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OPERETTA REVIEW

High Jinks in Parliament Are Without Peer, Milord

By ALLAN KOZINN

If it weren't the last company of its kind in New York, a theatergoer might be tempted to take the New York Gilbert and Sullivan Players for granted. Its repertory is only a handful of works, shuffled slightly from year to year, and its productions are offered in short bursts, rather than steadily through the year. Still, when Albert Bergeret started this company in 1974, it was one of a handful of ensembles that specialized either in Gilbert and Sullivan or in the broader operetta repertory, of which these satirical works are the pinnacle.

Like the other groups that thrived at the time, it offered modest productions, for the most part populated by young singers eager for experience, as well as a few troupers who contributed in style and spirit what they lacked in vocal power. For several years the company imported British singers who were thoroughly schooled in the Savoyard style — John Reed in particular — both to draw Gilbert and Sullivan fans and to impart experience to the company regulars. And there was a short-lived movement to broaden the company's mandate by presenting rarely heard Gershwin musicals.

Mostly, though, Mr. Bergeret has remained devoted to his original mission of keeping the Gilbert and Sullivan works alive. Now celebrating its 30th anniversary, the troupe presented a spirited, well-paced account of "Iolanthe" at City Center over the weekend, with productions of "H.M.S. Pinafore" and "The Mikado" to come.

At the Saturday evening performance the company sounded and looked fresher than ever. Jack Garver's sets and Gail J. Wofford's costumes were bright and colorful and reflected the skewering of the British House of Lords that is a central delight of this tale of fairies and peers. The story of course is willfully silly: Iolanthe, a fairy, has been banished for marrying a mortal, and when the fairies persuade their queen to restore her, she reveals that she has a son, Strephon, who is a fairy above the waist and mortal from the waist down. Strephon is in love with Phyllis, a ward of the Lord Chancellor, but the Lord Chancellor is one of several peers in love with Phyllis.

Richard Termine for The New York Times

From left, Erika Person, David Wannen, Jay Schneider, Jennifer LyAnn Rose and Richard Alan Holmes in "Iolanthe" at City Center.

Twisting tongues and popping plots in Savoyard style.

The convolutions all work out of course, and the solutions to everyone's problems are typically loopy. A great deal of the charm in these works after all is the degree to which they parody not only political and social institutions, but also the mind-numbingly silly plots of serious opera. Operatic ballet is satirized as well, and Robin Bartunek's choreography (an updating of the original choreography by Janis Ansley-Ungar and Starla Pace) clarifies that with its juxtaposition of the graceful and purposely clumsy moves suggested in the score itself during the fairies' scenes.

There was a degree to which the energy and polish of the performance seemed a product of the surroundings. Two seasons ago Mr. Bergeret moved most of the company's performances to City Center from Symphony Space. The Symphony Space productions had an appealingly homespun quality, but City Center affords a more theatrical atmosphere. There was, however, one drawback. The company now uses amplification, and although it is considerably more subtle than what one hears in a Broadway house the male voices in particular had a slightly metallic ring.

That said, the singers gave solid and often vocally appealing performances. For sweetness of tone, Erika Person in the title role and Jennifer LyAnn Rose as Phyllis held the spotlight firmly. David Wannen sounded a bit dry as Strephon, but his comic timing carried him. Stephen O'Brien supplied the Lord Chancellor's tongue-twisting patter with a virtuosic clarity, and Kelly Ebsary contributed an amusing portrayal of the Queen of the Fairies.