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Play review: Savoyaires shine with inspired 'Gondoliers'

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October 14, 2010

By **TOM WITOM** twitom@pioneerlocal.com

An inspired, rhapsodic production of Gilbert and Sullivan's tuneful 1889 light comic opera "The Gondoliers" brings The Savoyaires, an Evanston-based community theater group, full circle.

The company, which has devoted itself to the works of the dynamic 19th century musical duo, first staged "The Gondoliers" in 1965.

Though William S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan are well-known for "The Pirates of Penzance," "H.M.S. Pinafore" and "The Mikado," the less conspicuous "Gondoliers" broadly showcases their creative genius. Significantly, it also represents the pair's last successful collaboration.

The show's plot, full of familiar devices and twists and turns, involves two boatmen (who may have royal blood), confused identities, infant marriages and on-again/off-again relationships. Political and social satire also comes into play.

Jim Schneider directs an exuberant, well-trained cast that handily works its way through 21 fast-paced songs, many of them tongue-twisters. There's artful choreography by Amy Uhl and fine musical direction from Timothy Semanik, who has a full orchestra at his disposal. Elizabeth Powell Wislar's colorful costumes add zing and merit special mention.

Jay Morrissey and Noel Taylor, as Marco and Giuseppe, are easygoing gondoliers who find themselves in the middle of a crowd of swooning maidens in picturesque 1750 Venice during a festive Carnivale celebration. The two quickly woo and wed the sweet-voiced Gianetta (Maria Carini) and Tessa (Caitlin McKechney). But their honeymoon is sidetracked by Don Alhambra, the Grand Inquisitor (David John Craven), who believes one of the men may be the missing heir to the throne of Baratara.

Playing the comic leads are Kingsley Day and Jennifer Thompson, unforgettable as the officious Spanish Duke and haughty Duchess of Plaza-Toro. They hope to reverse their failing fortunes by returning to Italy with their charming daughter Casilda (the sweet-voiced Olga Bojovic) to locate and reconnect with the missing prince, the two of whom were united in marriage as infants.

Casilda is not thrilled to learn that she is already a wife, since she's in love with the duke's attendant, Luiz (Oscar Menoyo).

The gondoliers are temporarily installed as co-monarchs until the nurse who once had custody of the abducted prince can identify one as the rightful heir. The song "In a Contemplative Fashion" sums up the situation: two husbands who managed to acquire three wives.

The second act contains some raucously funny scenes where Marco and Giuseppe, dressed in kingly attire, get into a muddle by combining a strict monarchy with absolute equality where rank is meaningless when all are elevated to the No. 1 position. As the Grand Inquisitor astutely observed in "There Once Was a King" -- "When everyone is somebody, then no one's anybody."

Rotating into the roles of Marco, Gianetta and Casilda are Kevin R. Siembor, Anne Slovin and Marlene Meier, respectively.

'The Gondoliers'

through Oct. 17 by The Savoyaires at Chute Auditorium, 1400 Oakton St., Evanston. \$12-\$22 adults; \$7-\$17 children. (847) 251-8767 or www.savoyaires.org

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