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D.C. Arts Consortium turning Japanese

Gay arts group to produce updated, gay version of Gilbert & Sullivan's 'Mikado'

BRIAN MOYLAN
Friday, July 18, 2008

Sometimes it seems like there are as many gay and lesbian groups as there are colors in the rainbow. There are clubs for gay cowboys, gay car mechanics, lesbian bowlers and gay artists. And not only are there groups for gay artists, but each type of art has its own club. There are clubs for gay instrumentalists, lesbian singers and gay and lesbian painters.

Finally, in 2000, someone decided to unite all these organizations under one umbrella.

"The consortium grew out of an idea that the Lesbian & Gay Chorus of Washington had to coordinate more closely with other arts groups, so we had the first meeting and the Consortium grew out of that," says Jill Strachan, general manager of the LGCW, one of the founding members of the consortium.

Scott Barker, the musical director for the gay marching band the D.C. Different Drummers, thought from the beginning that an organization that would help promote gay and lesbian arts groups would benefit not only the individual groups and artists, but the city as a whole.

"I went to the first meeting of the Consortium and it was something that the band saw as a real benefit to the GLBT arts community here. I was thrilled when I heard it was happening," he says.

The Consortium now contains 14 organizations ranging from square dancing and visual arts to music groups and a theater production company. For the past two years, the group has run the Arts Corner at Capital Pride and held a remembrance of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Another one of the annual traditions that is arising out of the collective is Gilbert and Sullivan. For the past two years, members from the various organizations within the Consortium came together to put on a production of duo's "Iolanthe." For two weekends this summer, the GLBT Arts Consortium will be putting on a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's most popular opera "The Mikado" at the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop.

"I just wanted to do Gilbert and Sullivan," says Carol Wheeler, a singer with the Bread and Roses Feminist Singers, a member group of the Consortium, about her motives for joining the production. "It's fun and the more you do it, you realize it may be fluff, but it's really well-crafted fluff."

As well-crafted as it might be, Wheeler changed some of the lyrics of the libretto around to update the show. The Consortium's production is set in modern-day Washington and makes jokes about the people and politicians in the city rather than the Japanese characters in the musical.

"Being satire, it's always true. The names may change and the institutions may change, but people are still people and they still do the silly things they do," Wheeler says.

Barker, who also serves as the musical director for the "Mikado" says he likes the changes. "If people have seen it before, I think they'll be surprised and pleased with what we've done with the show. We've continued our tradition of creating a lavender version of the show, which not only appeals to our community but to Gilbert and Sullivan aficionados as well," he says.

As far as finding performers for the show, the groups of the Consortium had all they needed. The singers in the show come from Bread and Roses, the LGCW, the Gay Men's Chorus of Washington, and even the Different Drummers, who don't normally get a chance to sing. Members of the gay community who saw the audition notice also joined the show, even though they aren't affiliated with any of the Consortium's member groups.

Strachan is providing the stage direction and Alvin Mayes, a professional choreographer who sings with the LGCW, is setting up the dances. "I think [the people in the show] probably come more heavily from the music groups just because of the production. If we did something without music I think it would fall out differently," Strachan says, adding that people from other groups are helping out backstage and with sets and the like. "We have people from the Lambda Squares doing the lights," she says.

One of the things about a project like this is all the members of different groups get to try something different. Barker, for instance, is directing singers, something he doesn't get to do often with the Different Drummers.

"I look forward to doing it because it's a different type of artistic expression than just conducting instrumentalists. Having the benefit of lyrics is a different dimension to reach out to people in the audience," he says.

While Wheeler says she enjoys the chance to sing with a full orchestra for a change, being in the show gives her something to bring back to her work with Bread and Roses. "I think it has enhanced what we do. It gives us many more ways to network and find sources for things and information. We invited [the poetry group] mothertongue to be part of our performance last year, and that wouldn't have happened without the Consortium," she says.

Strachan is working with some of her own singers, but hopes that they will learn new skills in the show. "I think that people who are singing in this



Scott Barker, the musical director for D.C. Different Drummers, gets to try something a bit different when directing the vocalists in the GLBT Arts Consortium's production of the 'Mikado.' (Photo by James Brown)

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need different skills than the ones they need to sing in a chorus, and they'll take those skills back to the group. I think to work with different directors is always a great educational process."

The orchestra for the show is a joint effort between the Different Drummers, who are providing the wind section and the Pan-American Symphony Orchestra, an all-volunteer D.C. community orchestra, who are providing the string section.

"Not only has the 'Mikado' brought all the musicians from the member groups of the Consortium together but members from another group outside of it. I think that's the perfect expression of what the Consortium can do. It's building bridges between the communities and artistic groups in the city," Barker says.

MORE INFO

'Mikado'

July 31-August 2 and August 7-9 at 7:30 p.m.

Capitol Hill Arts Workshop

545 7th Street, SE

\$15

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