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## **Xavier University Presents: “The Pirates of Portsmouth” - A Modern Twist on Gilbert & Sullivan's Classic Masterpiece on April 18 & 19**

**New Orleans** – For 90 years, Xavier University of Louisiana’s resilient opera program has stood as a pillar against disparity in the arts. Established only nine years after the founding of the university it calls home, the program began in 1943 and was founded during a time when Jim Crow-related exclusion of African-descended communities from the arts was common. Since its inception, the Xavier opera program has significantly impacted New Orleans culture by producing fully staged grand operas with a full orchestra and an all-Black, majority-student cast for integrated audiences. Now, as Xavier prepares to celebrate 100 years of service, the Xavier Opera Workshop is proud to announce its spring production, “The Pirates of Portsmouth.” The comic opera will be presented fully staged on Thursday, April 18th and Friday, April 19th, at 7 p.m. in the university’s historic Administration Auditorium.

This production is an innovative adaptation of Gilbert and Sullivan’s famous work “The Pirates of Penzance,” relocating the original setting of the work from the late 19th century British coast to the post-World War II Tidewater region of Virginia. The premise has also been transformed to celebrate the history and legacies of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

“The essential spirit of wit, satirical reverence, and just plain fun from the original work remain the soul of our adaptation,” said **Dr. Sakinah Davis, director of the show and professor of voice at Xavier**. “Once audiences dig beneath the surface, I believe they will see how seamlessly the story transfers across place and time and serves to connect the opera with a wider range of communities.”

Instead of a “rollicking band of pirates” and a Major General-led family of orphan girls, Xavier’s production is about the life-changing encounter between students of two fictitious historically Black colleges: the rough-and-tumble Pirates football team of Portsmouth College (all-men) and the touring chorus and conductor from the illustrious Benman College (all-women). The story is centered on Frederic, an accidental recruit and star football player at Portsmouth, and his conflict between honoring his commitment to the Pirates and following his heart toward romance and a “respectable” future. The production works with the music and text of Gilbert and Sullivan to provide a comical window into the quest of mid-20th century HBCU students to achieve autonomy and success.

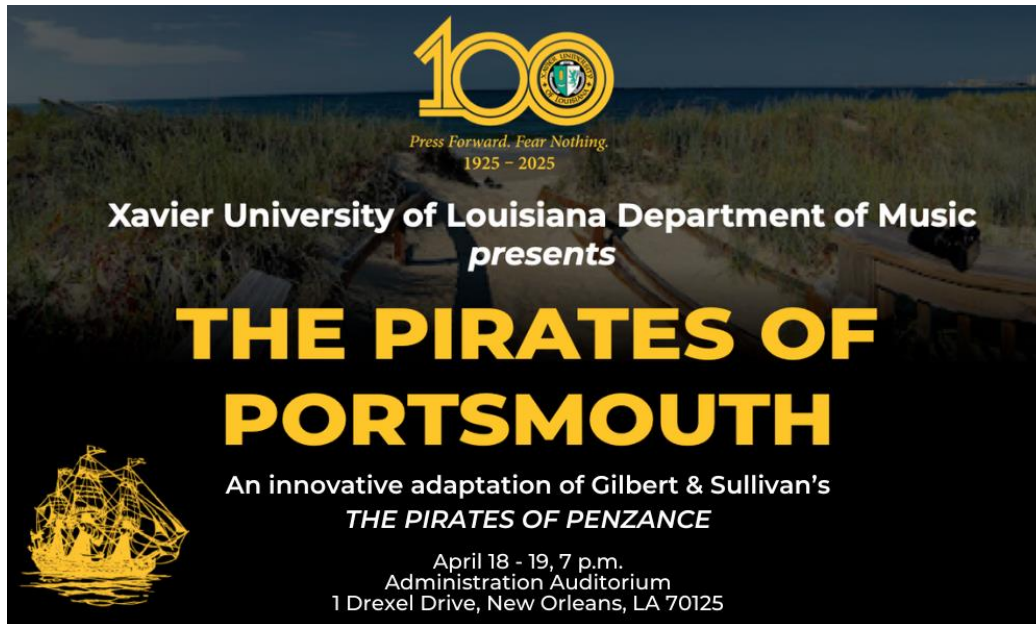
As the nation’s only historically Black and Catholic institution, Xavier University of Louisiana, since its founding by St. Katharine Drexel and her Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament (SBS) nearly 100 years ago, has acted as a patron of the arts and as a safe haven for performers of color who were, at the time, not allowed to perform in other venues. Sr. Mary Elise Sisson, SBS, founded the Xavier Opera Program in 1934, and just a year later, Xavier University earned the distinction of being the first historically Black university to produce full-scale opera productions. With its long history of educating and developing young musicians, Xavier is known worldwide for its leadership in music education and the performing arts.

The first fully staged opera production on Xavier’s campus since the COVID-19 pandemic, “The Pirates of Portsmouth” honors Xavier’s nine-decade legacy of opera by spreading more awareness about the talent

within the university's Department of Music and the program's significant contributions to opera in New Orleans and the world. The program has also produced multiple internationally known opera singers, including Xavier Department of Music alumnae Debria Brown, Annabelle Bernard, Lavergne Monette and Gail Gilmore. Xavier's opera program is one of the many examples of African-descendant operatic performance and composition throughout the history of New Orleans, the country's "first city of opera."

Xavier University of Louisiana's Opera Workshop production of "The Pirates of Portsmouth" is made possible through the support of the Xavier University of Louisiana College of Arts and Sciences and Department of Music, and through collaboration with the Xavier University of Louisiana Performance Studies Lab and Department of Art and Performance Studies.

For more information about tickets and the performances, contact Xavier's Department of Music at 504-520-7597.



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### **About Xavier University of Louisiana**

*On the cusp of celebrating its first 100 years of service, Xavier University of Louisiana remains America's only historically Black and Catholic University and is ranked among the top HBCUs (historically Black colleges and universities) in the nation. Recognized as a national leader in STEM and health sciences, Xavier has historically produced more African American students who graduate from medical schools each year than any other university in the United States. Additionally, Xavier's College of Pharmacy is among the country's top producers of African American pharmacists.*

*Established almost a century ago in 1925 by Saint Katharine Drexel and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament as a place for African Americans and Native Americans to receive a quality education, Xavier has since expanded its programs in nearly every industry, including the arts, sciences, business, education, pharmacy, and political science. More recent additions in STEM-based master's programs and undergraduate options in robotics, bioinformatics, engineering, data science, neuroscience, and genetics, have provided Xavier students (3,181 students) an unbeatable experience of traditional classroom study, hands-on research, service-learning opportunities, and life experiences. Xavier students collaborate with world-renowned faculty and experts in their fields to produce award-winning research and notable work. The winning Xavier formula provides students with a well-balanced curriculum and an environment that nurtures their intellect and feeds their souls, developing all who choose to learn at the institution into the next generation of leaders and agents of positive change. Blessed with a mission to promote a more just and humane society, Xavier is leading the way to a brighter future for all. For more information about Xavier University of Louisiana, visit [www.XULA.edu](http://www.XULA.edu) or contact the Marketing and Communications Department at (504) 520-5425 or [XULANews@XULA.edu](mailto:XULANews@XULA.edu).*