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Dear Claire,

Thank you very much for inviting Liz and me to your performance of *The Pirates of Penzance* last week. As you know it's one of my all-time favourite musicals and we had an extremely enjoyable evening and I would ask that you convey our thanks to the entire cast and crew.

Please find below my review of the production which will also appear on the NODA web site.

Yours sincerely

*Andrew*

Andrew Carpenter

Noda Regional Representative District 10

## National Operatic and Dramatic Association

NODA House, 58-60 Lincoln Road, Peterborough PE1 2RZ

Tel 01733 865 790 Fax 01733 319 506 Email [info@noda.org.uk](mailto:info@noda.org.uk) Web [www.noda.org.uk](http://www.noda.org.uk)

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Patron: The Lord Lloyd Webber

**Trowbridge Amateur Operatic Society**

**The Pirates of Penzance**

**By Gilbert & Sullivan**

**4<sup>th</sup> December 2012 Arc Theatre, Trowbridge**

Director Andrew Curtis - MD Helen Heaton

This was a very interesting production of The Pirates of Penzance insomuch as it took the original score but had a very 'Broadway Pirates' feel about it in terms of some changes made. The stamp of director Andrew Curtis was written right across this production with many slight alterations to script and substance. In that respect it was somewhat of a 'curate's egg' with some of these additions working extremely well whereas others not so. However that said Andrew created a production that would please any keen G & S fan and is to be congratulated on trying to update this traditional piece in a way I'm sure W.S. Gilbert would be most proud.

When one took one's seat in the Arc Theatre there was a good ambience about the place with the soft blue lighting immediately making you feel that you were about to witness a sea faring story. The set in Act One was simple but impressive and this is what one has come to expect as TAOS make full use of the limited space the Arc Theatre offers. As the scene opened I particularly liked the projected image on the rear wall (which I didn't think worked so well in Act Two when perhaps the one small window in isolation didn't look anywhere near as impressive as the seashore). The Act Two set however was equally simple and impressive and gave maximum space to allow the actors to perform.

The orchestra was small but perfectly formed and was a joy to behold throughout. At all times their playing was sympathetic to the players on stage and added greatly to the enjoyment of the evening.

The show opened rather sedately I thought as pirates ambled on rather than immediately giving the production pace by running on. In fact the opening sequence lacked any 'swash buckling' which was a real shame and consequently this opening scene really didn't do justice for what was to follow. In particular I thought a few of the director's changes here didn't work for example the 'palm tree' gag came too late as the audience was already asking why it was there (or at least I was), the addition of One Eyed Jack just didn't work as he (she) wasn't given enough substance or reason for being there and the changes in libretto just didn't work either and detracted from what is a fine original script.

The mood lifted immensely when the ladies appeared however as here was a small group of very animated and active young ladies who fully understood the culture of the piece for although their physical movement was somewhat limited due the restrictions of the available space; the expressions on their faces said it all. These ladies understood 'tongue in cheek' and delivered it perfectly, none more so than Sarah Hanks whose performance was comic genius and you just couldn't take your eyes off her whilst she was on stage. Their off stage singing of 'Didn't we have a lovely time the day we went to Bangor' was a real gem. Their red/black costumes were striking and a good contrast to that which is

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normally used and necessitated the removing of the line about 'taking off our shoes and stockings'. There were so many parts of this scene to be impressed by in addition to their off stage opening including the using binoculars to look at Frederick, the one girl jumping into another's arms in 'rare his beauty' and the eating of the popcorn & chocolates during Frederick's solo to name but three.

As the girls and boys were integrated so the pirates upped the ante and the final scene of Act One was marked with a very impressive rendition of Hail Poetry. The use of ladies as policemen (women) was I believe forced upon TAOS due to lack of men and the need to use the more mature ladies that would not be able to act as daughters of the Major General. Whilst I understand this need from a production point of view it was less successful with the male voices being sorely missed in "When the Foeman bares his steel" and "When a felon's not engaged in his employment". It wasn't that the ladies didn't perform or sing well it was just the 'gag' to change from a male chorus to a female chorus (particularly as they were dressed in modern uniform whereas the rest of the cast were in period costumes) just didn't work for me.

