

MUSIC

Delightful 'Pinafore' Is Packing the House

By Joseph McLellan
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Gilbert and Sullivan's "H.M.S. Pinafore" is playing at the F. Scott Fitzgerald Theatre in Rockville, and that fact is more remarkable than you might think.

"Pinafore" dates from 1878 and essentially is a satire on the British caste system of that era, particularly as it was exemplified in the governance of the Royal Navy.

This is, frankly, not a subject that you would expect to play to full houses in a Washington suburb in 1995, but that's what it is doing. When I went to hear its second performance Saturday night, the house was so full that I had to take a seat in the front row, right behind the busy percussionist, whose actions in the line of duty sometimes momentarily blocked my line of sight.

The shortage of empty seats partly reflects the enlightened ticket policy of the Victorian Lyric Opera Company, which will sell you a \$10 ticket for any seat you can find. But it equally reflects the quality of this very shipshape production.

The Victorian Lyric Opera is a community organization, which means that nearly all the performers are amateurs. But they have been performing Gilbert and Sullivan for a long time and have acquired a certain flair. It also means that this activity has values far beyond the level of proficiency shown on stage. At least one couple in this production met and married as a result of their work together in the company.

The performance I attended was an almost unalloyed delight. And although it takes place on a Victorian warship, "Pinafore" is in fact a show quite suited to today's Washington audiences. It is about bureaucracy, political appointments, pomposity and people who warmly endorse human equality while carefully avoiding the practice of it.

There may even be an anticipation of the current political correctness craze in Sir Joseph's insistence that Captain Corcoran

must end each command to his crew with "if you please."

For the most part, Sir Arthur Sullivan's music makes relatively modest demands. The two prime exceptions are the young lovers: Josephine Corcoran, daughter of the Pinafore's captain, and Ralph Rackstraw, the handsome and gallant young sailor who aspires to marry Josephine—rashly, perhaps, because she is of a higher social class and is sought in marriage by no less a person than Sir Joseph Porter, First Lord of the Admiralty.

Josephine and Ralph are portrayed by local professionals, soprano Lisa Lockhart and tenor Christopher Carrico, both visually and vocally appealing and endowed with considerable acting skills. Lockhart is particularly talented as an actress and hits some high notes that other sopranos would kill for. Carrico's light voice has excellent tone and fine expressive powers.

Scarcely less proficient, although some of their voices occasionally sound pushed to the limit, are the top amateurs in the production: Joseph Perine, a stalwart Captain Corcoran; Gordon Brigham, a properly pompous and self-satisfied First Lord of the Admiralty; and Tom Goode, who is impressively repellent as the villain Dick Deadeye.

Karen Mercedes, who sings the role of that "plump and pleasing person," Little Buttercup, falls a bit short in the plumpness department but compensates by being extra-pleasing, with a mellow mezzo-soprano voice and a magnetic stage presence.

Michael Plant's idiomatic conducting, Malinda Lloyd's adept stage direction and Todd Long's choreography all work together with fine results.

The Victorian Lyric Opera Company will perform Gilbert and Sullivan's "H.M.S. Pinafore" at 8 p.m. tomorrow and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday at the F. Scott Fitzgerald Theatre in Rockville. Call 301-879-0220 for ticket information.