

MOT's 'Pirates of Penzance' is outstanding

Performances of "The Pirates of Penzance," presented by the Michigan Opera Theatre, continue through Sunday at the Fisher Theatre in Detroit. For ticket information call the box office at 574-SING.

By Mary Jane Doerr
special writer

Mary Callaghan Lynch's bold assertion last week that Michigan Opera Theatre's production of "The Pirates of Penzance" at the Fisher Theatre would be the best of the season was not right.

It is not only the best of the fall season, it is sensational. Director, choreographer, dancer, actor, singer Lara Teeter gives the show what most Gilbert and Sullivan productions lack — a contemporary satirical relevance. Teeter updates jokes with subtle libretto changes and integrates chorus movements to accent the lines.

He enhances the plot by carrying through with Joseph Papp ideas from the Broadway revival, such as adding the number "It Doesn't Really Matter" to give the Pirate King, Frederic and Ruth another patter song. Some of Teeter's scenes are clearly Victorian. Others have touches of the 1920s. Still others are purely contemporary.

All of it is subtle, tasteful, clever and very, very funny. In the hands of Teeter, the story is not silly, it is hilarious.

JUST AS the writings of Gilbert and Sullivan play against themselves (such as having a patriotic hymn sing to absurd words), Teeter combines straight motifs with satirical ones. Lynch is a very straight Mabel, with her hair in bouncing ringlets. David Jackson sings Frederic's beautiful "Oh, is there not one maiden here yet," but when he goes for the high notes, the women's chorus goes for the floor. When the Pirate King (Gary Sandy of TV's "WKRP in Cincinnati") jabs himself in the eye, he ends up wearing a black eye patch ala Captain Hook.



David Jackson is Frederic and Mary Callaghan Lynch of Birmingham is Mabel in "The Pirates of Penzance."

But Teeter is clearly a dancer who, in three weeks, transformed a non-dancing chorus into a constantly moving ensemble of comic routines. He takes the part of Edward, the sergeant of police, donning white make-up and styling himself after Charlie Chaplin.

Sandy, who was the Pirate King eight years ago on Broadway, is worth the price of the ticket alone, but his performance is priceless. He

never runs out of antics that somehow come short of slapstick. He can't pronounce the words, he is constantly hurting himself with his sword, he can't remember where to place his arms in the routines, yet he can hush the crowd with a stroke of his hand.

Zale Kessler has the tongue-twisting assignment of the modern major general whose only military duty is



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to sing about his qualities, in words faster than sound. Kessler is very funny and turns the ridiculous scene in the graveyard into a real joke.

Lynch's coloratura is so strong she does what most G&S sopranos cannot do. She forcefully illustrates Sullivan's quips about French and Italian opera.

G&S SPECIALIST Jocelyn Wilkes

— who is lighter by 100 pounds since her last appearance with MOT — also adds humor, but not because of her delivery; she looks the part.

"The Pirates of Penzance" is more American than any G&S material. It was produced in New York in 1879, simultaneously with an English production, to protect the English duo from the Americans who stole "H.M.S. Pinafore." If Gilbert and

Sullivan had changed the scene of the opera from the southwestern English resort of Penzance (falsely of Selly) to Atlantic City or Bar Harbor, it would be even funnier to the Americans. Peter Dean Beck's sets capture the granite look of the Cornish coastline without the flowers.

MOT has always showcased local entertainers to everyone's advantage. Lynch and Jackson are spectacular. So is chorusmaster-turned-conductor Suzanne Aston. She will do for the orchestra what she has done with the chorus.

Mary Jane Doerr of Bloomfield Hills is a full-time teacher and free-lance writer who specializes in opera and musical theater.

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