

## Ohio Light Opera: Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Gondoliers or The King of Barataria* (June 26)

by Daniel Hathaway



There wasn't a black canal boat in sight on the Freedlander Theatre stage during the opening performance of Ohio Light Opera's production of *The Gondoliers* on Wednesday afternoon, June 26.

But setting the first act of Gilbert & Sullivan's 1889 show in Venice gave Arthur Seymour Sullivan an infectious lexicon of Mediterranean dance tunes

to work with — the *cachucha*, *fandango*, and *bolero* — and 135 years later, it suggested an exotic palette of colors for the OLO sets by Daniel Hobbs and costumes by Brooke Kesler.

Sullivan's desire to create theater that aspired to grand opera dimensions was rewarded with a libretto by William Shenk Gilbert that inspired him to write fifteen minutes' worth of continuous music at the top of the show.



In Wooster, director and choreographer Spencer Reese rose to the challenge of keeping a stage full of gondoliers and country maidens meaningfully occupied in a frenetic celebration for a quarter of an hour before a single line of dialogue was spoken.

Once everyone in the theater had the opportunity to exhale, the

reason for the festivities was revealed: strewn with celebratory flowers, gondoliers Marco (Owen Malone) and Giuseppi Palmieri (William Volvar) were about to choose brides from their large contingent of female followers.

At the same time, the fictional island kingdom of Barataria lacks a monarch, the previous incumbent having converted to Wesleyan Methodism, become a republican, and been overthrown in an insurrection. There's confusion over which of the two gondoliers is the rightful heir. (How we got to this point dates back to their infancy, and involves a proxy marriage, a kidnapping, and foster parenting!)



Moving the scenery to Barataria, the Grand Inquisitor Don Alhambra del Bolero (Zachary Elmassian) takes up the challenge of sorting this problem out, complicated by the arrival of the impecunious Duke of Plaza-Toro (Vincent Gover), his duchess (Andrea McGaugh), and their daughter Casilda (Sadiyag Babatunde), which gives Gilbert one of several societal memes to skewer — the Duke has applied to become a public company.

Separated by a curious injunction from their wives, forced to rule jointly as half-kings, and saddled with menial chores due to their adoption of republican virtues, Marco and Giuseppi are miserable. Finally, their foster mother Inez (Maggie Langhorne) arrives and puts things to rights.

This complicated plot is laid out in Gilbert's witty verse and Sullivan's charming music in such songs as "There lived a King" (*When every one is somebody, then no one's anybody*), and "In a contemplative fashion," where Marco and Giuseppe and their brides Gianetta and Tessa try to sort out their relationships.

G&S operettas are easy marks for insertions by later hands, and Spencer Reese has tucked in some quietly hilarious details. There's a gag that involves tossing objects into the wings followed by increasingly dramatic explosions. Told to "act bored," one of the half-kings ostentatiously picks his nose and wipes the results on the floor. And the Duchess's voluminous dress parts like a state curtain to reveal hand puppets that emerge through a trap door.



In addition to the splendid choreography, its brilliant execution by a stage full of singer/actor/dancers, and the unusual depth of vocal talent in the company, the OLO Orchestra sounded terrific under the direction of Michael Borowitz all the way from pre- to post-show.

That band made its first appearance raised to floor level for the singing of *God Save the Queen* in honor of Queen Victoria. Famous for her royal proclamation, "We are not amused," the reigning monarch of the Gilbert & Sullivan era made an uncharacteristically effusive entry in her diary after a performance of *The Gondoliers* at Windsor Castle. She wrote that Sullivan's music, "which I know and am very fond of, is quite charming throughout... The dialogue is written by Gilbert and very amusing." May we quote you?

*Photos: Ohio Light Opera.*

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