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The Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Austin: Frederic blows out 38 candles (or should that be 152?)

By Barry Pineo

It isn't every year that the Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Austin gets to celebrate the birthday of Frederic, the duty-bound young hero of *The Pirates of Penzance*. That's because the lad was born on leap day, meaning he has a birthday only once every four years. It's a key plot point in the climax of the popular comic opera: Frederic, as a young boy, was mistakenly apprenticed to a band of pirates (he was supposed to be apprenticed to a pilot, but his nurse was hard of hearing), and now that he is 21 years old, he thinks he has fulfilled his terms of service. But since they actually specify that he be apprenticed to the pirates until his 21st *birthday*, he must remain a pirate until he's 84. For the Society, which has been staging productions of the English duo's 14 comic operas annually since 1976, the leap day conceit is also a terrific excuse to throw a birthday party for the character on Feb. 29 and, additionally, fuel some anticipation for the group's summer production of – can you guess? – *The Pirates of Penzance*.

But the gala and performance, to take place on the charming little Victorian stage in the Chateau Bellevue of the Austin Woman's Club, is actually about more than Frederic's birthday. "We're trying to tell the story of leap day," says Eva Laskaris, society board member and chair of the event, "of the whole tradition surrounding leap day, at least as far as English society was concerned at the time Gilbert and Sullivan were collaborating. For the English, leap day is a day to defy social custom, especially the custom that only a man can propose to a woman. Long ago, there was a proclamation that on leap day a woman was allowed to ask a man to marry her, and if he turned her down, he owed her a silk dress and a pair of gloves. So we built this program around leap day being a day to romantically defy tradition." The songs in the program will revolve around themes of men pursuing women, women pursuing men, ways to get a man, and ways to comfort yourself should you not manage to get your man. No fewer than 10 performers will lend their voices, including society favorites Frank Delvy, Janette Jones, Russell Gregory, and Rose Taylor, singing songs from *Penzance*, *The Mikado*, and *H.M.S. Pinafore*, as well as numbers from such decidedly non-G&S fare as *Camelot*, *My Fair Lady*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, and *Les Misérables*. The Society's musical director, Jeffrey Jones-Ragona, will assay a tune, as will Artistic Director Ralph MacPhail Jr., who also is scheduled to perform a magic show.

And, of course, Frederic will be in attendance – or, at least, a reasonable facsimile thereof – in the person of Holton Johnson, who played the character in the society's last production of *Penzance* in 2003. Says Frederic, er, Johnson: "I'm both happy to have all my friends there to celebrate with me and sad that yet another year has slipped by, even if it's only every four years. I'm doing pretty well for 152, or 38 if you go by my natal day."

Frederic's Birthday Party will be held Friday, Feb. 29, 7:30pm, in the Chateau Bellevue of the Austin Woman's Club, 708 San Antonio. For more information, call 494-TIXS or visit www.gilbertsullivan.org.

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