

# EDGAS: The Gondoliers OR The King of Barataria



'We must' says the **Duke of Plaza-Toro**, 'arrive at some sort of satisfactory arrangement or we will get *horribly complicated*.'



Too right we will, for in **Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Gondoliers***, a tale of identities lost, hidden, artificial – and goodness knows what else – almost no-one knows who anyone is, and just about everyone wants to be somewhere else. Luckily for us, in **EDGAS's** entertaining production the plot is only unravelled after plenty of comic scenes and brilliantly performed musical numbers.



*The Gondoliers* – Gilbert & Sullivan's twelfth Savoy Opera – opens in Venice, where every *contadina* on the canalside is lusting after the handsome Giuseppe and Marco (**Geoff Lee** and **Michael McFarlane**, both in excellent voice). In a scene full of activity and humour (a banner draped over a cart bears the photo-shopped face of each beau in a heart-shaped border) the brothers find it so difficult to choose their paramours that they resort to doing so blindfold.



Even when they have lighted on Tessa (**Annabel Hamid**, whose lovely voice and outstanding acting talent are real finds for EDGAS) and Gianetta (**Anna Thomson**), women with whom they seem delighted – 'Just the very girl I wanted' – they are more than happy to swap if needs be. Does it really matter which one they marry? Probably not.




Life is not that simple, however – at least in a Savoy Opera it's not; no sooner have the happy couples departed for the church than a family arrives with a rather more complex agenda. The **Duke and Duchess of Plaza-Toro** (hilariously played by **Ian Lawson** and **Fiona Main**) come floating into view, having crossed the seas from Spain with their daughter **Casilda** (**Sarah Witty**, taking devotion to her art to a new level by performing just four weeks after giving birth – *and* managing to look as though she's had a good night's sleep...) and their drummer **Luiz** (the brilliant **Chris Cotter**, last seen as Lieutenant Joseph Cable in EDGAS's *South Pacific*, and now able to demonstrate his comic skills – every beat on his drum perfectly timed to annoy the Duke, every look speaking volumes – volumes of disdain).



Fiona Main plays the Duchess as a half-cut old trout, staggering off the gondola hip flask in hand, clearly needing liquid insulation from her irritating husband as much as the trials of the voyage – but they've had a stormy crossing and, as they promise in *From the sunny Spanish shore*, they will '*never never ever go to sea again*'. They're here to find the new **King of Barataria** (the old one having recently met a sticky end), to whom they married off their unsuspecting daughter at the age of 6 months. It's not a romantic mission – Plaza-Toro is in dire financial straits – so the Duke and Duchess are not best pleased to discover that no-one really knows the whereabouts of the royal baby – now a young man. Their daughter is slightly less interested; her heart belongs to another – must she resign herself to marrying the new king (whoever he is)?

It soon transpires that the **Grand Inquisitor** (Tom Paton's black-clad and rather creepy creation – 'so this is the little lady...naughty temper!') placed the infant prince with a

gondolier family (one with a son of its own) for his own safety at a time of political unrest. Unfortunately the  gondolier was a drinker who soon forgot which child was his and which the King's; needless to say, it's either Giuseppe or Marco (both now married, in a ceremony featuring Venetian masks – yet another concealment of identity, albeit symbolic), but Don Alhambra can't be certain until the child's foster mother can be brought to Venice to identify him. These days there'd be no time for foster mothers – the social services would be on the case before you'd downed your first *prosecco* – but this is 19th century Venice, and a fictional Venice at that, so Giuseppe and Marco set off to Barataria, determined to rule the place as a republic, sharing everything until the facts become clear. As the Duchess, now well into her cups, observes in *Try we life-long*, 'Life's a pudding full of plums'. She has been on the sauce all the way from Spain.



And here comes the next identity issue; is a king one person or can he be several, forming a single legal entity? And can a king afford to be all things to all people, mucking in and taking his turn to do the laundry? Can the monarchy really be 'remodelled on republican principles'? NO! says the Duke (a great performance by Ian Lawson, who has the preposterous affectations of minor aristocracy down to a fine art). NO! says the Grand Inquisitor in *There lived a king, as I've been told*; 'when everyone is somebody/then nobody's anybody.' And even the gondoliers begin to doubt their principles when they realise they're only going to get one tea between two... Meanwhile, in a sideways dig at the perceived absurdities of the new **Stock Company Act**, WS Gilbert has the Duke pronouncing himself a limited company to avoid his debts. Can a person really be 'applied for, registered and wound up'?



In the end, of course, everything turns out to everyone's

satisfaction – but not before a few more identity issues and twists of fate. If you don't know the plot, you'll have to try to get tickets to this excellent production – and if you do, you need to go anyway, not least to witness the fabulous *Dance a Cachucha* (in which **Emma McFarlane** – Liat in *South Pacific* – once again demonstrates her considerable acrobatic abilities) and EDGAS's new take on *To help unhappy commoners* ('based on a song by Gilbert & Sullivan, lyrics now updated'), featuring everything from *Downton* to FIFA.



*The Gondoliers* went down a storm when it opened at the Savoy Theatre in 1889, the *Illustrated London News* reporting that 'Mr Gilbert is himself again... and everyone is delighted.' That production ran for 554 performances, this one's only running for six; don't miss it.

*The Gondoliers* is at the **King's Theatre, Leven Street** at 7.30pm every night until 12th March, with a matinee performance at 2.30pm on Saturday; tickets are available from the Box Office on 0131 529 6000 or online. EDGAS's next show will be ***Me and My Girl*** at the **Church Hill Theatre** in October. All images of this production © Simon Boothroyd.

