

Review: 'Iolanthe,' utterly delicious, sings out

Reviews Judith Pfeffer Friday, 23 September 2022 997 Hits

UPDATED Sept. 24: Judith Pfeffer, affiliated with Your Arlington since early 2019, was raised on Greek mythology, Tom Lehrer songs and Gilbert and Sullivan. She first saw a professional production of “The Mikado” while in third grade. With the assistance of her parents, she had previously submitted to the producers a request for a line change as a call-out to a then-popular television show, but it was not adopted.

Arlington Friends of the Drama has started out strong in their yearlong celebration of its centennial. AFD, one of the oldest community theater companies in the nation, is mounting an excellent production of W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan’s “Iolanthe.” As with many of their other comic operas from those Victorian composers, the plot involves young lovers facing obstacles to their relationship, multiple misunderstandings, satirical portrayals of government officials and a happy ending for all.



1882’s “Iolanthe” – less-well-known than the British pair’s most popular works (“H.M.S. Pinafore,” “The Mikado,” “The Pirates of Penzance”) -- is nevertheless a respectable part of the canon and was previously produced thrice by the AFD – one of the reasons it was chosen to lead off this season.

Theatrical equivalent of a dessert

With a setting somewhat reminiscent of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” G&S’s “Iolanthe” is the visual-aural-theatrical equivalent of a dessert that the 19th-century composers might well have enjoyed – English trifle. But the name is misleading, as this trifle is, well, not trifling at all. It is gorgeous to look at, combines distinct components, tastes utterly delicious and is created seldom because of the work involved. Light and airy compared to most other confections, it nevertheless can take all day to make, especially if one bakes the angel-food cake and cooks the custard from scratch using made-from-scratch meringue, as this correspondent did a few months ago to impress an Anglophile friend.

The somewhat silly story and typically convoluted plot concerns Iolanthe, adored by her fellow fairies but having been banished long ago by the Queen of the Fairies for the sin of having fallen in love with, married and conceived a child with a man whose identity is not disclosed until later. Said child is now a 20-something shepherd, Strephon, who is half human, half fairy and completely in love with the similarly aged, fully human Phyllis. The path of true love does not run smooth as she becomes incensed to see her sweetheart embracing an apparent rival, refusing to believe that Iolanthe is Strephon’s mother, as fairies are eternally youthful. Difficulties continue as an entire group of peers (members of the House of Lords, vaguely comparable to the U.S. Senate) find themselves smitten by Phyllis.

Excellent singing

All the singing is top-notch. The most noteworthy performance in the opinion of this humble reviewer is that of Sara DeLong as Phyllis, a truly operatic-quality soprano. Carolyn Schneyer as Queen of the Fairies is in excellent voice also, and she projects both the gravitas necessary to her station and a humorously frank admiration of Takaaki Matsumoto playing the young, handsome Private Willis. Matsumoto also sounds terrific, has a true gift for physical comedy and delivers this memorable chorus: “For nature always does contrive that every girl and every boy who’s born into this world alive is either a little liberal or else a little conservative.”

And then there is Emily Greenslit as the title character -- great singing, great acting, an ethereally beautiful presence -- and a worthy reminder that even in the sometimes ridiculous frivolity of a G&S piece, there often exists a tragic situation. Iolanthe spends two dozen years in isolation and twice risks capital punishment for having acted out of love. Indeed, the ability to modify archaic law proves the key to eventual happiness in this play.

If one can ignore plot holes big enough to drive a coach-and-four through and accept that the pleasant-but-forgettable score is not known as G&S’s best work, this show is well worth the \$25 ticket price.

J. Deschene is the director, Ken Livak the co-producer, Sandy Armstrong the production manager, Div Sloman the musical director, Rebecca Graber the choreographer and Emily Carroll Swak the stage manager.

Covid requirements

Before attending, know that the organization requires proof of vaccination/identity for entrance; several people were kindly but firmly turned away during the initial weekend for being unable or unwilling to comply. Masks must be worn and are available in the lobby. As the organizers have noted, the theater is small, the seats are close together and the performers are unmasked, so the attendees need to be for everyone's health. Photography, audio recording or video recording are prohibited, as is use of phones, tablets or similar devices in any way.

“Iolanthe” runs more than two hours, not including a 15-minute intermission. Staging at AFD’s headquarters, 22 Academy St., on Friday, Sept. 23, and Saturday, Sept. 24, at 8 p.m.; Sunday, Sept. 25, at 3 p.m.; Friday, Sept. 30, and Saturday, Oct. 1, at 8 p.m.; and Sunday, Oct. 2, at 3 p.m. For more information, visit afdtheatre.org or call 781-646-5922.

On tap next for the AFD as it continues to celebrate its 100 years of existence: “Light Up the Sky,” Dec. 2-11; “Dancing at Lughnasa,” March 3-19, 2023; and “Nunsense,” May 5-21, 2023.

April 20, 2022: ['Boeing, Boeing' closes AFD's '21-22 season](#)

This review was published Friday, Sept. 23, 2022. Your responses are welcome in the comment window below. It was updated Sept. 24, to delete an unneeded reference to those 11 and younger.