



## PERFORMANCE REVIEW

# A FESTIVAL OF WS GILBERT PLAYS

*Reviewed by Deborah*

*Fabbro,*

*23 Nov 2024*

**Author:** WS Gilbert

**Director:** Comedy and Tragedy - Directed by Ben Klein; Creatures of Impulse - Directed by Danielle Zuccala; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern - Directed by Sarah Berry; The Hooligan - Directed by Naomi Tooby

**Theatre Company:** Gilbert and Sullivan Opera Victoria

## REVIEW

I must start this by saying that I wasn't aware that W S Gilbert had written over 70 works for the stage, I only knew of the fourteen comic operas Gilbert created with composer Arthur Sullivan. Therefore, I acknowledge GSOV for introducing me and, I suspect from the comments I heard from fellow audience members, many other people to these rarely performed works. While sometimes the comic musical background of the performers

was a little too obvious, it was interesting to learn of a different side to Gilbert's work.

GSOV stalwart and G&S expert, Diana Burleigh, is the artistic director of this festival of Gilbert's plays and appears in two of them. Amazingly, this is her first time on the GSOV stage despite her 50-odd-year involvement with the company.

She had chosen pieces that show the development of Gilbert's writing over the years from the early 'Creatures of Impulse' which was first presented in 1871; 'Comedy and Tragedy' which was written for the American actress Mary Anderson and opened in 1884.

After interval we saw his parody of Hamlet in the piece 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern'" which, although written in 1874, wasn't produced until 1891. The final offering of the presentation was 'The Hooligan', a very different style of play that opened in February 1911 only a few months before his death.

'Creatures of Impulse' is a farcical comedy about a "Strange Old Lady" with magical powers who has ensconced herself as a resident of the village inn and refuses to pay or leave. She casts a spell upon those who are trying to get her out, changing their personalities to the opposite of what they were. Director Danielle Zuccula has chosen the path of slapstick physical comedy to highlight the



Gilbert & Sullivan  
Opera Victoria

characters' extreme change of personality, and the performers have complied. Though, for me, Anna Castle as Martha stood out as she played "straight".

Adapted from an earlier short story, 'Comedy and Tragedy' (directed by Ben Klein) is set in France in 1723 and tells the story of Clarice de Quillacq, an actress, who seeks to distract her guests while her husband fights a duel with the Regent of France. The fight was well executed by Sam Hargreaves (Philippe de Quillacq) and Cyrus Raco (Regent) but the highlight was Sara Dimech-Betancourt as Clarice. She was a delight to watch and brought much vitality and humour to the role.

In 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern' directed by Sarah Berry, we get the Bard's iambic pentameter and some of the iconic passages from Hamlet including the flute scene and "that" soliloquy. There were strong performances from all of the cast particularly Timofey Alexandrov as Hamlet and Sara Dimech-Betancourt as Ophelia.

'The Hooligan' was, for this reviewer, the highpoint of the presentation. It is a very different style to the preceding works. Gilbert was a barrister and magistrate so had had experience of the law and criminals. The play is set in Pentonville Prison on the morning of condemned prisoner Nat Solly's execution, as he relates his story. Director, Naomi Tooby, has guided her actors well and there were standout performances from Josh Weaver as Nat and John Parncutt as the Warder Mathers.

Each of the four plays was staged simply with minimal set, furniture and some use of projections, and kudos must go to Marie Klein and her team for the stupendous costumes.