

## Savoyards' *Utopia* a limited success

### Lindsay Christians | The Capital Times

Solve your country's problems! Keep the doctors in business, the prisons full and the army busy with that political marvel: the two-party system.

That way, efforts to curb disease, crime and war will be quickly vetoed by the other party, leading to — what else? — "general and unexampled prosperity." This is the satiric thrust of Gilbert and Sullivan's penultimate operetta, "Utopia, Limited," produced by the Madison Savoyards and running through Sunday, July 31, in Music Hall.

Despite its promising name and painfully relevant subject matter, "Utopia" is a bit of a clunker. Director Terry Kiss Frank acknowledges in her notes that it's rarely performed, and it's easy to see why.

Plot lines are dropped, unresolved; songs can sound shoehorned in. The 90-minute first act makes the second half feel even longer. (Total running time with cuts: two hours and 50 minutes.)

Though it boasts several winning songs from Sullivan, Gilbert's story is even more inane than usual. Utopia is an island in the Pacific, reigned over by a bumbling despot controlled by two nefarious advisers.

Like in Disney, there are several princesses (five in all), but no queen. The eldest, Zara, returns from five years of British education with six "Flowers of Progress" to Anglicize the island's politics. (One of them is Sir Edward Corcoran, the captain of the "Pinafore." Three cheers!)

Catherine Schweitzer, as Zara, makes a fine leading lady for the Savoyards — her Elsie was a bright spot in 2009's "Yeoman of the Guard." She gets a few lovely moments here, notably in "Words of love too loudly spoken," a duet with tenor Ryan McEldowney (Captain Fitzbattleaxe).

For his part, McEldowney showcases an agile and pleasing instrument on the Act II opener, "A tenor, all singers above," in which he more than does himself justice. He's the strongest of the male leads.

Baritone William Rosholt, as King Paramount, is the easiest to understand, if not a particularly nuanced performer. As his proper British love interest, Lady Sophy, Allisanne Apple gives a humorous lesson on English maidenhood. Apple is a joy to watch, with a strong alto voice and an ease with Gilbert's wry humor. Less successful are the scheming advisers, Don Dexter and Dean Messerly. The goofy pair shimmy and mug and flap their robes (which look like they came off the racks at world gift shop Art Gecko). Dexter rushes his lyrics, and it's hard to hear Messerly. Both play over-the-top ridiculous, which isn't as funny as they think it is.

A more pleasing pair are Zara's demure, dying-to-sin younger sisters, played by Sarah Maurer and Mandy Goldberg. They have sweet soprano voices, and their quartet with two of the "flowers" is delightful: "I'll row and fish, and gallop, soon — no longer be a prim one — and when I wish to hum a tune, it needn't be a hymn one."

The orchestra, directed by Blake Walter, sounds well in the Music Hall pit, with crisp articulation and a careful balance that tries mightily to keep from overpowering the voices. It's a shame the players and singers are almost never together.

Still, the ensemble marshals a rich choral sound in an a cappella passage ("Eagle high in cloud land soaring") and the female voices are strong on the drowsy opening number, "In lazy languor motionless."

Set designer Liz Rathke puts "Utopia" in a bright "Flintstones" style cartoon, and costume designer Kat Anderson swaths each island woman in a pretty sarong. Unfortunately, this translates to a diaper-like effect for some of the men, whose skirts inexplicably gather between their legs.

The cast of "Utopia" gives Gilbert and Sullivan's muddled operetta an enthusiastic reading. But ultimately "Utopia, Limited" is too long, slow and absurd to earn a place among the Savoyards' best.