Patience or Bunthorne's Bride W S Gilbert & Arthur Sullivan Charles Court Opera Kings Head Theatre

From 04 June 2014 to 28 June 2014

Review by Howard Loxton

Charles Court Opera are back with John Savournin directing another lively G & S revival.

Pass through the Kings Head pub to the theatre behind and you find yourself greeted by another bar, fully-stocked, beer pumps at the ready, a Guinness-advertising mirror, posters on the wall that appropriately include one for a poetry reading and a sign of saying "toilets" that certainly won’t take you to the public ones.

It's a brilliant piece of stage design and construction, though the bar is unusual in that no-one seems to pay for their drinks and customers help themselves. Just the sort of pub I’d patronise.

It is here in the Castle Inn, not outside a mock medieval fortification, that the lights go up on Gilbert’s opening ”twenty love-sick maidens” knocking back the spirits and propping up the bar. Except that, this being a fringe space and a fringe budget, there are only three. Still love sick, they now call themselves ”melancholy maidens” to match the tune and are a set of Goth girls, though more Sloanes than Camden Town types, and one of them a real lass no longer.

Audiences today are not so familiar with Swinburne and Rossetti and the Aesthetic Movement that Gilbert satirised in this opera. An updating to a more contemporary cult, at least visually, makes an effective bridge between his period and what is otherwise modern dress.

The original libretto remains essentially intact, though there are a few discreet modernisations and one major change: the titular heroine, Patience, has lost her dairy and bucolic background: she’s now the Castle's barmaid.

Gothic sets the pattern for operatic indulgence and full-blooded performances, not least from David Phipps-Davis’s as parody poet Bunthorne, a beauty-spotted, portly dandy. He is diminutive in stature but big in personality and pointed in performance.

It is an OTT one of course, and so it should be. He is a self-created celebrity surrounded by his drooling entourage of aristocratic admirers, the trio of rapturous maidens Lady Angela (Helen Evora), Lady Saphir (Andrea Tweedale) and the more commanding Lady Jane, a maiden of advancing ripeness whom Amy J Payne makes a splendid comic creation.

While the ladies are besotted by Bunthorne, their former beau, the Duke of Dunstable and his Dragoon Guards comrades seek ways to reclaim them. Demoted here to private and a couple of corporals, in this second class cavalry regiment, David Menezes, Giles Davies and Michael Kerry are at their funniest attempting to assume aesthetic attitudes.

As competing poseur poet Grosvenor, Henry Manning offers matinée-idol looks wrapped in ruffles, a new-romantic who soon has Bunthorne’s adorers buzzing around him instead. But he, the long lost childhood chum of barmaid Patience, who has loved her “with a Florentine frenzy for fourteen years” pines only for her, while she has (so unselfishly) promised herself to Bunthorne.

Patience, at the centre of all this silliness, may not be a very bright girl but pure-voiced Joanna Marie Skillett gives her a sparkling-eyed innocence that is reflected through all of this production which affectionately exploits Gilbert’s humour and relishes Sullivan’s music.

Musical director David Eaton storms away on the piano, a one-man orchestra that, if you sit near him, is in danger of sometimes swamping the voices despite their operatic amplitude but this is a cast of real singers who relish the tongue-in-cheek romance and take the patter songs at a spanking pace that you just have to keep up with.

It may not have many of the most memorable of Sullivan’s melodies but it's an entertaining revival and an audience pleaser.