could, with footlights, but the balance of power between them and the rest of the stage lighting was rather too much in favour of the footlights, leading to some very stark and obvious (and quite distracting) shadows dancing on the up-stage flats. Apart from that, however, there were no obvious missed cues and in general the lighting worked very well, and I did like the image of the boat projected onto the curtains.

**SCENERY, STAGE MANAGEMENT & PROPS.** Sadly, I wasn’t overly impressed by the scenery used tonight, which although commendably ‘home-made’, looked just a little bit too ‘pantomime’ and minimalist on such a large stage (although I appreciate that you were probably up against some severe time constraints for your get-in and get-out at the venue). The backdrops, for instance, didn’t quite reach the top of the curtains, which meant that we were distracted by the lighting bar behind. I also want to question the use of dry ice in the finalé (it obscured the cast and didn’t seem necessary), and whilst the bubble machine was a nice idea, it didn’t generate nearly enough bubbles to justify its use. Fortunately, the way the scenery had been constructed meant there were few problems with scene

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**WARDROBE, WIGS & MAKE UP.** Costumes can make or break a production of this caliber and I thought that the Savoy Singers tonight had done a commendable job and had put together a wide range of appropriate attire. The pirates looked lively in their bright bandanas, striped jerkins and assortment of headscarves and eye patches, whilst the older daughters and principle ladies were elegant in their long dresses and headgear. The younger girls in the chorus looked fresh in their assortment of day dresses and straw bonnets and hats. There were also some specialist costumes which had been assembled, which included *Frederic's* sailor suit, the *Major General's* purple and gold suit and the policeman's uniforms and hats. There were some comic touches too: I had a chuckle at the 'L' plates on the junior chorus (Learner Pirates, indeed!), and also the flashing policeman's helmet worn by the *Sergeant of Police!* Hair and make-up looked appropriate, with any wigs or hair-pieces used by the ladies unnoticeable. The *Major General's* huge moustache also looked authentic.

**PROGRAMME.** Tonight's programme was an unusual orientation, being A5 landscape, and was printed in red and black on good-quality glossy paper. I thought this made it 'stand out from the crowd' and the format worked very well. The 'skull and crossbones' theme used on the cover and on most of the pages helped to give the programme a classy feel, along with the silhouetted artwork. Cast photographs were of a good quality and there were some interesting resumés. It was also good to see that the 13 (!) pages of advertising were kept to the rear of the programme, so they did not distract from the main text. If I have any quibbles, however, it would be that the NODA logo (which appeared solely on the front page) was far too small to see in the reverse print and there was no description of what the logo represented. There was also no mention of the Savoy Singers' affiliation to NODA (be proud of it!). NODA runs an annual programme and poster competition, and I think it would be advisable for you to enter future programmes for this. Programmes are more likely to win prizes if they include a short information piece on the work of NODA, and the text for this can be downloaded from the members' area of the NODA website (<http://www.noda.org.uk>). Good luck!

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To sum up, this was a competent and confident presentation of an entertaining G&S operetta, performed by an obviously talented and experienced group. Welcome to the world of NODA and the many benefits membership brings and good luck with your next production.

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