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Victorian Lyric Opera Company *Trial by Jury*

By **Bob Ashby** • Jul 15th, 2012 • Category: **Fringe, Reviews**

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Trial by Jury

Victorian Lyric Opera Company

Mountain – at Mount Vernon United Methodist Church (900 Massachusetts Ave NW DC)

Through July 27th

35 minutes

Reviewed July 13th, 2012

Like ***The Confines of Flattery***, which I saw on the same night, Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury* is a traditionally structured show in which the words are supremely important. Before Gilbert began working with Sullivan, he was not only trained at law but wrote very successful comic verse for humor magazines. Collected under the title "The Bab Ballads" ("Bab" was how he signed drawings that illustrated the verses), many of these pieces formed the basis for characters and plots in the G&S operettas. None of them is more deeply rooted in the Bab Ballads than *Trial*, derived from a ballad of the same name and featuring some lyrics (e.g., the opening chorus, the plaintiff's attorney's song) copied directly from the poem.



Rockville's Victorian Lyric Opera Company (VLOC) attempts, for Fringe purposes, to update the story as a present-day celebrity trial, complete with paparazzi, cell phones, and tweets. This results in a somewhat uncomfortable marriage of 21st century culture and technology with legal concepts (i.e., breach of promise of marriage) that have long since passed from the scene. Making the jury co-ed, rather than all male, dulls some of the humor resulting from the jury's bias toward the fetching female plaintiff and results in occasional awkward word changes.

That said, G&S is pretty bulletproof, and the success of a production rests principally on the quality of the performances. VLOC's production is a mixed bag in this respect. **David Merrill, as the defendant, displays an excellent tenor voice, matched to a relaxed, easygoing acting style that fits his happy-go-lucky cad of a character like a glove.** As the plaintiff, soprano Courtney Kalbacker does a good self-absorbed drama queen diva.

The most problematic performance is by Blair Eig as the judge. No one expects actors playing G&S patter song characters to be fine, pure singers, but Eig's grating sound and pitch problems were distracting. In what is normally a baritone role, Denise Young sang competently (an octave up), but often seemed passive in portraying the plaintiff's counsel.

By contrast, Gary Sullivan, in the small role of the defendant's counsel, was consistently active and involved, reacting physically and facially to everything going on in the courtroom. His performance was a nice example of the fine art of playing without the ball. Monica Harwood and Alexa Kuhn, the plaintiff's attendants, wiggling in their tight dresses, were fun in their number introducing the plaintiff to her adoring fans.

Performed in the "Mountain" space at Mt. Vernon Place Methodist Church, this *Trial* used a realistic, somewhat scaled-down, contemporary courtroom set, flanked by a jury box on one side and a spectator gallery on the other. The set generally worked well, though at times actors had to squeeze somewhat awkwardly between the lawyers' chairs and the jury or gallery areas in the blocking. Consistent with the celebrity trial theme of the production, the blocking generally emphasized playing to the gallery, with the judge, attorneys, and litigants all competing for public attention.

Director's Note

A man would rather be trampled by elephants on fire than tell you he's just not that into you. We would rather lose an arm out a city bus window than tell you simply, "You're not the one." We are quite sure you will kill us or yourself or both?ore even worse, cry and yell at us. –Greg Behrendt, author of "He's Just Not That Into You"

Trial by Jury was penned by Gilbert and Sullivan early in their career, it was first produced in 1875 and was their first major hit. Audiences and critics alike loved this little gem and found the premise hilarious: The Plaintiff brings a suit against the Defendant for "breach of promise of marriage." While Victorian audiences appreciated the satire of the British legal system, the opera is also packed with themes surrounding loving and losing (and losing one's mind over loving and losing) that resonate with us today: the unrealistic, rose-tinted visions we can have early in relationship, the unrealistic expectations we sometimes have for our partners in love; the cynicism that can erupt when romance fails; the desire to get everyone on our side or get back at the lover who done us wrong...these are themes we see everywhere today, in pop psychology, books, movies, and increasingly in social media as we process our private hurts and anguish in public arenas.

With that in mind, we've taken this Victorian classic and moved the action to our present time, and have taken our inspiration from pop culture and current events. From the Victorian era to today, people remain fascinated with courtroom spectacle. We have countless courtroom reality shows, prime-time law dramas, and an endless cycle of news coverage for celebrity trials. Angelina, a famous movie star, sues Edwin, her ex, for standing her up at the altar. The Plaintiff demands justice from the courts against the lover who callously tossed her aside, and drives herself crazy

trying to understand why, why, why? Why would the Defendant would do this to her? The truth of the matter is, well ... he's just not that into her.

Cast

- The Learned Judge: Blair Eig
- The Plaintiff (Angelina): Courtney Kalbacker
- The Defendant (Edwin): David Merrill
- Counsel for the Plaintiff: Denise Young
- Usher: Bennett Umhau
- Plaintiff's Attendants: Monica Harwood, Alexa Kuhn
- Foreman of the Jury: Rand Huntzinger
- Solicitor for the Defendant: Gary Sullivan
- Jury: David Bradley, Peggy Dennis, Lena Goldweber, Tom Goode, Zachary Korn, Josh Milton, Julie Stevens
- Gallery: Noah Friedlander, Tuyet Gunter, Carla Rountree
- Press: Ralph Johnson, Carlton Maryott, Jane Maryott, Stevie Miller, Maria Wilson

Production Staff

- Producer: Denise Young
- Directors: Ali & Pete Oliver-Krueger
- Music Director: Joseph Sorge
- Assistant Music Director: Jenny Craley Bland
- Stage Manager: Ali & Pete Oliver-Krueger
- Costume Designer: Denise Young
- Lighting Designer: Dawson Smith
- Set Designer: Rebecca Meryerson
- Scenic Artist: Rebecca Meushaw
- Props: Carl & Jane Maryott
- Graphic Design: Erika White Abrams
- Publicity: Ed Vilade

Disclaimer: Capital Fringe provided one complimentary media ticket to ShowBizRadio for this review.

Tagged as: DC, Victorian Lyric Opera Company, Washington DC

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Bob Ashby is a 35-year veteran of the Washington area community theater scene.

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