




Archive

- Magazine Issues
- Conductors
- Performers
- Ensembles & Orchestras
- Instrumentalists
- Instruments
- Search
- Singers
- Voices
- Vocal Roles
- SACDs
- Reviewers
- Labels
- Feature Articles
- Composers & Works
- Collections
- Jazz
- Videos
- Bollywood & Beyond
- Book Reviews
- Want Lists
- Hall of Fame

Related Articles

- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Issue 33:6 July/Aug 2010](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Composers](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [David L. Kirk](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [SULLIVAN](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [MADISON SAVOYARDS](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Catherine Schweitzer](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Daniel Graupner](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Donovan Armbruster](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Governor Harris](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Jesse Simpson](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Jim Rowe](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Leigh Akin](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Madison Savoyards O & Ch](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Michael Alexander](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Ryan McEldowney](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Sarah Z. Johnson](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Cholmondely](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Dame Carruthers](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Elsie](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Fairfax](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Jack Point](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Leonard](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Meryll](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Phoebe](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [Wilfred](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)

DVD Review by David L. Kirk

 **SULLIVAN** *The Yeomen of the Guard* • Michael Alexander, cond; Jesse Simpson (*Cholmondely*); Ryan McEldowney (*Fairfax*); Governor Harris (*Meryll*); Jim Rowe (*Leonard*); Donovan Armbruster (*Jack Point*); Daniel Graupner (*Wilfred*); Catherine Schweitzer (*Elsie*); Sarah Z. Johnson (*Phoebe*); Leigh Akin (*Dame Carruthers*); Madison Savoyards O & Ch • MADISON SAVOYARDS 854441323 (DVD: 151:42) Live: Madison July 2009

There are two videos of *The Yeomen of the Guard*, and they are significantly different: a 1982 TV-studio recording and this 2009 live performance. The 1982 is part of George Walker's *Complete Gilbert and Sullivan* video anthology (hereinafter referred to as the Walker *Yeomen*), and the 2009 is the latest entry by the Madison Savoyards (the Madison *Yeomen*), a community theater group in Madison, Wisc., that performs one of the G&S canon each summer. The Walker *Yeomen* was filmed on a soundstage, the audio a combination of studio-recorded segments (lip-synched before the camera) and portions that were spoken/sung on the soundstage before the cameras. The Madison *Yeomen* was filmed during performances on July 24 and 25, 2009, before an audience.



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The Walker production used many sets, both interiors and

exteriors, and was filmed using several cameras. The Madison production has one exterior set and was filmed using one camera positioned in the balcony on the left (stage right) side of the house. The Walker *Yeomen* is cast with professional actors and opera singers; the Madison cast is amateurs, many of them quite accomplished with considerable experience and musical training. The Walker is subject to numerous cuts in both dialogue and six musical numbers; the Madison is uncut and includes songs for Wilfred (*A Jealous Torment*) and Meryll (*A Laughing Boy*) that were deleted by G&S. Both of these numbers can be found as bonus tracks on the New D'Oyly Carte recording (1992); Meryll's song is also included (in place) on the old D'Oyly Carte's 1979 recording.

The directorial approaches are also different. Walker director Anthony Besch approaches the opera with a straight face and emphasizes the Romantic/dramatic aspects of the work. Madison director Joan Brooks (with Terry Kiss Frank) leans toward musical comedy with dashes of slapstick, much comic and interpolated business. The Tower Warders do a kick-line, there is posturing that would be at home on the stage of Cap'n Andy's *Cotton Blossom*, some mugging, and a flirtatious Phoebe reminiscent of Ado Annie. The comic antics share the stage with the serious side of *Yeomen*, particularly the scenes that feature Elsie. The pacing of the Walker production is occasionally leaden; the Madison production veers in the opposite direction. Gilbert's humor is especially dry in *The Yeomen of the Guard*. The Gilbertian wit is brought to the fore in the Madison production more so than in the Walker. Hearing the laughter from the Madison audience enlivens the proceedings.

Some oddities in the Madison *Yeomen* include Dame Carruthers sporting an umbrella, and a white bridal gown that is readily available for Elsie's unplanned wedding to Fairfax. During the offstage wedding she acquires an extremely long train that was not part of her gown when she entered the Tower. There are two onstage executions via the chopping block during Carruthers' act I song. Miraculously both decapitated people emerge from the block intact and walk off stage. (John Bobbitt's surgeon must have been on hand.) There is an unplanned similarity between the two videos. In the Walker *Yeomen* there are close-ups of a crow inserted into the action, perhaps as a bit of unsuccessful symbolism. In Madison a real bird found its way into the auditorium and is seen flying above the audience.

