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MUSIC REVIEW

A Graceful Surrender for Gilbert and Sullivan's Uppity Feminist

By ALLAN KOZINN

For a fan of the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, with their neo-Handelian scores and brilliant wordplay, the New York Gilbert and Sullivan Players' annual monthlong residency at Symphony Space is a highlight of the concert season. Where there were once a handful of groups presenting this repertory in New York, this troupe, founded by Albert Bergeret in 1974 and still directed by him, is the last of its kind. Its productions are attractive and solid, and the performances have grown increasingly polished over the years.

Typically the company balances one of the best-known works against a comparative rarity. This season the works are "The Pirates of Penzance," which runs through Sunday, and "Princess Ida," which had a shorter run that ended on Sunday. Apart from the charms of the work itself, the draw in the company's "Princess Ida" was the comedian Frank Gorshin, who sang the role of King Gama, and who was both in good voice and fine comic form on Saturday evening.

In "Princess Ida," the princess of the title, Gama's daughter, has established a women-only college at the Castle Adamant, founded in the belief that men are useless brutes. Ida, however, was betrothed as a child to Prince Hilarion, the son of King Hildebrand, and when it is time for the two to marry, the querulous



Jack Vartoogian for The New York Times

Frank Gorshin and Lynne Vardaman, seated, in Gilbert and Sullivan's "Princess Ida," at Symphony Space.

King Gama turns up at King Hildebrand's castle without her, to Hildebrand's chagrin.

Hilarion and two friends scale the walls of Castle Adamant, don scholar's robes (in this case, kimonos from a "Mikado" production) and make a half-hearted attempt to pass

as women, a plan that quickly unravels. When Hildebrand and his army arrive, they threaten to kill Gama and his three oafish sons. Ida's students prove unwilling warriors, so Ida agrees to be the prize in a battle between her three brothers and Hilarion, Cyril and Florian. Hilarion

and company win, naturally, and the gentlemanly Hilarion makes a gesture toward feminine superiority that allows Ida a graceful way to surrender.

The production, directed by Mr. Bergeret and Jan Holland, with choreography by Bill Fabris (including a

third-act tap dance for Hildebrand's soldiers) had a simplicity that let the work speak for itself, and the topical updating was amusing and lightly applied. Mostly the additions were in the scene in which Hilarion and company donned their kimonos. "Now we can get in touch with our feminine sides," was one of several interpolated lines that lightly skewered popular psychology. A brief fan dance underscored the costume link to "The Mikado."

The singers were comfortable with the style and made the most of the opportunities for both subtle and unsubtle comedy that it offers. Besides Mr. Gorshin, they included Philip Reilly, who gave a strong performance as Hildebrand. Keith Jameson brought an appealing tenor to Hilarion's music, and Lynne Vardaman sang the title role with a combination of forcefulness and beauty.

Lara Wilson was a suitably scheming Lady Blanche, Ida's de facto deputy, and Maariana Vikse gave a lovely performance as Melissa, Blanche's daughter. There were also fine contributions by Patrick Gallagher and Edward Prostak, as Cyril and Florian, Hilarion's friends; Noah Sferra, Walter DuMelle and Larry Picard, as Gama's sons; and Valerie Stadler as Lady Psyche, one of Ida's professors.

The orchestra played superbly for Mr. Bergeret, who conducted a lively, gracefully paced performance.