

“Yeomen's” song is slightly off-pitch

By Lindsay Christians, The Capital Times | Posted: Saturday, July 18, 2009 9:00 am

Gilbert and Sullivan musicals are the very model of a formula that works.

Whether it's “H.M.S. Pinafore,” “Iolanthe” or the Madison Savoyards' latest choice, “The Yeomen of the Guard,” the characters, story and music hew to a pattern.

The tenor marries the soprano. The alto is old; she tells us the history. The second act opens with a female chorus number, and everyone pairs up in the end.

“Yeomen” is a bit different -- one man is left solo, and the tone is a little sad -- but otherwise, this 1888 operetta sticks to convention. The Savoyards have been putting up G&S musicals since 1963. They stick to convention, too.

“Yeomen” opens on a menacing brick fortress, designed by Michele M. Fields to look like Bowser's Castle in Super Mario Brothers. (Sometimes it even moans, and its “eyes” flash red.) Flirty Phoebe pouts on the steps; she is in love with a prisoner who is due to be beheaded post-haste. She rejects the advances of uncouth jailer Wilfred, then plots to free her would-be beloved.

The imprisoned Colonel, though, has already married traveling player Elsie, giving an excuse about an unseen enemy who will get his estate if he dies single. But Elsie weds the Colonel blindfolded, so confusion ensues after his inevitable escape.

With such a story, it's lucky the skills of Gilbert and Sullivan (and the Savoyards) skew musical. Pleasing young singers like soprano Catherine Schweitzer as Elsie, alto Leigh Akin as Dame Carruthers and baritone Governor Harris round out the principals. The orchestra, directed ably by Michael Alexander, is lush and full with nearly 30 players.

But even though the accompaniment is lively and clean, the instruments continually overpower the singers. More than half the time, vocals and pit aren't in sync. It's a problem probably due as much to Music Hall acoustics as to an inattentive chorus.

Joan Brooks directs a mixed-age cast, chosen for their roles sans logic. For example, baritone Harris, in his early 20s, plays the elderly Sgt. Meryll. Meryll is the father of Phoebe, also 20-something, and Leonard, played by a man twice his age.

Young Akin fares better as the grey-haired Dame Carruthers. Still, she's painted pale and toting a strange black umbrella, like the Mary Poppins of the doomed.

Brooks packs too many bodies into the chorus, perhaps trying to bolster weak singing. The set crowds them and the dances are clumsy. Acting, even in the leads, is often overdone.

Tenor Ryan McEldowney as the escaped Colonel Fairfax is a lackluster love interest, “wooing” by declaiming his lines in the basic direction of his intended. He has a decent voice, but his arias are dramatically bland; he loses a little (but not all) of an unfortunate lisp as he sings.

As Phoebe, Sarah Z. Johnson spends most of the first act in a single pose: slouched, hand on chin, lower lip stuck out. But Johnson warms to the role as she goes, shimmying and grasping at Wilfred (the excellent Daniel Graupner) in a ruse so good she convinces herself.

Graupner as the affable, love-struck jailer and the energetic Donovan Armbruster (who literally pants through a few of his songs) are the strongest actors in the ensemble. As the lonely jester Jack Point, Armbruster has dozens of expressions from silly to sad; he “must be merry or be whipped.” His duet with Schweitzer, “I have a song to sing, O!” is lovely, and he barrels through the breakneck “Oh! a private buffoon is a light-hearted loon.”

Graupner and Armbruster's clowning is a nice contrast to the stone-faced chorus of guards. A yeoman, for those not up on their British lingo, is a guard at the Tower of London. Burly men in beards brandish tall wooden spears. Oddly, their traditional dress does not include pants.

One might assume costumer Karen Brown-Larimore has a wicked sense of humor, putting these poor men in bloomers, bonnets and bows. A little research shows she's just being accurate.

Wig designer Fanny Leung, however, has no such excuse. Why should Jim Rowe be stuck with a blonde, girlish bob? As Fairfax, McEldowney has to remove a fake beard to fool the guards. But must it stick out stiffly like repurposed paintbrushes?

Hampered by unbalanced sound, distracting design and declamatory acting, the Savoyards' "Yeomen" might be a community production, but it is not a particularly strong one. But that's the thing about formulas -- adding new elements equals different results, desirable or not.

IF YOU GO

The Madison Savoyards presents "The Yeoman of the Guard" on weekends through July 26, with 7:30 p.m. shows on Fridays and Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sunday matinees. Performances are at Music Hall, near Park and Langdon streets on the UW-Madison campus, and tickets cost \$20-30 for adults with discounts for students, seniors and children. Go to madisonsavoyards.org for more information.