

ROLAND PARK news

Quarterly from the Roland Park Community Foundation • Volume Seventy-One • Summer 2019

**Travelogue:
Cuba**

*Young Victorian
Theatre*

The Very Model of a Modern Major Theater

By Leah Eskin

They were high-school kids, giddy from long days in the Gilman School theater, late nights at Frazier's bar, sticky weeks of pulling together a show. Their production—the light opera “Iolanthe”—was meant to span a few nights of July 1971. Instead, it lasted a lifetime.

Young Victorian Theatre Company, which began as a Gilman summer program, is preparing for its 50th season in 2020. “We’re Baltimore’s oldest musical theater, fully professional,” says Brian Goodman, one-time chorus member, Gilman drama association president, glee club geek, and—for the past 42 years—general manager of the company (as well as a partner at the law firm, Kramon & Graham). “I take a lot of pride in that.”

Pride deserved. Young Vic is not the country’s only professional Gilbert and Sullivan company (an online archive counts at least



Jeff Williams as the Pirate King in “The Pirates of Penzance.” Photo courtesy Young Vic

late 19th century London, inspired productions around the globe and helped shape musical theater as we know it. Which meant little, some 100 years later, to the kids of Roland Park. “I didn’t know any Gilbert and Sullivan,” admits Bryn Mawr School alumna Marylou Sigler Frey. “Other than the Mary Sue Easter egg song.” (The candy-company jingle is lifted from a Sullivan melody.) But as a high-school “wallflower,” Frey did know an opportunity to socialize; beginning in 1974, she spent her summers working the box office, typing programs, printing

posters and singing. Says Frey: “It’s the most fun thing I’ve ever done.”

The company has kept up the Gilbert and Sullivan fun, with a focus on crowd-pleasers “H.M.S. Pinafore,” “The Pirates of Penzance,” and “The Mikado” – which, with its setting in the fictitious Japanese town of Titipu (sound it out) and the tradition of “yellowface” (ouch), is now generally considered politically incorrect.

Audiences still thrill to the duo’s witty lyrics, indelible melodies and the tongue-twisting tradition of “patter” songs, which squeeze a huge amount of text into a brief musical span. “Your mouth just keeps going,” says baritone Joshua Hughes. “Thank God.”

“The beautiful thing about Gilbert and Sullivan is it’s just fun and silly,” enthuses soprano Alissa Roca. “If you want to leave your problems at home, these are the shows you want to be at.”

Over the years, the company graduated from a Gilman program to an independent nonprofit. With an annual operating budget of about \$175,000, it rents costumes and sets, engages a full orchestra, and hires professional lead singers. The chorus, location and vibe remain local. “It’s returning home,” says



Catrin Rowenna Davies as the fairy Iolanthe and Joshua Hughes as the Lord Chancellor in “Iolanthe.” Photo courtesy Young Vic



Tom Connor (Gilman '77), Jerry Marcus ('77), Jari Villanueva and Brian Goodman ('75) outside Gilman. Photo courtesy Young Vic

10). Nor is it the oldest (a Philadelphia group dates to 1901). But it is a rarity. Better yet, it’s ours.

W.S. Gilbert wrote the words. Arthur Sullivan composed the music. Together, the two skewered Victorian society in 14 clever, convoluted, catchy comic operas. The blockbusters captivated

THE VERY MODEL

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Hughes, who earned his master's at Peabody Institute and who will fly in from Texas for his fourth Young Vic season this summer. During rehearsal breaks, he beelines to Eddie's for Utz chips and Berger cookies.

The company has never left the neighborhood (a few shows at the Inner Harbor aside), staging its productions at Gilman, Roland Park Country School and Bryn Mawr. "For 49 years, we have literally performed within one square mile," says Goodman.

This summer will bring the company full circle, back to the same Gilman stage (though not the same wooden seats) where it began. The review-style show, called "From London to Baltimore: A Salute to Gilbert & Sullivan," is scheduled for July 14, 18 and 21. "It's going to be like jumping back in time," says Frey, who will return to the stage. "Extremely exciting and a little bittersweet." The lineup includes Gilbert and Sullivan favorites as well as Broadway tunes—to underscore the connection between the two traditions.

