Gilbert and Sullivan Yield To Gershwin and Ryskind

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

When the Gilbert and Sullivan Players decided to extend their repertory beyond the Savoyard classics that the company has performed exclusively for the last 16 years, they couldn’t have made a more felicitous choice of a vehicle to make the break from tradition than “Of Thee I Sing.”

The 1931 satirical musical, with a score by George and Ira Gershwin and a book by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind, was patterned after Gilbert and Sullivan’s light operas and has the same mischievous spirit. For voices accustomed to singing Gilbert and Sullivan, the leap to Gershwin poses no major technical challenges. The most significant difference between the Gershwin show’s ensemble numbers and Gilbert and Sullivan’s set pieces is the jazzy syncopation that propels songs like “Love Is Sweeping the Country” and “Of Thee I Sing, Baby.” And the company delivers them with confidence and verve.

If there’s a single word that defines the essence of the show, it is that cheeky, sexy, irreverent “baby” tacked onto the end of a phrase borrowed from “My Country ’Tis of Thee.” Heard in the context of the Gilbert and Sullivan Players’ revival—which is the show’s first fully staged production in New York since the 1930s—the song re-emerges in all its slyly amusing glory.

The happiest surprise of the revival, which plays at Symphony Space (2357 Broadway, at 95th Street) through April 15, is how fresh the show seems nearly 60 years after it first opened on Broadway. In many ways, its satire of Presidential politics and media manipulation more than half a century ago seems as apt today as ever. The story of the Presidential candidate John P. Wintergreen who sweeps to victory on the platform of love and is later saved from impeachment by the rush of public sentiment attending his wife’s timely pregnancy is still a telling metaphor for modern political image making. For comparison, one need only think of Richard M. Nixon’s Checkers speech.

What sets “Of Thee I Sing” apart from contemporary political satire is its absence of anger. The show doesn’t point fingers; its vision of the political world is comic-absurdist. Among the show’s cleverest strokes is the creation of the invisible Vice President, Alexander Throttlebottom. A mild-mannered milquetoast, the character is so unassuming that even his handlers don’t recognize him when he periodically pops onto the scene.

If the Gilbert and Sullivan Players’ production, directed by Kristen Gardiner, doesn’t have any virtuoso turns, it has an admirable consistency of tone. The performances are all marked by a relaxed tongue-in-cheek silliness that never tips over into frenzy. The vocals are hearty and well sung. Keith Jurosko makes a genially pompous Wintergreen and Kate Egan a winsome Mary Turner. Alan Hill exudes a quiet comic glow as the perpetually adored Throttlebottom, who wears an unwaveringly perky smile.

“We appeal to your hearts, not your intelligence,” goes one slogan of the Wintergreen campaign. The secret of the show’s enduring charm is that it appeals to the intelligence first.