

'Sullivan and Gilbert' a delightful romp

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COTUIT — Notorious Odd Couple Felix Ungar and Oscar Madison could take a cue from W.S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan, the songwriting duo behind "The Pirates of Penzance" and "The Mikado."

In the Cotuit Center for the Arts' adaptation of Ken Ludwig's 1983 play "Sullivan and Gilbert," the longtime friends and partners successfully shun their differences for a harmonious relationship.

Yeah, right.

"Sullivan and Gilbert" is fraught with tension from the start, when a series of letters, written to plan a call on newly installed telephones, showcases a growing acrimony between the famous music man, Arthur Sullivan (the deliberately timid Michael Ernst) and his lyricist (Daniel Fontneau, in a star-making turn as W.S. Gilbert).

Like their modern TV counterparts, everything about Sullivan and Gilbert is a study in opposites. Sullivan's timidity and innocence in romance are sweet to behold, while Gilbert's temper and harsh criticisms recall a theatrically minded Simon Cowell.

Luckily for the audience, their clashing personalities make for a brilliantly written and fabulously executed show.

The play finds the longtime songwriting pair preparing, after a nine-month separation, to present a revue of their well-loved operettas to the Queen of England. Further exasperating the situation is the goofy-but-goodhearted Duke of Edinburgh, the Queen's son, who's finally been granted a cameo.

A few are-they-or-aren't-they backstage relationships coupled with the songwriters' growing rift makes "Sullivan and Gilbert" the perfect mix of cynicism (Gilbert) and idealism (everybody else).

Fans of the pair will rejoice in the generous use of songs, including "Three Little Maids From School Are We" and "Behold the Lord High Executioner," while fans of less-cheesy fare will enjoy the ennui the actors show while singing.

It's truly funny to watch Sybil (Katie Lynch Koglin, a sweet soprano with a disconcerting cockney accent) and Rutland (Glenn Starner-Tate, who speeds through Gilbert's lyrics like an auctioneer) transform their demeanors from jaded to joyous within minutes.

Music director Geraldine Boles keeps the arrangements crisp and clear and also takes an onstage role as Cellier, the pianist at the Savoy Theatre.

Overshadowing others' hilarity, though, is the brilliant and acidic wit of Fontneau, who as Gilbert affects the perfect smirk and raised eyebrow of a born comic. While lamenting the loss of a former company member, this biting sarcasm comes through loud and clear: "It's so sad that she's gone forever," he says wistfully. "Married."

On the sweeter side, the chemistry between the idiotic Duke (Robert Minshall) and leading lady Violet (Jennifer Perrault-Minshall) is a touching byproduct of the actors' real-life marriage. Though the relationship between the married royal and young soprano never comes to fruition, watching its twists and turns is a pleasure.

Bill Mock, as longtime player George Grossmith, is unfortunately scarce in Act 1 but returns for a haunting and memorable duet with Perrault-Minshall in the second half.

Though the choreography is somewhat clumsy and set changes are disorganized and loud, "Sullivan and Gilbert" is a delightful journey into the behind-the-scenes world of the famous songwriting partners.

The original odd couple's final theater experience might have been fraught with unhappiness, but the portrayal of it is a decidedly more enjoyable experience.

On Stage

What: "Sullivan and Gilbert"

- Written by: Kenneth Ludwig
- When: 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays (except July 4) and 4 p.m. Sundays through July 12; special benefit performance at 2:30 p.m. July 13
- Where: Cotuit Center for the Arts, 4404 Route 28
- Tickets: \$20 adult, \$18 seniors and arts center members, \$10 students with ID
- Reservations: 508-428-0669 or www.cotuitcenterforthearts.org