

## Arts & Culture

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# Three cheers for “Pinafore”: Tacoma Opera brings fine singing and clever jokes to Gilbert and Sullivan’s “H.M.S. Pinafore.”

By Rosemary Ponnekanti - Staff writer

If Tacoma Opera’s Rialto production of “H.M.S. Pinafore” began a little staid and strained last Friday night, it had warmed up completely by Act II to the kind of show you want to see twice: fine singing, clever humor and a dramatic flow that embodied the best of this classic 19th-century British operetta.

To a mostly-full house, the production utilized the full width of the Rialto’s small stage, tucking the orchestra (who offered good balance and nimble accompaniment under Bernard Kwiram) behind a spacious ship’s deck. Pale blue and faded red, the set’s colors (designed by Evan Ritter) echoed in the costumes (Frances Rankos), creating a unified 1860s visual palette. But as the men’s chorus marched onstage in sailor suits and stick-on sideburns, the theatrics took a while to warm up. Stolid acting and messy diction from the chorus, blandness and slightly nasal vocals from principals and some inexplicable choreography during Sir Joseph Porter’s patter-song made the production seem more amateur than you’d expect from this company. Despite a closed-circuit camera projecting Kwiram’s baton behind the audience, the final fast chorus ran completely off the tempo track, and key characters like Dick Deadeye (Benjamin Harris) seemed dramatically weak.

After intermission, though, it was a different story. Ksenia Popova, leading the show vocally as a convincingly dramatic Josephine, warmed up her golden upper register with impressive power (this is a young soprano to watch), while Matthew Richardson, as her beloved sailor Ralph Rackstraw, found more sprightly energy and effortless high notes. Mark Davies sang a suave, smooth Captain Corcoran; Melina Pyron Dick settled into her comically Scottish Buttercup with a round, clear mezzo; and Michael Drumheller finally convinced us that a gangly, Mad Hatter-goofy Sir Joseph with a penchant for cheesy dance moves could be as hilarious a satire as Gilbert meant him to be.

Strong duets and trios (including a very clever rendition of “Never Mind the Why and Wherefore”) flowed into confident ensemble numbers with pretty stage tableaux and excellent dramatic sustain from director Phillip Kraus; and by the time the crew of the “Pinafore” wrapped up their final, ridiculously patriotic English anthem the production had reached the kind of sparkling heights that made you wish for more.