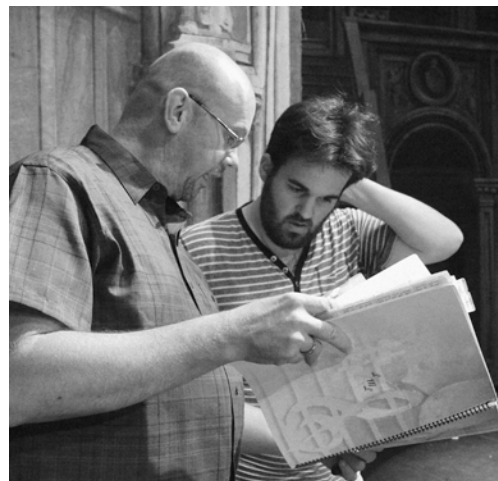


Jarrod Lee as the Sgt. of Police in "The Pirates of Penzance." Photo courtesy Young Vic

It's a straight line. Consider "Hamilton." When George Washington strides on stage, he declares: "I am the very model of a modern Major-General." Straight outta "Pirates." Playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda is a fan. As is Justice William Rehnquist, who, in a letter, called Young Vic's 1988 production of "Trial by Jury" "excellent."

"My clients are all very impressed when they see it," boasts Goodman. "Until they read it closely and see that is nothing to do with my skills as a lawyer, but with running a theater company."

A company that—come 2020—will turn 50. In celebration, it will stage "Pirates of Penzance" ("the greatest of all," says Goodman), complete with gold-trimmed golden anniversary costumes, a longer run and a gala with an appearance by one-time cast member former governor Robert Ehrlich.



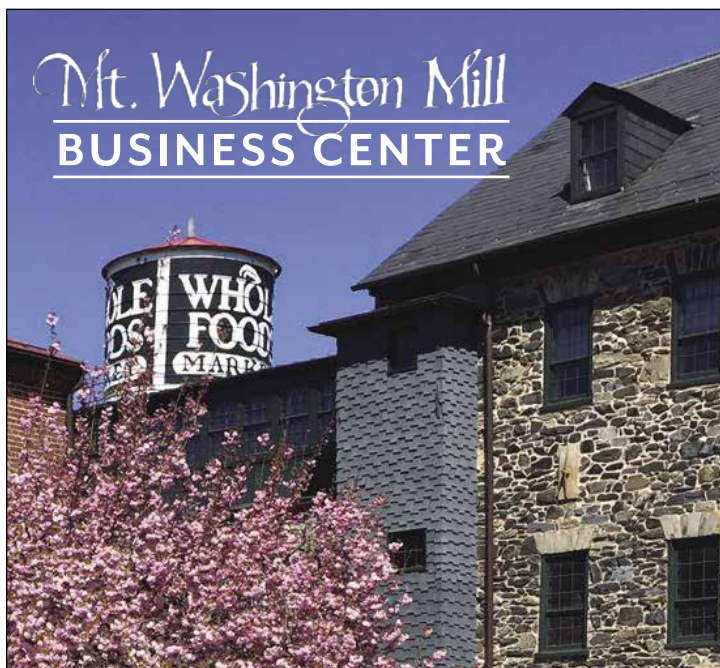
Former Music Director Phillip Collister consults with Andrew Pardini. Photo courtesy Young Vic

If looking back promises to be a pleasure; looking forward poses a

challenge. "We have an aging following," says Carol Haislip, who spent her high-school and college summers running up long gowns, hand-stitching fairy wings and bagging up sweaty sailor suits. "We need to educate the next generation." Cast members make an annual appearance at Bridges, an enrichment program at Gilman for public-school students, to introduce the unfamiliar style of singing. "When I first heard it, it felt weird," says Marty Everett Levant, Jr., 12, "like a butterfly in my stomach." Curtis Lawson, 14, was instantly stage-struck. He's since joined the Gilman middle-school chorus, played Mercutio ghetto-style, and perfected both his glare and sashay for "Once on This Island." "Offstage, I'm me in a costume," he says. "I get on stage, and I am exactly who I need to be. And it's amazing. I want to do all the musicals I can. Forever."

For tickets to one of this year's shows, visit yvtc.org.

Leah Eskin (leaheskin.com) writes about food and other urgent matters. She is the author of the memoir, *Slices of Life: A Food Writer Cooks through Many a Conundrum*. ❖



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