

Whimsy, Wit, Romance and Political Parody

Colin Douglas September 28, 2024 Reviews No Comments



Iolanthe

Oh, joy; oh, rapture! “Loudly let the trumpet bray!” This very, very popular Victorian fantasy operetta, the fourth consecutive hit by the theatrical writing team of W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, has magically appeared in a polished and professional production in Evanston. I advise you to spread your wings and fly as fast as possible to see this enchanting entertainment.



The intricate plot revolves around the magical, necromantic nymphs of Fairyland and their conflict with Britain’s brainless House of Peers. Iolanthe, one of the more beautiful and creative supernatural sylphs of the kingdom, had been banished 25 years ago. The reason? She committed the capital crime of falling in love with and marrying a mere mortal. The couple even had a son. But the Fairy Queen, sympathetic to Iolanthe, was reluctant to follow fairy law and execute one of her favorite fairies. She simply excommunicated Iolanthe. So the sprite’s been living in the nearby stream, among the frogs and fish, but her fairy sisters have finally persuaded the Queen to pardon Iolanthe. And this is when the plot begins to boil.

Reunited with his mother, Iolanthe’s grown son Strephon confides to her that he’s fallen in love with Phyllis, the Lord Chancellor’s pretty ward. And since Strephon is only half fairy (just from his head to his waist; the legs are human), he’s free to marry a mortal without breaking any laws. No problem, except for one thing: the Lord Chancellor has absolutely forbidden Phyllis to marry the handsome, young Strephon. This is partly because of his lowly station in life as a shepherd, and also because the Lord Chancellor wants to marry Phyllis himself!

But then we discover that the entire House of Peers also wants to marry Phyllis, as well! Two of the more stuffy and brainless Earls, Lords Tolloller and Mountararat, are Phyllis’ most vocal suitors among the Peers. Not sure what to do, Strephon seeks his mother’s advice. But when all the Peers arrive and assume that the beautiful, youthful fairies scampering around the riverbank are schoolgirls looking for love, the Fairy Queen casts a spell on the men. She makes Strephon an instant Member of Parliament and proclaims that any bill he suggests will automatically pass into law. The operetta continues into Act II with many more secrets revealed and complications arising. But fear not! They are all overcome and straightened out by the finale.

There’s so much to recommend in this exquisite production. First is the sensational Musical Direction by Timothy Semanik. Normally, Mr. Semanik conducts the incredibly talented 30-member pit orchestra, but on opening night his spirited Assistant Music Director Lindsey Baer competently assumed the duty. Secondly, the multit talented Mr. Kingsley Day, a name synonymous with Gilbert & Sullivan in Chicago, returns to the Savoyaires to Direct every aspect of this spectacular production. His years of experience and unique artistic touch are evident in every spoken line, every perfect gesture and each carefully choreographed movement.

In addition, talented Tom Kieffer has created some of the most beautiful, and often humorous, costumes of his long career. His work is nicely accentuated by Robert Kuper’s colorful and whimsical wigs. There’s an extra hilarious wardrobe surprise that pops ups, just in time for the finale, that’s guaranteed to leave theatergoers laughing. And gifted Tech Director and Scenic Designer, Andy Armstrong, has created a delightfully enchanted setting for Act I, while keeping the look clean, simple and properly British in Act II. I especially enjoyed Mr. Armstrong’s Big Ben Clock Tower that actually worked.

The entire ensemble of actor/singers must be equally congratulated for their mastery of Gilbert’s libretto and Sullivan’s sophisticated musical score. Katarina Bakas does a lovely job in the title role, both as a pardoned fairy and as a loving mother. Betsy Pennington Taylor is an absolute treasure in the role of the Queen of the Fairies. She’s regal, funny and a most talented songstress. As Phyllis, Lauren Sutherland is graceful, charming and sings like a bird. She also looks great in her Marie Antoinette-inspired costume and wig. As the fairies Celia, Leila and Fleta, talented Anna Caldwell, Mary Nora Wolf and Marie Sauze are as fine a trio of sopranos as you’ll ever hope to find.

The men are all wonderful, as well. As the Lord Chancellor, Henry Michael Odum brings his musical and comic talents to this Patter role, along with years of prior experience. Ross Matsuda, a standout in last year’s enjoyable production of THE GONDOLIERS, is handsome and delightfully funny as Strephon. He has a fine voice and excellent timing. I particularly enjoyed two talented newcomers to the Savoyaires. As Thomas, Earl of Tolloller, Coleman Dziedzic is a humorous, handsome and beautifully trained tenor; dashing Stephen Hobe, a rich and powerfully accomplished baritone, stylishly portrays George, the Earl of Mountararat. Hopefully we’ll see these two talented performers in many more Chicago area operettas and musicals. And, saving the best for last, Jack W. Ellis is simply sensational in the cameo role of sexy Private Willis, of the Grenadier Guards. Mr. Ellis (nicknamed “the bearded ingenue”) is a gifted bass-baritone who doesn’t appear until the beginning of Act II, but he’s well worth the wait. Mr. Ellis will be remembered for his appearance last season in THE GONDOLIERS as the animated Antonio. He’s an absolute delight in this production.



One of the top four operettas by the renowned theatrical team of Gilbert and Sullivan, IOLANTHE is a delicious musical treat. It overflows with whimsy, wit, romance and political parody. Listen carefully to the lines and the lyrics of this piece because, not only are the songs gorgeous, but so much of the satire is unbelievably au courant. The comedy is so surprisingly topical, the operetta could’ve been written today. It satirizes and comments on the politics of the times. Our times!

Highly Recommended

Reviewed by Colin Douglas

Presented September 27-October 6 by the Savoyaires at Chute Middle School Auditorium, 1400 Oakton Street, Evanston.

Tickets are available at the door, by going to www.savoyaires.org, or by calling 847-563-0155

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