

Lakeshore Light Opera celebrates 60 years with Penzance



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[More from Kathryn Greenaway, Montreal Gazette \(HTTP://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/GREENAWAY29\)](http://montrealgazette.com/author/greenaway29)

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Place boisterous pirates and inept British bobbies within singing distance and you get Gilbert & Sullivan's immensely popular light opera, *The Pirates of Penzance*.

The Victorian-era hit returns to the Lakeshore Light Opera stage to mark the company's 60th-production milestone. (It was last performed by the company to mark its 50th-production milestone.)

The five-day, six-show run begins at the Louise Chalmers Theatre in Pointe-Claire, March 6 at 8 p.m.

The *Pirates of Penzance* was company-member Colleen St-James' first encounter with the musical form. She was in elementary school when she watched the 1983 film version of *Pirates*, starring Kevin Kline, Angela Lansbury and Linda Ronstadt. She was instantly drawn to the mix of serious music with fantastical narrative and lyrics.

St-James went on to perform the Gilbert & Sullivan repertoire in high school at Emmanuel Christian School in Dollard-des-Ormeaux. In her graduating year, she joined the Lakeshore Light Opera. She was 16 years old.

"It's a special feeling being part of something greater than yourself," said St-James, who plays Edith, a ward of the Major-General, in the Lakeshore production. "You are on stage with professional sets and beautiful costumes and a live orchestra. And you respond to the audience, the laughter, the applause."

The 34-year-old mother of two has spent years performing Gilbert & Sullivan's greatest hits and knows the repertoire inside out.

"*Pirates of Penzance* is very accessible for children," she said. "The boys love the pirates and the girls love all the beautiful costumes."

Grown-ups can dig deeper. The duo of W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan employed music and humorous storylines to render astute social and political commentary. The G& S light opera is the forerunner of today's musical theatre and the repertoire is plum with songs that have embedded themselves in the collective conscience.

The *Pirates of Penzance* debuted in New York City on New Year's Eve 1879 and was both a box office and critical hit. It poked fun at operatic conventions, bumbling authority figures and social snobbery and produced one of the most familiar of all Gilbert & Sullivan moments — the Major-General's Song — sung at lightening speed.

All together now:

I am the very model of a modern Major-General

I've information vegetable, animal and mineral

I know the kings of England, and I quote the fights historical

From Marathon to Waterloo, in order categorical

Singing in a Gilbert & Sullivan production is equal parts fun and challenging, St-James said.

“A favourite moment for me is when we are singing a double chorus and the men are saying one thing and we are saying something else entirely,” St-James said. “But when the whole chorus is singing together and so many (musical) things are going on all at once, it demands focus. We have to watch our musical director Marian Siminski like a hawk or we can get lost.”

Each Lakeshore Light Opera production costs around \$60,000 to mount, but in the last years, generous corporate donors have defrayed the costs, which frees the company to give proceeds from the performances to the Lakeshore General Hospital Foundation.

Over the last seven years, the company has donated \$65,000 to the hospital to help pay for services or equipment not covered by government subsidies. Money gathered the last two years paid for the training for a home-dialysis program.

“Performing Gilbert & Sullivan is fun, but giving the hospital thousands of dollars feels even better,” St-James said. “I feel like I’m helping to do something really significant.”

Lakeshore Light Opera performs The Pirates of Penzance at the Louise Chalmers Theatre, housed in John Rennie High School in Pointe-Claire, corner of St-Jean Blvd. and Douglas-Shand Ave., March 6-7 and March 13-14 at 8 p.m. and March 8 and March 14 at 2 p.m. For ticket information, call 514-804-4900 or visit <http://www.llo.org> (<http://www.llo.org>).

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