

Reviews

A Pirates worth its salt

THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE ★

Open Air Theatre, Regent's Park

Tom Sutcliffe

IS IT Gilbert or is it Sullivan, the treasure presented by the Pirates of Penzance? At Regent's Park Theatre in the open air the (amplified) words get closest attention. But, of course they are inseparable twins, G and S. It's tunes that you come out humming, even if Steven Edis's incredibly economical arrangement for this 1980 Joe Papp New York Central Park version is hard on Sullivan. It uses eight instrumentalists, two with versatile electronic keyboards, including the excellent musical director, Catherine Jayes — as in last year's memorably energetic staging by Ian Talbot, of which this version, with new sets and different costumes, is a close cousin. Singing may not be the whole point. But even in Victorian punning rhyming rap, the patter of tiny words benefits from firmer voices. Sullivan's sturdy thread deserves better.

It's wonderful theatrical gamesmanship. All the gently satirical elements are deliciously unfading: nursemaid Ruth's ludicrous mistake indenturing Fred as an apprentice pirate, his leap-year birthday, the revelation that the pirates are just peers who have gone wrong, a topical arrow scoring bull's-eye laughs. Mabel (Karen Evans) may sound a bit Minnie Mouse when she's at a high



High on the ocean wave: a robust ensemble includes Gary Wilmot, Joshua Dallas and Su Pollard

climax. But we shouldn't be too snooty about the singing, even if quality is vocally down a notch. Su Pollard's far from plain Ruth manages her numbers very nicely.

The ensemble is robust. Gary Wilmot's ultra-friendly Pirate King, all thumbs with a rapier except when he's into sword-swallowing, is more relaxed than David Alder's whisky, slightly uptight Major General. Joshua Dallas's engaging

grinning Fred has a ball, though his slavery to duty is more than a little tongue in cheek. When the Sergeant (Giles Taylor) thinks of strategic withdrawal but realises "It's too late now", his style evokes Kenneth Williams. There's nothing plodding about the arresting balletic footwork of constabulary duty in Penzance.

● Until 8 September. Box office: 020 7486 2431.

Ice maiden melts hearts

ON A recent webchat, Björk confessed to a desire to "perform in the most beautiful, intimate venues where I can sing without the use of a microphone". Premiering her Vespertine album at St John's, a 300-capacity church just off Millbank, the Icelandic singer skips elf-like down the aisles, yelping and whispering Unravel.

By the time she joins San Francisco sound-sculptors Matmos, harpist Zeena Parkins and a 14-strong choir from Greenland on stage, the audience is spellbound. And speechless. This may have something to do with the fluffy white swan dress she is wearing. Björk even has the

Ratings: ○ adequate, ★ good, ★★ very good, ★★★ outstanding, X poor

BJÖRK ★★★

St John's Smith Square

Pierre Perrone

long neck of the bird wrapped around her right shoulder. The late Rod Hull and Emu briefly and surreally spring to mind but this is the only time I step out of the singer's wondrous world.

A roadie places a transparent musical box on her lap for Frosti and we're all transfixed. Aurora follows, Björk doing hand-chops and drawing circles in the air while her beguiling voice rises and swoops, the choir sending shivers down the spine. Undo proves another highlight, the yearning line "I'm praying to be in a generous mood" taking on layers of meaning in this setting. The

singer's cradling, cuddling move in Cocoon proves as seductive as the music. She can even get away with performing only four of her hits: All is Full of Love, Possibly Maybe, Venus as a Boy and Human Behaviour, the last of three encores. And debuting It's in our Hands with the whole ensemble clapping the rhythmic pattern.

Arguably the only truly original talent to have emerged in the past 15 years, Björk operates outside the parameters of mainstream pop. The only current reference points seem to be Aphex Twin's slightly off-key frequencies and distant echoes of trip-hop. Her alien sound draws you in, her impish sense of childlike wonder still palpable in spite of all her trials and tribulations. Goddess-like genius indeed.



