

Poets who know it

Patience satirizes artsy phonies

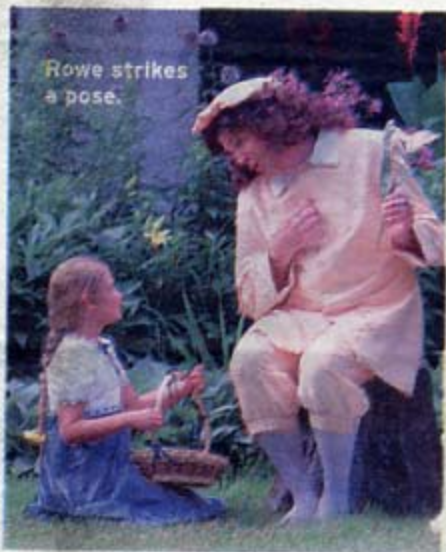
By John W. Barker

Any of the 13 Gilbert and Sullivan operettas other than "the big three" (*HMS Pinafore*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *The Mikado*) are simplistically called "lesser known." But G&S fans know that *Patience* is one of the collaborators' best. Gilbert's skewering of cultural faddism is hilarious, while Sullivan matches verbal wit with delightful music.

Scorning their macho soldier sweethearts, the local village maidens are lost to absurd intellectual and artistic fashions, out of devotion first to the pretentiously obscure poet Reginald Bunthorne, and then to his challenger, poet Archibald Grosvenor. The sensible milkmaid Patience, first oblivious to such nonsense, is briefly entrapped by it, but her escape precipitates a sensible resolution. Gilbert and Sullivan were satirizing in 1881 the extremes that poets Rossetti, Swinburne and Wilde had brought to the Victorian movement of aestheticism, but their deflation of cultural posturing is timeless.

Now adjusted to the modest facilities of UW's Music Hall, Madison Savoyards use them skillfully in a rousing production. Director Terry Kiss Frank gives the setting a more distinctly rustic emphasis, but her staging is unfailingly clever, energetic and funny. Jennifer Nehls Bonner's set is charming, played on deftly by Paul Schaefer's lighting. Roberta Sprain's costumes are gorgeous. Drawing maximum results from the small pit orchestra, conductor Blake Walter steered through brief coordination problems with the singers on opening night.

In the excellent cast the vocal standout is Catherine Schweitzer in the title role. Aptly pretty and girlish, she is a bit more spunky than the usually naïve Patience. Above all, she sings with a strong, pure and truly beautiful voice. Two fine tenors are a



treat: Christian Smith-Kotlarek sounds and looks very much the "idyllic poet," Grosvenor, while Christopher Smith combines lovely singing with real comic flair as the dippy Duke of Dunstable. He and his two fellow officers (Robert Kovak, Justin Wilder) make their Act II "aesthetic" trio the show-stealer it should be.

Notable, too, is Kathleen Butitta, ample in tone and figure as Bunthorne's most dogged groupie, Lady Jane. James Rowe lacks the sleazy edge in voice and acting that Bunthorne should have, but his alternative bumptiousness amusingly conveys the phoniness of the "fleshy poet." The chorus of lovesick maidens and gruff dragoons is unusually strong and lively, enjoying the comic details devised by the director.

Madison's summer music scene may now be fuller than in years past, but once again, in its 45th season, Madison Savoyards can still claim to be the star attraction. Don't miss!♦