

Netherworlds

The Mikado is a scrappy hit in Ivoryton; the SumCab ends on a high (and weird) note.

By Christopher Arnott

It's an unjust world, and virtue is only triumphant in theatrical performances. That's not just something my parents used to say, it's a quote from Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, now going through its Japanese jackanapes at the Ivoryton Playhouse through Aug. 6, thanks to the River Rep ensemble.

Virtue wasn't exactly triumphant at the show's opening matinee, last Wednesday. There was a mix-up, and I almost found myself and my theatergoing companion without seats for the sold-out performance. The box office rallied last-minute and found us seats in the balcony (often the best place to sit when the River Rep's doing a musical, as the sound and size of a live band—in this case two pianos—dominate the front of the auditorium). Then, as we walked down the aisle, my companion tore his toenail on a seat leg and had to hobble down to the lobby, where he convalesced for the entire first act. I was left to sit directly in front of three young, audible children who weren't exactly riveted by the performance and were being pacified with crinkly bags of candy. At intermission, better seats had been located, and we were ushered to them—past an usher who had fainted in the 90-degree heat. EMTs and firefighters swooped in to strap the prone woman to a stretcher. This led to a much longer intermission, followed by the announcement that "the woman is fine."

Then came the second half of *The Mikado*—with its own dithering mix-ups, overextended administrators, swoonings, fears of death and cultural collapse, and gracious good spirits. The company's longtime leading man, Warren Kelley, causes (and collapses in) comic convulsions as Ko-Ko. Adina Verson's a gloriously vain Yum-Yum. The chorus (if you want to know who they are, they are gentlemen of Japan) make funny faces.

This is the magic of live theater. Overcoming real-life distractions is an art form unto itself, and the River Reppers are exceptionally skilled at snatching back your attention and keeping it.

It would be an error to call this production "ambitious." When the River Rep's done big-cast Broadway fare like *1776* or *Damn Yankees*, that was ambitious. But this seemingly daunting piece—an 1885 operetta with a cast of dozens—has been wisely scaled down, Off Off Broadway style, by director Owen Thompson. The script and score are uncut, but human gestures, not elaborate sets, provide the pomp, and the use

of pianos instead of an orchestra helps keep the focus on the show's myriad small pleasures. The songs jump out of the score like well-rehearsed cabaret routines—solo bits like "Titwillow" and "Wandering Minstrel," obviously, but also a boffo quartet rendition of "Sing a Merry Madrigal." Savor these savvy Savoyards.

If only *Baal* had opened the Summer Cabaret at Yale's summer season instead of closing it! This inventive integration of Brecht's breakthrough play-with-music and the post-pop art revolution succeeds where the company's

frightwig, Eric Gilde sets up each scene by shifting an onstage film camera and describing the impending action in the artist's trademark fey mumbling voice.

The attention to detail is admirable: The walls have been covered in tinfoil, as the Factory's were. Silver mylar "Exploding Plastic Inevitable" balloons float from the tables. But some design fillips fall short: The VU song selections bypass atmospheric instrumentals like "Sister Ray" and "Murder Mystery" in favor of melodic, lyric-bound tunes like "Femme Fatale" and "Venus in Furs," which are quoted like cheap gags. The '60s iconography



PHOTO COURTESY OF SUMMER CABARET

Camp Baal's soup: Warhol meets Brecht at Yale's Summer Cabaret.

previous overhauls of Handke, Fassbinder, Buchner and Frederike Roth fell short, giving the text an accessible post-modern context in which it can appear newly confrontational and controversial.

Director Tea Alagic, script adapter Kristin Mendicino and their intrepid, trusting ensemble have jettisoned *Baal*'s original songs in favor of Velvet Underground classics (plus later Lou Reed live recordings and snippets from David Bowie's 1982 TV version of *Baal*). They've shrunk the script from 21 scenes to 15. They've moved the action from Augsburg in 1917 to Andy Warhol's New York City Factory complex in 1967. The actors embody both Brecht's characters and Factory icons such as Reed, Edie Sedgwick, Candy Darling and Joe Dallesandro. In glasses and a white Warhol

isn't superficial, but the troupe could have dug much deeper and found far more intriguing collisions of Brecht's epic theater and Warhol's superstar verite filmmaking. A reality-bending intro sequence in which each character's entrance is accompanied by videos of the actors discussing the project has moments of enlightenment, but also exposes shortcomings; those who deride or confess to not understanding Warhol's film work, or the Factory style, are indeed the least convincing performers in the show. Thanks to the more convincingly jaundiced and jaded members of the cast, the simple sociopathic tale of Brecht's artsy anti-hero is tersely and tightly told.

Sure, it's not for everyone, but it's for a heck of a lot more people than the Cabaret's last three shows were. And it's a

validation of the troupe's season-long experiments with style and narrative. As the Velvet Underground sang, "Now now baby, I'm beginning to see the light."

The Summer Cabaret at Yale spent its season reviving a special kind of cabaret: the politically charged, experimental German underground variety. Two cabaret conferences in the state this week are attuned to a variant definition: small-scale concert performances of showtunes and patter, often paying tribute to long-ago legends of the live stage.

The O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford held a cabaret conference for years, then—when funding faltered—had to let it go. Cabaret types may be a dying breed, but they're a hardy lot, and the conference found a new home at Yale. This year the O'Neill restarted its conference, and the Yale one persists. It's ironic that Connecticut now hosts two high-level cabaret klatsches, since you can count the number of year-round cabaret venues in the state on less than one hand.

Remaining public perfs at the Yale conference (which commenced July 30 with diva Julie Wilson) are a coupling of Sharon McNight's *Betty, Betty, Bette! The Music of Grable, Hutton & Davis* and Steve Hayes' *Would'a, Should'a, Could'a* on Aug. 4, an equally vivacious double bill of Laurel Masse's *From the Heart* and Heather MacRae's *Songs for My Father—The Songs of Gordon MacRae* Aug. 5, and a *Curtain Call* revue in which students at the nine-day gathering strut what they've learned (crucial stuff like how to make your eyes glimmer, how to clasp your hands giddily and how many raunchy jokes are too many, I'd wager).

The O'Neill's slate, programmed by Michael Bush, kicks off Aug. 4 with Naava Piatka's *Better Don't Talk*, followed Aug. 5 by *An Evening with Penny Fuller*, then Ruth Williamson's *Pure Heaven: The Music of Kay Thompson* on Aug. 7, Hunter Bell and Jeff Bowen's behind-the-scenes musical *Title of Show* on Aug. 8, and the magic act *All the People, All of the Time*, starring Darwin Ortiz and David Roth, Aug. 9. The conference concludes Aug. 10 with Suzanne Douglas in *Lucky to Be Me*, based on the life and works of Abbey Lincoln. There are also two "Participants' Cabaret" events, Aug. 6 and 11—not anchored by students but by headliners like Fuller and Piatka—and a "Grand Finale Cabaret/Reception" Aug. 12. ■