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'Pirates' shivers some timbres in Torrance

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ARRRRRRG! The "Pirates" is here! Los Angeles may have lost the Raiders, but Torrance (at least until Nov. 20) has "The Pirates of Penzance" -- those jaunty, too-good-hearted buccaneers who ride the high seas (and Cs) of Gilbert and Sullivan's classic operetta.

And it's a tight ship let me tell you, me buckos, with the rocky coast of Cornwall, the good ship Ruddigore (a little G&S in- joke), a small musical combo, 25 pirates, lassies, constables and one Modern Major General, plus the audience, all stowed away in the hold of the Torrance Cultural Art Center's George Nakano Theatre.

But shiver me timbers, Torrance Theater Company's director/ choreographer, Janet Miller, stage manager, Kate Barrett and producer, Gia Inferrera have reefed things tight and managed to pack the jaunty spirit of "Pirates" (with a distinct nod to Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival production) into the limited space.

Now you'll not be expecting to find Kevin Kline, Linda Ronstadt and Rex Smith on board.

But what you will find is a hale and hearty crew, who may not hit every note with rapier perfection, but certainly give their hearts and souls over to the task. Truth is, poor old Arthur Sullivan's music (which is performed here on piano, synthesizer, percussion instruments and string bass, led by music director Rick Heckman) takes a pretty good pummeling. And ye of perfect pitch should be prepared to wince more than once.

The fact is, "Pirates of Penzance or the Slave of Duty" has more in common with opera than it does with the Broadway stage, despite Mr. Papp's skill at popularizing it. And in merry old England, ever since the show was first presented by the D'Oyle Carte company in 1871, some of the realm's finest opera singers have taken on the challenge of songs like "Poor Wandering One."

This does not, however, mean that the Torrance Theatre Company's production is bereft of musical punch -- it packs plenty, accelerated by a number of well-crafted acting, dancing and singing performances (especially in the choruses where the cast's voices form a harmonious blend).

But the real star of the production is not on stage.

It's Miller. Working with a dedicated cast of players, who loyally showed up for six weeks of rehearsals ("For FREE!" as Inferrera pointed out in her introductory remarks), Miller creates some real stage magic. Her direction and choreography is consistently savvy, the pacing of the show bounces right a long, and her use of the tight quarters is masterful. Give her a big ARRRRRRG!

If Jason Whisman could build up his singing voice to the level of his acting as the jaunty Pirate King, he could find himself Broadway bound. He's got all the swagger and good-humored bravado the role (as redefined by Kevin Kline) requires. He's got the swash. It's his singing voice that buckles. It's thin, lacks support, as well as the ability to consistently hit the dead center of a note.

The two performers that manage to totally inhabit their roles are Shirley Anne Hatton, as the forlorn maid, Ruth, who mistakenly indentured her ward, Frederic, to a "Pirate" instead of a "Pilot," and Michael Grenie who really is the model of a Modern Major General.

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Hatton's accent is letter perfect. Her singing is dulcet. And she is a real charmer in the role, capturing all the frustration of poor Ruth, as she tries to convince Frederic that she is the woman of his dreams, despite the older woman thing.

Grenie's plays the Major General with a playful combination of bluster and huckster, and patters letter-perfect through his credentials, which include being able to "write a washing bill in Babylonian cuneiform."

Bridget Curran makes a valiant stab at the role of Mabel, taking on a tessitura that goes straight through the stratosphere. She's got the charm. She's got the big, blinking baby blues. She can even hit a high F. But her voice is too thin an instrument to make the decorative scales and appoggiaturas ring with bell-like brightness.

Chris Mannal is an ardent Frederic, torn in twain by his duty to his pirate brethren. He looks the part of the handsome youth, with a voice that is also ardent, if not always clarion. This is a cast that shines best in mass: as bold (and silly) buccaneers, twittering maidens, and tarunta-raahing constables, who know "a policeman's lot is not a happy one." If you love G&S you won't be let down (too much) by this production. But if your kids don't know Gilbert & Sullivan from Wallace & Gromit, it's time you introduced them to these musical treasures. This production's a fine place to start. Stage review

\* "The Pirates of Penzance" plays at 2 p.m. today; 8 p.m. Friday; 2 and 8 p.m. on Saturday; and 2 p.m. on Nov. 20, at the Nakano Theatre, 3330 Civic Center Drive, Torrance. Tickets: \$25. Information: 310-781-7171.

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