

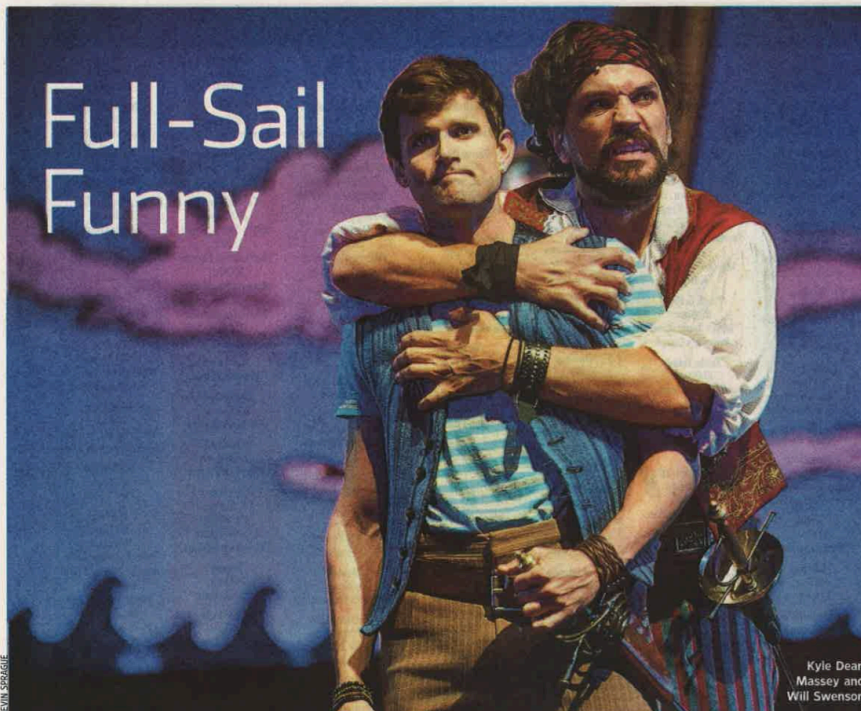
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

July 29, 2016

D8 | Friday, July 29, 2016

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Full-Sail Funny

Broadway, after which it was filmed. No other G&S production has reached a larger audience.

It stands to reason, then, that Barrington Stage should have opted to produce Elliott's version of "Pirates" in its 520-seat main-stage theater. Beowulf Boritt's comic-strip set features a runway that juts straight out into the auditorium—the mainmast of the ship on which the first act takes place is dead center in the house—and Mr. Rando has filled both aisles to overflowing with actors. The effect is noisily intimate: If you're sitting on the aisle or in one of the two stage boxes, you're more than likely to have pirates in your face at one time or another, and you might even get pulled out of your seat to take part in the action. Mr. Rando, a recognized master of slapstick, keeps the energy level vaultingly high, and Mr. Bergasse's choreography is irresistibly ludicrous. Best of all is "When the Foeman Bares His Steel," sung and danced by a semi-chorus of black-coated, silly-walking school-of-John-Cleese bobbies who lurch around the stage like demented marionettes.

Will Swenson, who plays the Pirate King with swaggering gusto, has admitted in interviews to having watched the 1983 film of "The Pirates of Penzance" "on a loop" in his youth. That's not surprising: His singing voice and physical deportment will undoubtedly remind you of Mr. Kline. You can see that he's having a ball, and so will you. Scarlett Strallen, who plays Mabel, the love interest, is a beauty with first-class pipes, and David Garrison, who sings "I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General," the patter song for which "Pirates" is best known today, tosses off Gilbert's tongue-snarl couplets ("I know our mythic history, King Arthur's, and Sir Caradoc's / I answer hard acrostics, I've a pretty taste for paradox") with perfect poise. The choral singing is unpolished but strong, and the eight-musician pit band is...well, good enough.

My only reservation about Barrington Stage's "Pirates" is that it demands what might be called a suspension of musical disbelief. If you know and love the original "Pirates of Penzance," you'll more than likely feel that Elliott's revised version fails to do justice to the myriad subtleties of Sullivan's score, much of which is very beautiful indeed, and that this staging, like the Public Theater production before it, is more than a little bit rough around the musical edges. But it's funny—wildly, gloriously funny—and only a stiff-necked prig could possibly fail to succumb to its charms.

Mr. Teachout, the Journal's drama critic, is the author of "Satchmo at the Waldorf," which opens on Aug. 20 at B Street Theatre in Sacramento, Calif., and on Aug. 25 at Mosaic Theatre in Washington. Write to him at tteachout@wsj.com.



REVIEW TERRY TEACHOUT

The Pirates of Penzance

Barrington Stage Company, Boyd-Quinson Mainstage, 30 Union St., Pittsfield, Mass. (\$20-\$85), 413-236-8888, closes Aug. 13

Pittsfield, Mass.

Rejoice greatly! John Rando and Joshua Bergasse, whose 2013 Barrington Stage revival of "On the Town" moved to Broadway the following year and ran for 368 performances, have joined forces again: Barrington Stage has reunited the best of all possible director-choreographer teams for a rumbus-

tious production of "The Pirates of Penzance" that is strongly cast, delightfully designed and whizzingly well-staged. It's no less worthy of a New York transfer than "On the Town" was, and I wouldn't be surprised if one is in the works.

Should this "Pirates" make it to Broadway, it'll be none too soon. The comic operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan are not-so-distant ancestors of the modern-day American musical, yet they're rarely revived in this country by professional theater troupes. I've reviewed just two productions in the past 13 years, and it's been three decades since an operetta by G&S (as they're known to their avid fans) was last mounted on Broadway. It is, alas, all too easy to see why. Not only is "The Mikado," their masterpiece, now widely regarded as politically incorrect, but Sullivan wrote his scores for classically

trained singers, meaning that when the operettas do get done professionally, it increasingly tends to be by opera companies like Chicago's Lyric Opera. While such large-scale versions get the singing right, they're also prone to drop the comic ball: Gilbert and Sullivan meant for their shows to be performed in smaller theaters by singing actors who wear both hats with equal ease.

This helps to explain why only one G&S operetta has had a long commercial run on Broadway. In 1980, the Public Theater commissioned William Elliott to revise "The Pirates of Penzance" to make Sullivan's score more suitable for performance by musical-comedy actors and Broadway-sized pit bands. The resulting production, which starred Kevin Kline and Linda Ronstadt, opened to immensely successful effect in Central Park, then played for two years on