

The Modesto Bee

modbee.com

Posted on Tue, Mar. 31, 2009

Pinafore's singers, set are shipshape at Gallo Center

By Stephen Thomas

Townsend Opera Players' production of the perennially popular Gilbert and Sullivan musical "H.M.S. Pinafore" opened last weekend at the Gallo Center for the Arts and offered plenty of charm, silly tongue-in-cheek humor and, of course, great singing.

Notable among the leads was mezzo-soprano Heather McFadden, who in her role as Little Buttercup provided a stage presence as large as her rich, operatic voice.

Likewise, baritone Donn Bradley played the completely pompous Sir Joseph Porter with impeccable diction and an interpretive approach that successfully conveyed ridiculous humor without resorting to overacting.

Tenor Jonathan Smucker's pleasing, lyrical voice was right in line with his earnest approach to his role as Ralph Rackstraw.

Playing his love interest, Josephine Corcoran, soprano Sibel Demirman matched him in sincerity and expressive vocal lyricism. This production offered her only a few opportunities to show off the top of her range, but what we heard was spectacular and left me wishing we could hear more.

As Josephine's father, Capt. Corcoran, baritone Joe Rykert brought a subtle sarcasm to his role that kept the audience smiling. Besides his agreeable vocal talents, Rykert provided a son for this production, Joseph Paul Rykert, who performed admirably as boatswain Bill Bobstay. Only a junior in high school, Joseph proved light on his feet, quick with his wit and musical in his singing. He will be one to watch in coming years.

While TOP always has hired fine soloists for the lead roles, its productions sometimes have lacked the same level of quality in sets, costumes or orchestra.



Jonathan Smucker and Sibel Demirmen will play the rolls of Ralph Rackstraw and Josephine in Townsend Opera Players production of HMS Pinefore. Rackstraw, a common sailor falls in love with the captain's daughter Josephine. (Steve Kosko / The Modesto Bee) - Modesto Bee - Steve Kosko

The company has made a marked improvement in these areas throughout this season, and "H.M.S. Pinafore" is no exception.

Corey Strauss' set looks like a ship ready to sail, nicely accented by Cindy Defilippo's colorful and whimsical costumes. Apart from a few minor ensemble glitches, the orchestra, led by Ryan Murray, sounded truly professional.

What I felt this production lacked was a bit more energy. As I have mentioned, most of the individual elements of the show worked very well, but I missed a more spontaneous sense of chemistry among the sailors, the cousins and aunts, and sometimes between the leads.

Perhaps director Paul Tischer prefers a more stylized Gilbert and Sullivan approach that keeps everyone on stage moving in small, predictable patterns to match all those patter songs, but the actors seemed a bit hemmed in and stuck when they could have been moving and using the space on the stage with more creativity.

Another factor could have been that the show simply needed more people in the chorus to give it more liveliness and bustle. Surely there are more people in the region with some singing and theater experience who would enjoy being a part of a production like this. Let's hope they take advantage of the opportunity to join in future shows, which promise to be better and better each year.

Stephen Thomas is a professor of music at California State University, Stanislaus.