PATIENCE by W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan.

The King’s Head Theatre, 115 Upper Street Islington N1 QN

To 28 June 2014.

Review: William Russell.

Glorious and scintillating.

This gorgeous, sparkling production of Gilbert and Sullivan’s 1881 opera satirising Oscar Wilde and the “greenery, allery” aesthetic movement of the day should not be missed. Director John Savournin has updated it skilfully, setting the action in a pub where Patience, Joanna Marie Skillett, the dairy maid in love with a little boy from her childhood, is the barmaid.

Fleshly poet Bunthorne has been transformed into someone resembling Meatloaf and the lovesick maidens, reduced from 20 to three, into Goths knocking-back shorts at the bar. It works a dream. The nine strong cast can sing, updating of the lyrics is minimal – there is a neat Frank Sinatra joke – and David Eaton at the piano accompanies the singers superbly. The worry at the time was that the opera, because of its topicality, would have a short shelf-life. Savournin demonstrates this is not the case. His changes are to the point. Gilbert would surely have approved while Sullivan could have no complaints about the musical standards.

Perhaps the best song is Lady Jane’s lovely lament to ageing. Gilbert’s spinsters are something of a problem today – humour does not always survive the passage of time, and the aria about the fading taper-waist is not funny, the melody sad. Amy J Payne as Lady Jane, however, almost stops the show – and would do if this were a West End musical. Her comic timing is a delight, she gets the laughs Gilbert intended and, because this Lady Jane is not a desperate spinster, but a tough, realistic girl who knows time may be running out, but who will survive whatever happens, she is funny. When she gets a man at the end we delight for her and feel sorry for the man.

David Phipps-Davis delivers a tremendous performance as Bunthorne the Goth, Henry Manning is suitably languid and lovely as his rival, Archibald Grosvenor, and as the rapturous maidens, reduced to two, Ladies Angela and Saphir, Helen Evora and Andrea Tweedale sing-up a storm, as does Skillett.

But it is Savournin’s evening. Resisting the temptation to camp it up something rotten, he has worked wonders.