Reviews

THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE



presented by
THE ROYAL GRAMMAR SCHOOL
and
THE CENTRAL NEWCASTLE HIGH SCHOOL

in the Central High School, Eskdale Tce.

MON. 25, TUES. 26, WED. 27, FRI. 29 & SAT. 30 APRIL at 7·30 p.m.

ENTRY BY PROGRAMME £1 Tel. Mr. JONES 815711

The Cast

Major-General Stanley	Dominic Armstrong
The Pirate King	John Kirk
Samuel	Louis Taylor
Frederic	Michael Oswald
Mabel	Gillian Brunton
Edith	Susan Stephenson
Kate	Catherine Badger
Isabel	Linda Penney
Ruth	Jane Cox

Nowadays it becomes increasingly difficult to find performances either in the live theatre, or in the cinema or on T.V., that are neither violent nor sleazy, so it comes as a refreshing experience to enjoy two hours of "innocent merriment" in the shape of G. and S. Friday's performance of the 'Pirates of Penzance' by the combined forces of the Central Newcastle High School and the Royal Grammar School presented to a full house an exhilarating performance which was satisfying both visually and musically.

Successive generations of school teachers have been wringing their hands in desperation when their star performer at last leaves for higher things: "It will never be the same without X," they are apt to complain! But, miraculously, a replacement always seems to emerge. Thus it was in the case of the departure of Max Hill and his replacement by Dominic Armstrong, who not only ably assumed the mantle of his distinguished predecessor, but took upon himself in his performance as General Stanley a similar style as well as many of the talents: a stage presence, a sense of timing, a gift for caricature, an expertise with patter songs which (quoting the General's own words) displayed "an elegant diction". Moreover, he acted the whole time he was on stage...

I have singled out Dominic's performance because it was the performance by a pupil which most impressed. It is a truism in the world of theatre that comedy is more difficult to bring off than serious drama: this, combined with the exigencies of the solo vocal parts, justified the use of adults in the parts requiring maturity and experience: Pirate King, Frederic, Sergeant and Mabel.

The production was fortunate in securing the services of Mrs Gillian Brunton, who dominated the vocal solos with singing often of operatic dimensions, including some splendid coloratura. Particularly delightful was the waltz-aria "Poor Wandering One", in which she was immaculately partnered in well-blended staccato sixths by the flautist (Christopher Cox).

Mr. John Kirk's acting revealed an experienced performer, but I felt that his singing was if anything too refined and smooth for a Pirate King. I wish his voice had been more sinister — one doesn't expect even the most benign Pirate to be quite such a Nice Chap!

Mr. Michael Oswald as the hero has a beautiful legato tenor which, however, reached the back of the hall mostly when in the middle register, but the orchestra did well in its attempts to allow the notes above the stave to penetrate. His performance was highly amusing where it needed to amuse, and elsewhere convincing; while there were moments of great tenderness. I should have been happier if he had not been so easily recognisable — why not a black beard, or a wig...? something to deceive us as to his real identity!



N. Posner



N. Posner

I observed a slung microphone, so we shall be able to hear a recording of the sound. This unfortunately will give little idea of the brilliant comic performance by Mr. Frank Bowler as the Sergeant. If only he had a stronger, more resonant voice, the performance would have been so much more satisfying. But in comic acting, use of gestures, facial expression and sheer sense of comedy, he produced a character which may have reminded some people of Inspector Clousseau as played by Charlie Chaplin. And he was admirably supported by his intrepid (?) team of constables displaying a wealth of antics.

The 18-piece orchestra composed entirely of pupils with the exception of one imported oboist was conducted by Mr. Martyn Lane from the piano, to which he had recourse on only rare occasions. This small band played well in tune and provided a pleasing accompaniment. A crisply played overture set the evening off (I could have done with a different choice of drum), and during the performance the orchestra did all that was required of it, from delicate accompaniment to dramatic outbursts (here the timpani was most effective), and a particularly effective tremolo towards the end of Act II. One missed a bassoon, and I felt the triangle was used too sparingly. It was only in a few exposed passages that the orchestra was other than satisfying. The stage chorus responded well, the tutti ensembles being most exhilarating. The recitatives were accompanied with precision and conviction.

The other solo parts (Samuel, Edith, Kate, Isabel and Ruth) were all played and sung with brave panache. I was most impressed with Ruth, whose acting, singing and speaking all carried conviction in a difficult part, requiring versatility. The others satisfied two of these three — a different two in each case! All these parts were well cast.

But the chief credit for the success of the whole project must go to Mr. Jeremy Thomas for his masterly handling of the production. So often in amateur performances, players, having said their piece or done their bit, become statues! Not so in this production — the entire company continued to act in character when not immediately occupied, and the result was continuous animation. Stage effects and movement on the stage were expertly handled, and also impressive was the use of the wings for "aside" antics and effects.

The conclusion of the piece brought an explosion of balloons on stage and a rapturous reception from an obviously delighted audience, whose prolonged ovation was a fitting tribute. The work of preparation for such an enterprise is very great, and it is to be hoped that the talent can be found and the efforts repeated to make the G. and S. production at least a biennial event. I for one shall be a regular supporter.

F.J.B.





'Pirates of Penzance' Photographs by N. Posner.