Both productions are costumed in traditional terms evoking the 16th century. It is to be expected that the Walker production, with a larger budget and access to professional costume houses, would handsomely dress the cast; Madison's costumer,

Karen Brown-Larimore, did a remarkable job costuming the community-theater cast. As mentioned, the Walker *Yeomen* uses numerous sets. Are they all necessary? Probably not, as Gilbert only specified one locale, the Tower Green, but the various interiors and exteriors don't intrude on the action and provide some visual variety. There is no green in the Madison set. A massive scenery unit depicting the exterior of the Tower dominates the stage and provides the backdrop for the action. The stones, all painted gray with black highlights, are relieved by a portal (upstage center) at the top of a wide flight of stairs. Curtains are frequently drawn to hide the tower's interior; the portal is also fitted with a gate that descends. The somber set provides a suitable contrast to the colorful costumes.

The casting is more consistent in the Walker production. Madison, like most community theaters, offers a wider range of talent; some of the cast members are quite good. Catherine Schweitzer (Elsie), Ryan McEldowney (Col. Fairfax), Sarah Z. Johnson (Phoebe), Leigh Akin (Carruthers), and Governor Harris (Sgt. Meryll) were among the outstanding singers. Schweitzer and McEldowney have exceptional voices rarely heard in community-theater productions. If musical matters were of a high order in the Madison *Yeomen* (including the chorus and orchestra), there was considerable range of accomplishment with the acting, however. The Brits in the Walker production handle the dialogue more comfortably than the Americans in Madison.

An unusual casting choice by the Madison Savoyards was Daniel Graupner as Wilfred Shadbolt. Wilfred is usually depicted as an unattractive oaf—hence Phoebe's revulsion explained—and is sung by a baritone with dark hues to his voice. This describes Alfred Marks in the Walker *Yeomen*. Graupner's Wilfred was imminently likable, even charming, and his pleasant singing voice sounded distinctly tenor. He was one of the best actors in the piece, bested only by Donovan Armbruster's skillful Jack Point. Armbruster was last season's Ko Ko. He is a versatile performer who created a sympathetic jester with just the right hint of bitterness that fuels Jack Point's often trenchant wit. Joel Grey, the Jack Point in the Walker *Yeomen*, has not fared well in reviews, perhaps unfairly. His waiflike vulnerable characterization may not be the usual interpretation of the role, but it works for him.

There is some evidence that more of the Walker *Yeomen* was filmed than what made it onto video, but consumers must live with an abridged performance that lasts less than two hours—including commentary by Douglas Fairbanks Jr. The Madison *Yeomen* runs slightly over two and a half hours. The Walker *Yeomen* is full-screen and two-channel stereo; Madison's video is widescreen with 5.1 surround. It is available through their

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Related Articles

◀ First	Prev	<i>Issue 33:6 July/Aug 2010</i>	Next	Last ▶
◀ First	Prev	Composers	Next	Last ▶
◀ First	Prev	David L. Kirk	Next	Last ▶
◀ First	Prev	SULLIVAN	Next	Last ▶
		MADISON SAVOYARDS	Next	Last ▶
		Catherine Schweitzer	Next	Last ▶
		Daniel Graupner	Next	Last ▶
		Donovan Armbruster	Next	Last ▶
		Governor Harris	Next	Last ▶
		Jesse Simpson	Next	Last ▶
		Jim Rowe	Next	Last ▶
		Leigh Akin	Next	Last ▶
		Madison Savoyards O & Ch	Next	Last ▶
		Michael Alexander	Next	Last ▶
		Ryan McEldowney	Next	Last ▶
		Sarah Z. Johnson	Next	Last ▶
		<i>Cholmondely</i>	Next	Last ▶
		<i>Dame Carruthers</i>	Next	Last ▶
		<i>Elsie</i>	Next	Last ▶
		<i>Fairfax</i>	Next	Last ▶
		<i>Jack Point</i>	Next	Last ▶
		<i>Leonard</i>	Next	Last ▶
		<i>Meryll</i>	Next	Last ▶
		<i>Phoebe</i>	Next	Last ▶
		<i>Wilfred</i>	Next	Last ▶



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