

**Ohio Light Opera: *Yeoman of the Guard*  
or *The Merryman and His Maid* (July 22)**

by Kelly Ferjutz, *special to ClevelandClassical*



Before opening night, director Julie Wright Costa freely admitted that *Yeoman of the Guard* was her “very fave of all of Gilbert & Sullivan’s creations.” Having appeared in several productions of it through the years, she was eagerly looking forward to putting her own vision onstage at Ohio Light Opera. And what a splendid vision it is! With a bit of help from conductor J. Lynn Thompson, the production zipped right along, while still allowing everyone time to breathe.

The story is almost a double double-cross, set during the time of Elizabeth I, within the environs of the Tower of London, home of the famed Yeomen, who are sometimes referred to as Beefeaters. A small platoon of these men play an important role in this operetta. The double-cross refers to not one, but two, or maybe even three somewhat reluctant betrothals which occur, with hardly a happy marriage anywhere on the horizon.

The music is sublime, and the singing from the cast did everyone proud, as did the marvelous orchestra.

The plot — such as it is — concerns one Colonel Fairfax, who has been sentenced to death on a false charge of sorcery, brought by a cousin in hopes of acquiring Fairfax’s estate. With the connivance of the Lieutenant of the Tower, Fairfax secretly marries Elsie Maynard, a strolling singer. Uninformed as to the groom’s identity, the bride agrees to be blindfolded during the ceremony, expecting to be a well-paid widow within the hour. However, with assistance from the Meryll family, Fairfax escapes, throwing the Tower into confusion and the astonished Elsie (and her companion, the jester Jack Point, who is in love with her) into despair. But Fairfax, disguised as Leonard Meryll, woos Elsie, and

after a number of plot complications are worked out, she falls in love with Fairfax and leaves behind a broken-hearted Jack Point.

Just as Shakespeare loved his clowns, *Yeoman* presented librettist William S. Gilbert the opportunity to utilize several of them to his very good advantage. First and foremost is the wandering jester Jack Point, played by veteran Ted Christopher. A splendid baritone and lighter-than-air dancer, he brought immense poignancy to the role, while drawing laughter with nearly every word and gesture. Second is Phoebe Meryll, played by mezzo Olivia Maughan, who brought down the house with her flirtatious “Were I Your Bride.” This is sung to the head jailer and assistant tormenter, Wilfred Shadbolt, in the person of baritone Brad Baron, who at times gave the impression of being made of rubber. These three actors were superb.

In the next rank came veteran Boyd Mackus as Sergeant Meryll (father of Phoebe), Leonard (played by Stephen Faulk), and a somewhat younger veteran, Sandra Ross, as Dame Carruthers, the stately housekeeper of the Tower. The Dame has her eye on the Sergeant, who is in charge of the Yeomen.

Unlike many G & S presentations, *Yeoman* does not begin with a rousing ensemble piece, but rather with a soliloquy by Phoebe, accompanied by her spinning wheel, in the ever-truthful “When Maiden Loves, She Sits and Sighs.” This sets off a trend of unbalanced emotional highs and lows throughout the operetta. You’re never quite sure what to expect next.

When the time of the execution arrives Fairfax is nowhere to be found, then what? There are numerous plot complications to be worked out, including the attempt by Jack Point to teach the art of being a jester to the willing Shadbolt, with a good many lovely songs to be sung and sprightly dances to be danced. Elsie finally falls in love with Fairfax, while Phoebe is more-or-less blackmailed into accepting Shadbolt, and Dame Carruthers captures the Sergeant, leaving the broken-hearted Jack Point to . . . No spoilers here. You’ll have to see it to discover the surprise ending!

Stefanie Genda’s costumes are terrific, while Tymberley Whitesel’s set is stunningly realistic, with lighting by Shannon Schwietzer. Spencer Reese’s choreography was excellent.

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