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Stage Review

An exhilarating ‘Pirates of Penzance’ at Barrington Stage



Kevin Sprague

Kyle Dean Massey (left) and Will Swenson in “The Pirates of Penzance,” directed by John Rando and choreographed by Joshua Bergasse.

By [Don Aucoin](#) Globe Staff July 25, 2016

PITTSFIELD — Three summers ago director John Rando and choreographer Joshua Bergasse teamed up at Barrington Stage Company for a revival of “On the Town” that later transferred to Broadway, where it earned several Tony nominations.

No one should be surprised if the joyous and inspired Rando-Bergasse revival of “The Pirates of Penzance” at Barrington Stage follows a similar trajectory. In the meantime, it is — to borrow a locution from “Pirates” — my bounden duty to inform you that there is not a better time to be had in the theater this summer than at this exhilarating production.

Where to begin? Perhaps with Will Swenson’s uproariously virtuosic portrayal of the Pirate King, leader of a band of soft-hearted and soft-headed ruffians whose habit of releasing any captive who claims to be an orphan has made them singularly unsuccessful at the pirate game.

Overstatement is always a risk when you enjoy a performance as much as I did this one, but here goes: In terms of charisma, comic invention, and sheer swashbuckling brio, Swenson rivals Kevin Kline’s legendary turn in the role 35 years ago.

Or perhaps an appraisal of this “Pirates” should start with the artistry of Rando and Bergasse, whose electric staging and choreography fuse to form a propulsive force that blasts away any cobwebs that might cling to the 1879 Gilbert and Sullivan operetta.

Or maybe it’s best to kick off with praise for Gilbert and Sullivan themselves, for crafting this irresistible and strangely sturdy Victorian-era confection in the first place. Distribute your own kudos as you see fit after you see Barrington Stage’s “Pirates,” and be advised that if you’re allergic to G&S or to operetta in general, this revival just might clear that up for you.

Central to the cheerfully inane story line at first is Ruth, onetime nursemaid to a stoutly honorable pirate’s apprentice named Frederic (Kyle Dean Massey). Played by the fluty-voiced Jane Carr — so memorable on Broadway in an operetta of much more recent vintage, “A Gentleman’s Guide to Love & Murder” — it was Ruth who, years earlier, was instructed by Frederic’s father to apprentice the lad to a ship’s pilot, but misheard it as “pirate.” Hey, mistakes happen. (Later, Gilbert’s libretto has further semantic fun with “orphan-often.”).

Now Frederic is turning 21, a birthday that, according to the wording of the original agreement, will spell the end of his apprenticeship. The newly free Frederic solemnly informs the Pirate King that he will henceforth be obliged to align himself foursquare against the pirates.

First, though, Frederic discovers the delights of the fairer sex in the form of Mabel (Scarlett Strallen) and the other comely, parasol-twirling daughters of the Major-General (David Garrison). Strallen brings a gorgeous, crystalline soprano and a winking, slyly naughty wit to her luminous, altogether first-rate portrayal of Mabel.

The performance by Massey, Strallen, and the ensemble of “Oh, Is There Not One Maiden Breast,” with the besotted sisters prostrate and Frederic standing athwart two rocks, is a high point in a show that’s full of them.

When the pirates capture the sisters, intent on marriage, the Major-General talks them out of it, plucking their consciences by falsely asserting that he is — what else? — an orphan. Complications soon arise for him and for Frederic, however. Ruth and the Pirate King realize that Frederic was born on Feb. 29 in a leap year, meaning that he has had only five birthdays, technically speaking, and thus must return to service with the pirates. The compulsively honest Frederic reveals the Major-General’s duplicity to the Pirate King, who vows to wreak a vengeance most terrible. There’s much more, equally nonsensical and equally enjoyable, all of it carried off with unflaggingly high spirits by Rando’s cast.

Garrison is solid as the Major-General, though his rendition of the classic patter song “I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General” could and should be projected more forcefully. Apart from that, I’m hard-pressed to pinpoint weak spots in this “Pirates.” Even when Swenson and other cast members break the fourth wall to entice an audience member onstage, always a dicey proposition, it works.

Alex Gibson is hilariously limber as a sergeant in command of an exceptionally craven collection of police officers who are called upon to combat the pirates, while Phillip Boykin lends his robust presence as Samuel, the Pirate King’s lieutenant. The ensemble of pirates and daughters is topnotch across the board.

Music director Darren R. Cohen faces more than the usual challenges: He conducts the superb orchestra with his head poking out from an opening in the stage, while boots clatter and swords swing nearby. Credit for the dynamic swordfights belongs to fight choreographer Ryan Winkles as well as to the actors who execute them with such skill. Beowulf Borritt’s set, featuring a catwalk on which pirates strut or crawl and a rope ladder that Swenson nimbly ascends, brings the action out into or above the audience.

How best, finally, to describe Barrington Stage's "Pirates of Penzance"? Perhaps by borrowing once more from that ace wordsmith W.S. Gilbert: It is, it is a glorious thing.

THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE

Lyrics by W.S. Gilbert. Music by Arthur Sullivan. Directed by John Rando. Choreographed by Joshua Bergasse. Presented by Barrington Stage Company. At Boyd-Quinson Mainstage, Pittsfield, through Aug. 13. Tickets: \$20-\$75, 413-236-8888, www.barringtonstageco.org

Don Aucoin can be reached at aucoin@globe.com.