The Pirates of Penzance – King’s Head Theatre, London

Music: Arthur Sullivan

Libretto: WS Gilbert

Director: John Savournin

Reviewer: Michael Gray

The Public Reviews Rating: 4 and a half stars

Charles Court Opera’s compact, pocket-sized Pirates is set in a child’s bedroom – rocking horse, toy box, pirate ship on the bookshelf – and a window prominent downstage left.

Enter through it, not Peter Pan, but Captain Hook, or his Pirate King lookalike, played here with a nod to Fawlty and boundless brio by John Savournin, who also directed this hugely entertaining operetta. Followed, over the course of the action, by other “mad intruders”, none madder than Amy J Payne’s gurning, scheming Ruth, a superbly sustained comic creation. In a less promising role, Matthew Kellett is hilarious as Samuel, especially when he masquerades as a police constable, sidekick to Simon Masterson-Smith’s hangdog Sergeant.

Since this is a reduced production, that’s about the size of the Force, and Major-General Stanley, like Lear, has just three daughters. Ian Jervis’s take on this iconic role is traditional but totally engaging; his nightshirt with the uniform braid is wonderful. His three little maids are beautifully characterized, with Charlotte Baptie’s Edith and Nichola Jolley’s Kate the gorgeous ugly sisters to Alexandra Hutton’s Cordelia, a wonderfully entrancing Mabel. Their entrance, and her big number, are creatively choreographed: the girls are constantly on the move, without missing a beat of the intricate score. Poor Wandering One has been exquisitely sung many times, but rarely so well interpreted dramatically. Hutton is well matched by her Slave of Duty – Kevin Kyle’s dashing Frederick, a splendid Savoyard tenor.

Vocally, the whole cast is impeccable. Oh Poetry sounds incredible as a septet, and the piano reduction for four hands is played with panache by the Eaton-Young duo, of which the MD David Eaton is half, with répétiteur James Young sharing the stool.

Savournin’s production is witty and fresh, but no liberties are taken either with Gilbert or with Sullivan, though the tongue does sometimes stray towards the cheek. Indeed, the satire comes up very sharp, the Death and Glory ensemble underlined, in a touch of pure genius, by spelling out key words with alphabet blocks from the toybox – a great idea deftly executed. And how refreshing to be in a G&S audience – packed out on Press Night – where so many are clearly coming to the show for the first time: the bons mots new-minted, the paradox and the plot twists delightfully unexpected. And for all of us, the grime of years and the layers of varnish are stripped away, revealing the sparkling masterpiece beneath.

This enterprising company has already given its Pinafore and its Mikado. Plenty more fish in the Savoy Opera sea – Patience next, perhaps?