Again the re-emergence of the pirates in Catlike Tread was very lethargic and didn't really gather any pace until the last sequence. The gag of repeating the song left the audience on a low because the pirates were so called (or maybe actually) out of breath which is a real shame as this number could and should leave the audience on a real high. Another example of a change of emphasis that didn't work I feel. The sequence that followed on the other hand with the pirates hiding behind the bushes was particularly well delivered. The finale of Act Two was well sung, as one has come to expect from TAOS, but I thought there was a missed opportunity in it by not having an image of Queen Victoria on the back wall.

**Sean Andrews as Frederick:** Sean sang and acted his way perfectly through this role. Whilst his relationship with Ruth was not always believable, either because he was slightly too old or she too young or both, once Mabel arrived on the scene the relationship was perfect. I thoroughly enjoyed Sean's performance which would have been enhanced by a slightly better costume as he looked rather like a peasant throughout. Obviously an accomplished performer his duets with Mabel were highlights of the show and his characterisation was near perfection.

**Naomi McMurray as Mabel:** Reading the programme notes I noted this was Naomi's first production with TAOS, well judging by its quality it certainly won't be her last! What a fabulous singing voice Naomi possesses which of course is highly necessary for this role. Coupled with that however was a perfect sense of comedy that far outweighed her tender years. This was highlighted in a scene in Act Two when she was sitting with Frederick on the bench stage right during *Stay Frederick Stay* when the short pause when Frederick asked her to be faithful before she sang 'It seems so long' was true comic genius. I wish Naomi a long and successful career with TAOS if she chooses.

**Matt Dauncey as Major-General Stanley:** Matt is obviously a natural when it comes to G & S and he obviously relishes the challenges it brings judging by this performance. His relationship with the audience in this small theatre was first class and his rendition of *I am the very model of a modern major-general* epitomised this. I would like to have seen more detail in his costume to make his visual impact even more comical with perhaps the traditional shorts and a pith helmet doing the trick. Matt's relationship with the various members of the cast worked extremely well and his sequences with

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the Pirate King towards the end of Act One were especially well delivered. I must say how much I enjoyed the 'South Pacific' gag in his song and the beheading of the teddy bear was one of the funniest moments of the whole piece (my congratulations to the director for thinking of this).

**Paul West as The Pirate King:** Either director, Andrew Curtis, or Paul himself had decided that this role should be underplayed which is the first time I've seen it portrayed this way and so took some time to understand. However once one did understand it the portrayal I suspect was just as the director required it. Confidently sung and well-acted Paul provided the solidity throughout this musical and featured in many of the production's high spots.

**Jon Hawker as Samuel:** The way this musical is written means we only get to see glimpses of Samuel throughout which is a real shame as Jon's characterisation was first class. Here is an actor who obviously relishes comedy and he squeezed every last ounce out of this cameo role.

**Michelle Hole as Ruth:** This was a first class performance from a first class actress. She sang beautifully and acted perfectly throughout and her scene with Frederick in Act One was particularly well done. The only concern I had was that she appeared too young and the make-up used just didn't do the trick and was far too obvious from an audience perspective. However this did not detract from her excellent portrayal of this 47 year old woman who was desperate to climb down off the shelf, albeit late in life.

**Kirstie Blackwall as Sergeant of Police:** Having made the comment earlier about the change from men to women in the roles of the police not really working for me, that said Kirstie's characterisation, was spot on and I enjoyed it immensely. Good comic timing and interaction with other principal cast members meant the Sergeant was always the centre of fun whilst on stage (as it should be) and her portrayal was a good mix of traditional G&S and contemporary which I suspect was as director, Andrew Curtis, intended.

**Frances Brown, Francesca Denny & Sarah Hanks as Isabel, Edith & Kate:** As I've already mentioned the ladies chorus was a real highlight for me and this was led by these three young ladies. Again I've already mentioned my admiration of Sarah Hanks' performance but she was ably aided and abetted by Frances and Francesca who both have wonderful stage presence and beautiful singing voices. This trio was particularly impressive and worked very well together.

The wardrobe was interesting and perhaps needed to be more consistent. The ladies costumes, in the main, were good throughout (the exception being the policewomen as previously mentioned) whereas the pirates I felt, and in particular Frederick and The Pirate King, needed to be more swashbuckling and 'sexy'. Lighting and sound was good as were the props, hair and make-up (with the exception of Ruth as previously mentioned).

As a huge fan of G & S, and in particular The Pirates of Penzance, I was royally entertained by this production and applaud Andrew Curtis for his ingenuity and the cast for their delivery. Well sung and well-acted once again TAOS showed their in depth quality of performance and I congratulate all concerned in this highly entertaining production.

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