Keeping them spellbound: Björk

Nothing that will bring the house down

NEVER before has the concept of the ideal home been more important to us. As society becomes increasingly atomised, so the theory goes, we shy away from the public and the local, and instead retreat into the womb-like comfort of our own homes. It would seem to be a perfect moment, then, for an exhibition that aimed to upset our preconceived notions of domesticity.

Unfortunately this show does nothing

of the sort. The 40 pieces on display, several supplied by big-name artists such as Richard Hamilton, Rachel Whiteread and Jeff Koons, generally attempt to shake up our concepts of homeliness by being "uncanny". That which is superficially familiar but on closer inspection is abnormal, is meant to disturb us far more than some object that is alien to our experience. Mona Hatoum's T42,

IDEAL HOME SHOW ○

Gimpel Fils

Nick Hackworth

consisting of two non-descript white saucers morphed together like Siamese twins, is an attractive work but fails to disturb any preconceptions whatsoever. Similarly, Jeff Koons's Ice Bucket, which is, uncannily enough, a stainless-steel ice bucket, fails to disguise its deeply conservative nature with a poorly applied veneer of witty irony. In our image-saturated age there are few images that can, by themselves, truly shock or disturb.

The best work on show is by less-established artists and the most impressive is Callum Morton's White Light White Sleep. A simple life-sized bed is fixed above head height to the end gallery wall. Partially visible on

the bed is a sleeping figure, hidden underneath an institutional grey blanket, that rustles from side to side and occasionally groans. After a minute's silence, just when you're looking at another piece of art, the groans return, which not only serves to create a creepy atmosphere but also saves you the bother of having to groan at the other artwork yourself.

There are artists who have produced work that genuinely challenges our notions of domesticity. Kurt Schwitters, who during the Twenties and Thirties turned his house in Hanover into a sinister labyrinth, would be one. Gregor Schneider, whose work people had to crawl through to enter the recent Apocalypse exhibition at the Royal Academy, would be another. Uncannily enough however, work of that type would be harder to sell.

● Until 8 September. Gimpel Fils, 30 Davies Street, W1 (020 7493 2488).



Discomfort zone: misshapen chair by Nina Saunders



Watery refuge

PROM 51 ★

PROM 52 ★

Royal Albert Hall

Rick Jones

THE host orchestra's shivering strings plunged straight into a moment of panic in Schoenberg's Accompaniment to an (imaginary) film scene Op34 in yesterday's early concert. It is a pity no film was ever made. Audiences take to squeaky gate music more readily if they have a squeaky gate to look at. The hall might have been full. The refugee Schoenberg did not even try to make it in Hollywood where film was flattered by anodyne, undemanding scores. The aural always compromises in favour of the visual. Music is quite descriptive enough without pictures or interpretive lighting displays, as Tuesday night's colouring-in Prom showed.

The refugee Bartók's only opera, Duke Bluebeard's Castle, stood alone as absolute music last night. Bass László Polgár resonated from terrifying hollow depths. Mezzo Michelle DeYoung sang with irresistible directness if too little volume.

Pierre Boulez conducted, drawing out of his own Le visage nuptial sounds of such mystic, watery dissonance as to gloriously drown the listener. The women of the BBC Singers chanted like primordial earth mothers while the soloists Françoise Pollet and Katharina Kammerloher sang poetry of true obscurity by René Char. What exactly is "multivalved, granite dissidence"?

The late concert contained comprehensible verse. Tenor Ian Bostridge plaintively sang settings of Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Tennyson and Shakespeare in Britten's Nocturne and by Peele and Knevet in Finzi's Farewell to Arms. The Britten Sinfonia under Nicholas Cleobury proved it is an orchestra not only of soloists but also of powerful, weeping strings in Finzi's Romance. Works by Constant Lambert began and ended the concert. Philip Fowke played his Piano Concerto with joyful vigour. Everyone on the bill was an exile: Britten briefly to the States, Finzi as a Jew and Lambert as an Australian (of all things) to Britain. As these well-themed Proms have shown, there are benefits in allowing asylum-seekers to find it.

● Tonight Herbert Blomstedt conducts the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra in Mendelssohn's Midsummer Night's Dream, Haydn's Cello Concerto with Truls Mork and Dvorák's New World Symphony. Box office: 020 7589 8212.