Review by Murray Bramwell

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HMS Pinafore
by Gilbert and Sullivan

Carl Rosa Company
Her Majesty’s Theatre

The Carl Rosa Opera Company occupied a distinguished part of English operatic history from its establishment in 1873 through to the late 1950s. It presented the first English productions of Carmen, Lohengrin and Aida and would have staged the works of Gilbert and Sullivan had the D’Oyly Carte company not got their hands on them first. Now, 131 years later, under artistic director Peter Mulloy, a new Carl Rosa Company is staging Gilbert and Sullivan with an attention to authenticity that is Gilbertian in its detail - even using sets, props and costumes once owned by D’Oyly Carte.

As the first night curtain opens at Her Majesty’s it reveals the deck of HMS Pinafore with an imposing varnished wooden bridge and a sailors’ chorus in costumes restored from Gilbert’s carefully tailored originals and wearing straw boaters specially woven for the production. The outfits and set by film designer Christine Edzard look particularly handsome under Hugh Hamilton’s creamy lighting.

But as that famous barge comes into view, things are not quite as trim for the major entrance of Act I - that of Sir Joseph Porter, First Lord of the Admiralty. Gilbert’s scathing satire on the appointment to this exalted position of the inexperienced civilian WH Smith, the newsagent tycoon, is given a new spin with Timothy West’s bewildered arrival. Surrounded by an appealing bevy of pastel coloured sisters, cousins, and aunts, West mis-times vocal cues and the directional microphones - which have already been making ominous echoes -struggle to register his flickering delivery.

As Ralph Rackstraw and his beloved Josephine, David Curry and Maeve Morris perform pleasingly but without much romantic sizzle and Graham Stone’s Dick Deadeye, while in good voice, reduces the villainy to an eyepatch and the occasional shrug. Steven Page is refreshingly animated as the Captain and his reversal of fortune with Little Buttercup (Beverley Klein) is one of the sprightlier moments of the night. Also memorable is
Ralph Meanley as the Boatswain and Sophie-Louise Dann’s snazzily tailored Hebe.

However, with the big numbers muted and energies unsustained, there is an overall sense of a production underdone and technically glitchy. As director and lead performer, Timothy West, an actor of eminent reputation, has failed to lift the ensemble to its evident capability. I am sure it will spruce up, but HMS Pinafore has made an inauspicious beginning to its Australasian tour of duty.