

Ohio Light Opera's *The Arcadians*: all upbeat, all the time (July 18)

by Peter Feher



The Ohio Light Opera is traveling to a world terrifically out of time in *The Arcadians*, the company's sixth and final production of the summer.

No, not Arcadia, the mythical realm where shepherds and nymphs always tell the truth and, as a result, never grow old. That vision of utopia lasts for only one act of Lionel Monckton, Howard Talbot, and Arthur Wimperis' 1909 musical comedy. For the remainder of the show, we're whisked to what would have been familiar territory for the three songwriters but what, in 2024, might seem like an even more fantastical setting: Edwardian England.

The delightful sense of dislocation owes a little to OLO's staging and a lot to the inevitable reality that *The Arcadians* has aged. Like much turn-of-the-20th-century musical theater, the story here — by librettists Mark Ambient and Alexander M. Thompson — comes second

to the songs.

So it's just as well that the diversions of the score are the chief pleasure of this production at the College of Wooster's Freedlander Theatre, which runs through Friday, July 26.

Lively, light-stepping numbers are the show's signature, whether the scene is a London restaurant or a fairy-tale forest. And the leading player is the character who brings these worlds together — James Smith, a rogue Englishman who stumbles upon Arcadia when his plane crashes there and who is soon transformed into a sprightly shepherd named Simplicitas.

In OLO's opening performance on July 18, baritone Vince Gover proved the perfect actor for the part, seizing every opportunity to sing out or save a joke with his impeccable musical and comedic timing. His rendition of "All Down Picadilly," a tune that's little more than two notes and the words "dilly, dilly, dilly," made the most of the unassuming material.

The major exception to the story's merrymaking is Sombra, an earnest Arcadian who, with a friend, tags along with Simplicitas on his return to London. Soprano Laura McKenna sweetly sang this role that otherwise serves to satirize the society of the day (though never too severely).

Sombra's gentle scolding aside, the show is all upbeat all the time. In Act I, Father Time, the closest thing Arcadia has to a villain — portrayed with the right sort of smarmy charm by bass-baritone Zachary Elmassian — does a song-and-dance routine, twirling a walking stick that might as well be a vaudeville cane.

Even the ingenue — Eileen Cavanaugh, played with an air of propriety by mezzo-soprano Madison Barrett — introduces herself not with a yearning melody but with a lusty, lilting number, "The Girl with a Brogue." OLO's program notes point out that the character was made Irish less for the sake of the story and more for the simple inclusion of the song.

But Eileen hardly sticks out here, with each member of the cast settling on his or her own version of a British accent. OLO's production, directed by Steven Daigle, can sometimes seem like an England of the imagination, with the costumes for the London scenes also straying somewhat from the Edwardian era.

Still, the fun of *The Arcadians* is in the fantasy, and the music is what holds the show together. The OLO Orchestra, conducted by Wilson Southerland, succeeded in always sounding sunny and chipper.

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