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I've Got a Little Twist

nytheatre.com review by Daniel Kelley

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Ever since I was a kid growing up in Brooklyn, the New York City Gilbert and Sullivan Players (NYGASP) have put on three productions yearly—two of the "big three" (either *H.M.S Pinafore*, *The Mikado*, or *The Pirates of Penzance*) and one additional lesser-known work. When I first started to attend their performances, they were uptown at Symphony Space. Later on, they moved to Midtown and the much larger City Center. This year, no doubt due to the current turmoil that's gripping the global economy, NYGASP has decided to hold off on a fully staged production of a Gilbert & Sullivan classic for the first part of the year and has instead decided to do something a little more intimate.

The result is the cabaret evening *I've Got a Little Twist*, a prime example of how arts organizations can use the limitations placed on them by the current financial climate to get back to their roots and get creative. NYGASP's mission statement is "giving vitality to the living legacy of Gilbert & Sullivan." *I've Got a Little Twist* does just this and in the process gives one of the freshest and most heartfelt performances that I've seen the company do in years.

The premise of the show is very simple: it's an evening of songs from Gilbert & Sullivan and songs from musical theatre that are part of the "living legacy of Gilbert & Sullivan." Each of the songs, however, is sung with a twist—guys sing "girl's" songs, girls sing "guy's" songs, Gilbert & Sullivan segue into Broadway, Broadway segues into Gilbert & Sullivan. The informal nature of a cabaret setting proves ideal for NYGASP's style, one that is less about having an incredibly polished performance and more about their love of the material. This love is typically echoed in the audience, and it certainly was the night I went to see this show. While this audience is primarily silver-haired, these folks are not about to go quietly into the night. The intimate and informal nature of the cabaret setting put the audience at ease to cheer and hoot and clap after their

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favorite numbers. At one point, one of the audience's favorite performers, the patter baritone Stephen Quint, is insulted and sent offstage. Following this, the audience erupted in a flurry of good-natured boos, hisses, and cries for Quint to return.

This particular series of bits revolving around Quint is, in fact, the highlight of the evening. In them, Quint attempts to break out of his stock patter baritone character and sing other types of songs, while the other members of the company attempt to prevent him. The sequence finishes with Quint alone onstage, ostracized by the other members of the company, singing a longing and heartfelt rendition of the famous soprano aria from *The Mikado*, "The Sun Whose Rays."

The piece as a whole was conceived and directed by David Auxier, who acts as the Master of Ceremonies as well as singing a few songs of his own. Auxier is a likeable MC and keeps the show moving at an energetic pace. This probably also has something to do with his role as director, for which he should be commended. Auxier does a great job of navigating the small stage of the Triad in creative ways.

An inevitable part of any show that attempts to take a fresh look at Gilbert & Sullivan is, of course, its take on the patter song—the fast-tempoed, many-worded songs that most people think of when they think G&S. Luckily, the company has on hand the multi-talented Auxier, who in addition to his many other duties with this show, has written contemporary lyrics for much of the classic G&S patter in the show. The epic patter song "When you're lying awake", otherwise known as "The Nightmare Song" from *Iolanthe*, has been rewritten by Auxier as a number for the whole company bemoaning their train commute, and interspersed with sections of "New York, New York" from *On the Town*. The updated lyrics are clever, funny, and topical, and the ensemble plays with them well. The show finishes with a barrage of patter songs past and present, in a vocal montage called "The Legacy of Patter." The song pastiche traces the patter song from its origins in Gilbert & Sullivan through *The Music Man* and that favorite of Danny Kaye, "Tchaikovsky," and up to *Company*. The arrangements are all very clever, and the performers are very energetic, making the number work seamlessly.

As with all NYGASP shows, the company walks a thin line between being campily endearing and cloying, and sometimes falls over the edge. A number of the newly written scenes fall flat—an update of a duet from *Patience* set in a therapist's office fails to stir up laughs, and an attempt to infuse the lovely aria "Take a Pair of Sparkling Eyes" from *The Gondoliers* with a hidden sexual meaning ends up feeling awkward and misguided.

In the end, what you're left with most of all is the love these performers and this audience have for this kind of music—both Gilbert & Sullivan and their legacy in contemporary musical theatre. If you're a long time G&S fan, or someone who's interested in a crash course in their canon, take a look at *I've Got a Little Twist*.