

# Operetta 'H.M.S. Pinafore' sets sail for Multnomah Village

By KC Cowan  
The Southwest Portland Post

If you've heard any songs by Gilbert and Sullivan at all, you will likely recognize the music that will soon fill the auditorium at the Multnomah Arts Center. "We Sail the Ocean Blue," or the commentary on politics, "When I was a Lad," and perhaps the best known song of all, "I'm Called Little Buttercup."

All of these and more will be sung in June when Light Opera of Portland performs "H.M.S. Pinafore or The Lass that Loved a Sailor."

Light Opera of Portland is the creation of Dennis Britten. He has a 60-year history of performing, from a national tour of the Broadway show, "My Fair Lady," to singing with the Lamplighters in San Francisco, the oldest resident Gilbert and Sullivan company in the country.

Britten came back to Portland to care for his aging parents and missed the theatre "family" he had known, so he decided to create his own.

Portland also didn't have a Gilbert and Sullivan company, and when Britten learned of the old opera house at the Alpenrose Dairy, it all came together. He launched the Dairyville Players in 2012.

"We began with condensed versions (of the plays)" he explained. "Only seven people. Then we moved with the shorter 'Trial by Jury' and 'Cox and Box' to complete shows, and then 'Ruddigore' was our first full-length show. It was such a huge success."

But the Alpenrose Opera House was only available in the summer. "It has no restrooms, it has no air conditioning, and we performed there in August, which is a problem," Britten said. "At the end of the production of 'The Mikado,' we were applauding the audience for sitting through the heat!"

"H.M.S. Pinafore" will play at Multnomah Arts Center. Dairyville Players had already transplanted single performances from Alpenrose to MAC

for two fundraisers, but this will be the first time all six performances of a show will be held there. It may signal a shift from Alpenrose to the MAC and from summer-only shows to winter ones.

"Because we really want to show them we can have standing room only," said Britten. "We hope. And if that works, we will be partners from here on out."

Hence the name change from the Dairyville Players to Light Opera of Portland. Though small, the company has built a solid reputation for good performances, with talented singers, many of which are from the Oregon Chorale.

"What we are is unusual in community theatre," Britten said. "We're a little theatre, but we are a resident repertory company. Right now we only do Gilbert and Sullivan. And so much of the company stays with us."

The shows are also royalty-free, which helps the small-budgeted company. "H.M.S. Pinafore" is set aboard a ship and tells the story of the captain's daughter, Josephine, who is in love with a lower-class sailor.

Her father wants her to marry Sir Joseph Porter, the First Lord of the Admiralty. "H.M.S. Pinafore" debuted in 1878, but the humor is still relevant



Sir Joseph (Dennis Britten), Josephine (Lindsey Lefler) and Captain Corcoran (Ron Swingen) sing together in "H.M.S. Pinafore." (Photo courtesy Light Opera of Portland)

today, Britten said.

"Gilbert's humor is hysterically funny," he said. "Gilbert was the first absurdist. I've always said, this is absurdity done in complete sincerity and that makes it funny. It's still topical."

Unlike a recent Portland Opera performance of "Pinafore," where they added calypso, Elvis impersonators and even Verdi to "update it," Britten said he doesn't think that is necessary. The original is best, he said.

"We get comments like that all the time," he said. "People write on our Facebook page: 'I never knew this stuff was so funny.' And Gilbert captures

emotions beautifully. It still resonates."

Britten has stepped down from producing, directing and acting in his company's shows to just directing and acting. With new blood to help produce the shows, a possible new full-time home, and a new name, Britten said Light Opera of Portland plans to entertain audiences for many years to come.

"H.M.S. Pinafore" plays at the Multnomah Arts Center on June 17, 18, 24 and 25 at 7:00 p.m. and June 19 and 26 at 3:00 p.m. Suggested donation at the door is \$18 for adults, \$15 for seniors and \$10 for youth. For more information visit [www.lightoperaofportland.org](http://www.lightoperaofportland.org).



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