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## When an Audience Is On Board, Anything Goes With Sexy Swagger

PITTSFIELD, Mass. — It's hard to imagine more ideal summer entertainment than the exhilarating production of "The Pirates of Penzance" swashbuckling across the stage — and often tumbling merrily off it — at the Barrington Stage Company here.

**CHARLES  
ISHERWOOD**

**THEATER  
REVIEW**

Rarely have I felt an audience and a cast coming together in such a happy communal bear hug. And we could all use one right now, no?

This superbly realized production is directed by John Rando and choreographed by Joshua Bergasse, who teamed up for "On the Town," which was first seen at Barrington Stage before moving to Broadway. It embraces an anything-goes spirit that is both in keeping with the distinctive silliness of Gilbert and Sullivan at their best, and establishes its own brand of inspired goofing. (There's even a little "Brexit" joke at the finale.)

The production uses the revised version of the operetta originally presented by the Public Theater in Central Park, back in 1980, before moving to Broadway, with Linda Ronstadt, Rex Smith and Kevin Kline in the central roles, and directed by Wilford Leach.

On this occasion, for more modest star power, we have Will Swenson ("Hair" and "Priscilla

Queen of the Desert," among other Broadway shows), perhaps never better cast than he is here as the Pirate King. Mr. Swenson's swarthy good looks are matched here with a sexy pirate swagger, but he's also in possession of a powerful baritone.

Most important, he has such an assured natural comic flair that even the raising of an eyebrow — or, in one delightful bit, the donning of an eye patch — becomes the stuff of belly laughs. A few audience members are seated onstage, and Mr. Swenson's jovial joshing with them (including a reference to his "pirate booty") is handled with just the right smiling lewdness.

While they may not be as familiar, the rest of the principals are equally terrific. There has the fabulous Scarlett Strallen, who plays the ingénue, Mabel, been hiding herself? She hasn't really been pining in obscurity, but has been performing mostly in her native Britain, although she also appeared in "A Gentleman's Guide to Love & Murder" on Broadway.

A lyric soprano with a voice as flexible as it is rich, she is also a fine actress whose instinctive feel for the Gilbert and Sullivan ingénue idiom — play it straight with just a sly wink peeking out from the batting eyelashes — makes her every scene and song a joy.

One of two numbers interpo-

lated from other Gilbert and Sullivan shows, "Sorry Her Lot," from "H.M.S. Pinafore," is a solo for Mabel. A half-dozen more could have been added — and the full mad scene from "Lucia di Lammermoor" (which is mildly spoofed in the score), for good measure — and I wouldn't have complained.

As the conscience-stricken pirate Frederic, apprenticed by mistake to the band of brigands by his adoring nursemaid (you'll recall she was meant to put him in service to a pilot), Kyle Dean Massey, recently on the TV series "Nashville" but also in Broadway's "Pippin," has the square-jawed handsomeness and boyish virility that suit the role. His light tenor is not large, but it's nimble and it suits the squeaky-clean nature of the good-hearted Frederic nicely, as does his throbbing earnestness as he switches his allegiance from his pirate crew to the bumbling bobbies trying to capture them, and back again.

The veteran David Garrison imparts the Major-General, the father of a brood of capering lovelies, including Mabel, with a dithery pomposity. The litmus test for any actor in this part — and, in Gilbert and Sullivan in general to a degree — is an ability to twist the tongue around the dense lyrics set to beat-the-clock tempos in their dizzyingly fun patter songs. Perhaps the most



KEVIN SPRAGUE/BARRINGTON STAGE COMPANY

From left, Jane Carr, Will Swenson and Kyle Dean Massey in "The Pirates of Penzance," at the Barrington Stage Company in Pittsfield, Mass. The operetta is directed by John Rando.

famous of all is "I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General," and Mr. Garrison passes with flags flying.

Rounding out the principal roles with equal polish is another supremely good stage veteran, the British-born Jane Carr as Frederic's devoted Ruth. (Ms. Carr was also in "Gentleman's Guide.") Ruth's attempts at acting the demure would-be bride of her young charge are delightfully funny — a nice deadpan glance to the audience at the mention of her being "middle-aged" — but she also brings a bustling maternal warmth to the role that fits it snugly.

Mr. Bergasse's zesty choreography keeps the cast in almost constant, exuberant motion. Among the highlights are

the dances for the policemen set to capture the pirates, led with aplomb by the excellent Alex Gibson. Clearly these fellows, who twitch and squirm at the thought of the dangerous duties before them, would much rather kick up their heels and risk a hamstring injury than scratch so much as a pinkie finger chasing seafaring miscreants.

The staging, on a set by Beowulf Boritt that deftly switches from the deck of the pirate ship to the estate of the Major-General for the second act, takes full advantage of the auditorium. A narrow platform stretching into the audience brings us closer to the fun, as when the pirates steal upon the Major-General's mansion, with their catlike tread, hissing "meow" and admonish-

### The Pirates of Penzance

Words by William Schwenck Gilbert; music by Arthur Seymour Sullivan; directed by John Rando; sets by Beowulf Boritt; costumes by Jess Goldstein; lighting by Jason Lyons; sound by Ed Chapman; wigs by Leah Loukas; fight choreography by Ryan Winkles; choreography by Joshua Bergasse; production stage manager, Michael Andrew Rodgers; musical director, Darren R. Cohen. Presented by Barrington Stage Company, Julianne Boyd, artistic director; Tristan Wilson, managing director. Through Aug. 13 at Boyd-Quinson Mainstage, 30 Union Street, Pittsfield, Mass.; 413-236-8888, barringtonstageco.org. Running time: 2 hour 20 minutes.

WITH: Jane Carr (Ruth), David Garrison (Major-General), Kyle Dean Massey (Frederic), Scarlett Strallen (Mabel), Will Swenson (Pirate King), Darius Barnes (Ensemble), Phillip Boykin (Samuel), Tommy Bracco (Ensemble), Alex Gibson (Sergeant), Michael Hartung (Ensemble), Samuel Ladd (Ensemble), Melanie Leinbach (Ensemble), Jeanette Minson (Ensemble), Drew Nelissen (Ensemble), Lindsay O'Neil (Edith), Jacqueline Petrocchia (Kate), Benjamin Rivera (Ensemble), Morgan Rose (Ensemble/Dance Captain), Alanna Saunders (Ensemble), Claire Saunders (Ensemble), Eric Stretch (Ensemble/Fight Captain) and Michael Williams (Ensemble).

ing the audience to shush.

Remaining silent, however, is not an option at this buoyant production, which had me giggling with delight more or less from silly start to silly finale. Mr. Rando, long an expert in comedy with a speciality in delirious zaniness, liberally sprinkles the staging with frisky bits of business that wouldn't be fair to spoil. Any reviewer so foolhardy as to describe them in detail would deserve to walk the plank.