

St. Bede Players 'Iolanthe' is top-flight G&S

Performances of the St. Bede Players production of Gilbert and Sullivan's "Iolanthe" continue through Saturday, May 11, at the Southfield High School Auditorium in Southfield. For ticket information, call 557-6527 or 557-7245.

By Mary Jane Doerr special writer

The great-granddaddy of modern stage directing, W.S. Gilbert, may have done us a disservice with his stage books outlining the staging of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. It has provided many companies with the classical staging for each show, sometimes eliminating the need for inventiveness.

St. Bede Players have a stunning production of probably the most elegant score of the Savoy opera mas-

ters, "Iolanthe" (pronounced I-o-lan-the). Costumer Ruthann Logsdon Zaroff has an eye for color. Her bright costumes enhance two striking sets by John W. LaCroix Jr., and provide a brilliant setting for some quality voices, under the fine leadership of musical director-conductor Joseph Gamache.

In the lead as Phyllis, Jenny Lee Head, now a student at the University of Michigan, is not only elegantly costumed in a fabulous green velvet dress, but her voice is wonderful to listen to. She plays the role straight, which is how it should be done, with enough egotism to add some humor.

Her counterpart Strephon is tenor Mitch Gillett, another lovely voice. Together their duet "None Shall Part Us from Each Other" is beautiful, like all the love duets in the G&S repertoire.



Mary Jane Doerr

"IOLANTHE" is a satire of the fairies and the peers, another Fairyland and the English Parliament, who meet in Arcadia. Iolanthe (Ruthann Logsdon Zaroff) married a mortal 25 years before the story begins and has been banished to live with the frogs in a stream by the Fairy Queen (Sara Zivian Zwicki). These thunder-and-lightning stage effects make the queen a cross between Queen of the Night ("The Magic Flute") and Brunnhilde ("The Ring.")

Her son, Strephon, is a half breed — half fairy and half mortal — a situation that has certain complications. When he disappears, only half of him disappears. He loves Phyllis who is a ward of the court of Chancery.

G&S veteran of "patter" song George Bloomfield is the Lord Chancellor, more lovable each time he takes on a role. Certainly no one can sing faster, and in this role he has three songs to deliver. His "Love, Unrequited, Robs Me of Me Rest"

was the fastest yet.

Gilbert's libretto in "Iolanthe" is satirical about the House of Lords and the political situation of 1882 when the operetta was premiered. The targets of the lines, especially those of the Fairy Queen's, have long since been forgotten. The humor then has to be in the way the lines are delivered and expounded upon in the stage antics.

Sometimes the Sullivan melodies and Gilbert's caustic lyric work off of each other. Thomas Petlet captures this humor in the "patriotic" song "When Britain Really Ruled the Waves" with its biting words. David Reynolds as Lord Tottoller and Douglas Rugez as Private Willis provide some lovely singing as well as more moments of humor.

OTHER TIMES in the production the humor is not easily discerned.

Circle patterns, gender groupings, figure eights and couple pairings are all-too-predictable marks of all-too-familiar G&S staging to be of interest.

Some productions spoof the G&S style to provide laughs. Others use updated lyrics. Neither is necessary if the directing is full of fresh ideas and inventiveness. Perhaps this is why there are specialists who do nothing but G&S operettas.

St. Bede Players is a group full of fine talent that does not need to be satisfied with boring "classic" staging for its productions. A little inventiveness would have made this seasonal production into a very funny show.

Mary Jane Doerr of *Trop* is a full-time teacher and freelance writer who specializes in opera and musical theater.

Nina Kircher as Reno puts zip into 'Anything Goes'

By Mary Jane Doerr special writer

Reviewing the light-hearted musicals of the 1930s and '40s seems to be a fad. Everyone is doing it. The latest is the First Theater Guild of Birmingham presentation of Cole Porter's "Anything Goes."

When an electricity shutdown forced the cancellation of opening night April 26, anything goes was not the general mood of the hyped 28-member cast, but last weekend any

opening night jitters were smoothed into a glitchless performance. The show closed Saturday night.

Lead Nina Kircher, playing the part of the evangelist turned nightclub singer Reno Sweeney, carries this show with strong dancing, rhythmic style singing and a natural acting style. She brings freshness to "I Get a Kick Out of You," but her evangelistic revival meeting with song "Blow Gabriel Blow" is the best of the show.

Robert B. Pennington III as the Clifton Webb-like Sir Evelyn Oakleigh is a rather stuffy husband-to-be as the show opens. Pennington develops his character's personality into a likeable chap by the final refrain of "You're the Top." He has such a charming English accent one has to check the credits to see if he is indeed British. No. He is American-trained at Kenyon College, in drama.

"ANYTHING GOES" starts at the

gangway of the liner American embarking on a cruise to England. An odd assortment of characters boards the ship — a suspicious couple hiding from something (Kurt Pennington as Bonnie and Paul Hoffmaster as Moonface Martin); a stiffly unromantic couple on the way to England to be married (Cynthia Merritt as Hope Harcourt and Pennington as Oakleigh); with a vocal mother-in-law close by (Mary Lyle as the irritating Mrs. Harcourt); and the bishop

of the Chinese Episcopal Church, Bishop Dobson (Ronald Vachon).

Billy Crocker (John F. Spears) decides to stay aboard the ship when he learns his lover Hope is on her way to England to be married. Spears is lively and believable as Crocker who ends up rooming with criminal Moonface with Snakey Jones's passport and disguising as a sailor to spend evenings on deck with Hope.

Sexy but exquisitely costumed Kircher as Reno plays up to Oak-

leigh and falls in love to the tap-dancing tunes of her four Fallen Angels, well rehearsed dancers Pam Vachon, Mary Fry, Diane Schaefer and Cathleen Mitchell-Biber. Dressed in red stripes and erles-spangled dresses, their chorus line routines are precise.

The show comes in a slow two hours and 45 minutes, which even pianist conductor Barbara Anne Gowans's snappy rhythms can't speed up.

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