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Madison Savoyards' *Utopia, Limited* doesn't get the words across

by John W. Barker

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Utopia, Limited (1892) was the next-to-last collaboration of Gilbert and Sullivan. It has long been among the least known of their operettas, but the brave Madison Savoyards, who have already staged it once before, join other companies in giving it increasing attention in recent years.

It involves the largest of the G & S casts and the most extensive score. Its story of a "backward" south-sea island being upgraded by a team of advisors from the greatest superpower is ripe with satire about the hypocrisy, sleaze, blustering, financial shenanigans, and virtuous posturing that such upgrading involves. Aimed at English pretensions of 115 years ago, its barbs seem more applicable than ever to the USA of the moment.

Savoyards has managed to muster up a vocally creditable cast to handle the 15 roles of prominence. Outstanding is Catherine Schweitzer, applying her lovely, crystalline voice to the soprano lead, Princess Zara. Parallel quality is offered by her romantic partner, Captain Fitzbattleaxe, played by always reliable and strong-toned tenor Ryan McEldowney. William Rosholt is a youngish King Paramount, but he handles his busy role with aplomb.

What marks so much of the vocal work, however, is recurrently poor diction. The words are crucial in G & S, nowhere more so than in this unfamiliar and verbally pungent operetta. Granted, words do often suffer in high-voice ranges, and conductor Blake Walter regularly fails to keep the pit orchestra from overwhelming the singers. Two old-timers, welcome after so long absence from the company -- Allisanne Apple as the starchy governess Lady Sophy, and Greg Walters as Captain Corcoran - - do show how stylish singing can convey the words clearly.

To be sure, the set and costumes are amusing, while Terry Kiss Frank's direction and choreography are unfailingly witty and imaginative. Especially in visual terms, it is a very funny and enjoyable show. But, at the first Saturday evening performance I attended, a number of audience members left after the first half, as much because of the inadequate verbal intelligibility as because of the hyperactive air conditioning.

The cast really ought to re-commit itself strenuously to clearer diction, so as to make the remainder of the production's run at Old Music Hall (July 24 and 31 at 3:00; July 29-30 at 7:30) a fully satisfying introduction to this really worthwhile novelty.