

## Madison Savoyards bring flair to *The Yeomen of the Guard*

by John W. Barker

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In its 47th summer presentation, Madison Savoyards again mounts a Gilbert and Sullivan production of professional quality. Notably so, too, in perhaps the richest, both musically and dramatically, of the 13 G & S collaborations, *The Yeomen of the Guard*. The mix of typical comedy with uncharacteristic pathos gives this work uniquely "operatic" substance among the G & S operettas.

Despite some weak singing in the lesser roles, the major ones are done with consistent flair by the kind of gifted young singers Savoyards has fostered. Tenor Ryan McEldowney is a vocally trim and dramatically agile Colonel Fairfax, the condemned hero whose secret marriage of convenience, and then escape from the Tower of London, drive the sophisticated plot. He is more than matched by the current Savoyards diva, dazzling soprano Catherine Schweitzer, as Elsie Maynard, secretly married and then wooed by her disguised husband.

Donavon Armbruster, last year's Ko-Ko in *The Mikado*, is truly professional as jester Jack Point, the funnyman whose fate is no longer a joke but a veritable tragedy. As Phoebe Meryll, Sarah Z. Johnson is a vividly flirtatious character despite a destiny etched in frustration and unhappy ambiguity. The mate she must accept, the jailor Wilfred Shadbolt, becomes more a manly bumpkin than sinister clod, as vigorously sung and acted by the strapping Daniel Graupner.

As Phoebe's father, Sergeant Meryll, Governor Harris uses fine vocal resources with good comic sense, though his diction in dialogue is sometimes rushed. The stereotypical love-starved contralto character who wins him, Dame Carruthers, is made more charming than formidable by Leigh Akin.

The extra choral demands of this score are well met. Conductor Michael Alexander gives lively direction, though I found his tempo for the quartet, "When a wooer," rather too fast for proper musical effect. But credit is due him for reviving two solo numbers in Act I left out of the official edition and most performances, one each for Shadbolt and Meryll.

Karen Brown-Larimore's 16th-century costumes are wonderfully rich. And set designer Michele M. Fields splendidly captures the ominous and bloodthirsty presence of the Tower of London as itself a protagonist in the drama.

Between them, stage director Joan Brooks and movement choreographer Terry Kiss Frank create a lively and witty spectacle. I confess I missed the allusion to Schubertian spinning in Phoebe's opening solo, I found some of the chorus-line treatment of the massed Yeomen a bit cheap, and I deplored the mistake of making the beautiful Act II madrigal-quartet too simply comic.

Quibbles aside, though, this is another dazzling and absorbing production of highest Savoyards quality.

*Editor's note: The performance John Barker attended was conducted by assistant music director Grant Harville.*