

Written by John Watters

Strong actors with good voices boost Cotuit's *Sullivan and Gilbert*

Sullivan and Gilbert is not an accidental reversal of the names of the famed English composer and lyricist team. Like the pair's billing, playwright Ken Ludwig cleverly flips the setting for his comedic play with music now at the Cotuit Center for the Arts, so the audience sees the goings-on from a backstage vantage point, a special view of the endearing friendship between the duo that brings much humor and charm to the play.

In the latter part of the 19th century W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan were the equivalent in the world of music to the Beatles' John Lennon and Paul McCartney a hundred years later. The operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan packed theaters on both sides of the Atlantic for more than 20 years and were the hottest ticket in town.

The two men were quite different: Gilbert gregarious and satirical, always willing to poke fun at Britain's upper crust; Sullivan staid and buttoned-down, a favorite of the Crown and its gentry. Often they did not see eye to eye. Nevertheless, they could put their differences aside to meld their music and words into magical theatrical spectacles, a point proven by their popularity to this day.

Ludwig's play takes place in the Savoy Theater eight hours before a command performance before Queen Victoria. The chance to play before Her Highness is the only reason the pair have come together after a lengthy feud. Gilbert has been rehearsing the show solo for weeks while Sullivan has been ill. To add to the mayhem of bringing the show to the stage, the lyricist is trying to fit in a new soprano into the cast after losing his regular diva to marriage. When Sullivan does finally show up he's brought the Queen's son, Alfred, the Duke of Edinburgh, to play a small role. The show threatens to come unhinged with each and every turn in Ludwig's script.

Director Rich McKey does well to rein in the cast, not allowing them to take the farcical piece over the top. The pace is swift but stubs its toe occasionally with distracting set changes performed upon the open stage. Daniel Fontneau turns in an impeccable performance as the bombastic lyricist Gilbert. He struts with the pomp of a pit bull menacing his cast to elicit performances to perfection. Still in the end he ably shows compassion to his partner when Sullivan's love for a woman goes unrequited.

Michael Ernst is equally entertaining as Arthur Sullivan. Ernst plays the proper Englishman to the hilt. He handles his heartbreaking relationship with a true stiff-upper-lip attitude.

Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, is played foppishly by Robert Minshall. The oafish Royal can't remember his cues, lines, or for that matter where he is at times, bringing much laughter from the audience.

The part of Violet, the new soprano, is played wonderfully by Jennifer Perrault-Minshall in a demure yet coquettish manner that belies her saucy background.

The entire ensemble – Stephen Andrew Spillane, Steven Koglin, Glen Starnner-Tate, Katie Lynch Koglin, Kim Mitchell, Laura Garner and Bill Mock – are all standouts as McKey has mined actors with talented voices that could lead any production.

Period costumes designed by Karen Billard give this production a true sense of elegance.

If you are a Gilbert and Sullivan fan or want to know more about the famous flamboyant pair, you won't go wrong by catching this production.



Sir Arthur Sullivan (played by Michael Ernst) and W.S. Gilbert (played by Daniel Fontneau) in SULLIVAN & GILBERT at Cotuit Center for the Arts. Photo by Jim Huxs, 2008

JIM HOECK PHOTO

THEY'RE HAVING WORDS (AND MUSIC) – W.S. Gilbert (Daniel Fontneau) is flourishing his watch to indicate his impatience with partner Sir Arthur Sullivan (Michael Ernst), but you won't feel any need to check your timepiece during Cotuit Center for the Arts' delightful production of *Sullivan and Gilbert*.

Sullivan and Gilbert is at the Cotuit Center for the Arts on Route 28 through July 13 with performances Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 4 p.m. For tickets (\$20; \$18 for seniors; \$10 for students with ID), call 508-428-0669

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