Highlights from Gilbert & Sullivan’s 

**Pirates of Penzance**

Behind the Scenes 
with Shelley Graham, dramaturg

Watching Highlights from Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Pirates of Penzance*, you may not realize just how many layers there were to the process. As dramaturg for this production, I’m happy to bring you along with me on a visual journey behind the scenes of this unique “livestreamed-filmed-choreographed-sung-lip-synced-on-stage-theatrical performance.”
Zoom Beginnings

Like all great group events and artistic endeavors in the era of Covid, we started our rehearsals and production meetings via Zoom. We met together virtually to talk over the style and approach for this piece, and it proved quite difficult at first in a virtual meeting space to envision a performance like this one. The production team had many long conversations about how to create a socially-distanced musical with full choreography, quality singing, and practical onstage blocking. Eventually, however, the performance started taking shape. Many early rehearsals also happened via Zoom, with actors joining from various spaces in the Harris Fine Arts Center, as well as from home computers, for dramaturgy and dialect workshops as well as learning blocking and choreography.
Production meetings via Zoom

Rehearsals with attendees throughout the HFAC, as well as from home

Choreographer Kori Wakamatsu teaches a dance sequence in person and via Zoom
Usually, rehearsals come before the performance, but in this case, the full audio portion of our final performance (including music and dialogue!) had to be recorded before we had done much rehearsing at all! And it had to be near-perfect, since actors would be lip-syncing to themselves during the filming a few months later!
Actors recording melody, harmony, and choral parts to pre-recorded tracks in the music studio.
Our music director, Korianne Orton Johnson working with a pod of four actors in the studio.
Audio Engineer Troy Sales at work in his studio
Choreography

Dancers worked to discover a variety of movement within confined sections of the stage, playing with height and exploring levels within their very small performance spaces.

When asked about the challenges of this process, Choreographer Kori Wakamatsu said, “The biggest challenges involve not being in the same room with other stakeholders to get a sense of how others are feeling and approaching the material...[I missed] some of the wonderful in-person collaboration moments.”

Wakamatsu took some creative approaches to overcome these challenges. Much of the choreography happened in collaboration with her students during what she called “creating in the moment.”

She also created side-by-side videos of rehearsal, using her phone to record one group of four dancers, and then another group of four dancers, and putting those videos side by side on a computer screen to imagine how they might eventually appear to the audience on stage.
A screenshot from one of Wakamatsu’s early side-by-side choreography videos.

The stage itself was a reminder that this was a unique production.
In choreography rehearsals, Wakamatsu and the cast members used video recordings to help them work within their “pie wedge” in the rehearsal space.
Blocking Rehearsals

Blocking is theatre terminology for the work that the directors and actors do to create the movement and pictures on the stage to tell the story. The process of blocking this show was especially challenging for the actors and director Tim Threlfall, because even though the stage itself is a good size, the available acting area for any one group of four actors was quite small. Thanks to an amazing stage manager and her equally amazing assistant, wedges of space were outlined on the floor with tape designating the playing space for each group of four actors and each scene.

“A unique challenge of this piece was trying to find movement, blocking, and choreography, in little slices of the stage, that would support the music and spoken dialogue that had already been recorded,” said director Tim Threlfall.
Threlfall worked with actors to find creative visual storytelling within the “pie wedges” onstage, seen here in tape outlines.
Filming

The filming for this production took place over two weekends. The cast members were given call times, in their groups of four, and assigned to separate green rooms throughout the building. They were called in, one group at a time, for performance. We filmed each chapter of the production with two cameras (one for wide shots and one for close-ups), usually two or three times with each separate group of actors. That means when the stage was divided into five pie wedges, we filmed the same scene 10-15 times on two different cameras! Our video editor, Nick Sales, then had the monumental task of cutting, selecting, and layering the video feeds together to create what you see in this performance.

There were always two cameras filming, one to take the wide shot of the entire stage and one for Sales to capture closeups on action, choreography, and solos.
Close-up shots were integral to being able to tell the story visually.
Stage manager Katie Arnold ran the pre-recorded vocal tracks during filming and let Sales know when important moments were coming up to catch on a close-up.
Look closely to see what happens when the actors can't quite stay inside their designated “pie wedge”!
Actors worked hard to bring characters to life, even when they were “responding” to someone who wasn’t actually with them on stage.