



The Gilbert & Sullivan Society Newsletter

Issue No. 54 – Spring 2018

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Presidential peripateticisms – “While this magnetic”

Readers will be happy to realise that these peripateticisms will be, for its author, markedly short, not because I've nothing to say – perish the thought! – but because so much has been, or will be, going on in our Society this year that I'd rather let that speak for itself. So, no theme this time, but only a few introductory words.



The sad news of the death of one of our founder (charter) members, Anita Duttweiler-Bilaney, led me to wonder how many of the original 36 are still members. The answer: exactly half! They are, in order of registration, Ann & Tom McClymont, Alison & Franz Metzger, Bryan Stone, Jacqueline & Bernard MacCabe, Barbara & David Laurie, Rachel Bunger, Christopher Bennett, Peter Hilton, Valerie Walder, Corinna Balfour, myself, Catherine & Urs Hengartner and, last but not least, Joanna Lonergan. Long may they continue to support the Society!

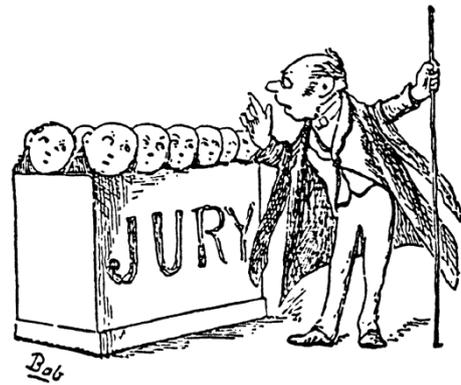
I shall return to membership and numbers thereof in the next Newsletter, scheduled for around the end/start of our financial year, where calls for renewal will be appropriate. However, the Board, as you'll see below, hopes to attract new members with its performances in June and September (more below), as well as – excuse the vulgarity – bums on seats! The higher our aspirations, the more opulent our events, the more costly they become and the greater the need to increase attendance, and, nota bene, the (wo)manpower, both on- as well as backstage.

As you've seen from the *Contents* above, there have been, since the last Newsletter, two workshops (!) and two events, all reviewed here, and, already planned and dates fixed for a further four. The *Spotlight* falls on Gaby Felix, the Board's Minutes taker (indeed, her husband, Felix (!) is also a vital member of the Society as our Auditor). By popular request (sic), I've included my recent talk, at least the first half (part 2 will follow in the next issue); this issue closes with a review of a recent performance of *Iolanthe*. What are you waiting for? Read on!

Board decisions – “That we will well and truly try”

This too can be kept short as both meetings were largely devoted to the forthcoming performances, together with final preparations or discussion for the two workshops in March, and my own talk in April.

A few words on these ‘performances’. First, as you have seen from the invitation you recently received, we are radically departing, at least for this year, from the ‘standard’ *Summer Apéro*. Although the Society will provide a glass of bubbly and nibbles when doors open, there will not be the ‘apéro riche’ of last year, and drinks will be available at the bar during the interval; in other words, this will be more like an evening at the opera! Consequently, as with the Society’s production of *Trial by Jury*, we are taking somewhat of a financial risk, but clearly less so now as then. Although we are hoping for ‘full houses’ – and I would call on all of you not only to support this initiative by coming along, but also to bring your “sisters, cousins and aunts” – we have to be prepared, and the Board has accepted, that these two events may make a deficit. If we do, but have awakened interest in the region in our Society, or, better still, recruited new members, then the Board feels that it will have accomplished its goal. Should we make a profit (or at least break even), so much the better. Finally, another reason for supporting this initiative is to honour the amount of work that has been or will be invested by, especially, the singers (more than usual!), coaches and organisers.



Forthcoming Society events – “Then no longer let us linger”



Saturday, 23rd June: Summer Spectacular!

The flyer notes the salient points and recipients of this newsletter have already been sent invitations.

As noted earlier, please tell – and bring – your families and friends to what we’re sure will be an evening not to be missed!

And, if you’re reading this as an e-document, you can register directly under:



The Gilbert & Sullivan Summer Spectacular!

Saturday 23 June 2018 - 7:30pm (doors 7:00pm)

Bask in a musical and theatrical presentation of the best-known G&S songs and dialogues, performed by the Society and friends!

Location: Silberbergsaal, Zum Lamm. Rebgasse 16, 4058 Basel

Tram: Claraplatz Parking: Rebgasse

Members CHF 30*/40; non-members CHF 40*/50; under 26 CHF 15*/20; under 13 free

Apéro and nibbles provided by the Society

*Early bird rates for tickets bought by 2 June

RSVP savoyardsbasel@gmail.com



The Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Basel www.savoyards.ch

<https://goo.gl/forms/HkheS6GovcEyEmZk2> or write to savoyardsbasel@gmail.com.

Saturday, 22nd September: September Showcase

In a sense, a *reprise* of the *Summer Spectacular* for those who couldn't make that – or want to hear more of the same. However, there will be new songs (including one from yours truly, which will hopefully not be a reason to give the evening a miss). More information before the summer break.

Thursday, 18th October: Society's AGM

As last year, in the "Kochische" in the Markthalle. Although the Board hopes that the evening will not be dry and boring, drinks and nibbles will be provided, and afterwards there's the chance to eat something in one of the many food stalls there. More information and formal invitations to members during the summer.

Friday, 7th December: Yule Apéro

The Silberbergsaal has already been booked and the format will again differ slightly (as we try to do each year): the theme will be "Carols through the ages" and will not be limited to English carols, or even the English language! Something for all: reserve the date!

**Review of recent Society events –
"Singing so merrily, 'Trial la law' "**



Burns Supper – 27th January 2018

"Burns and Song" was the appropriate title and, *nomen est omen*, theme of this, the fifth Burns Supper chosen by Ann and Tom McClymont. Alas, the Scottish superduo announced it would be the last that they would organise; fortunately for us they are still prepared to aid and guide, so Saturday, 25 January 2020 is already inked in for BS no. 6 (and you should do the same)!



And it was with a G&S song – what else? – that the evening opened (after a champagne (!) apéro): "How beautifully blue the sky" (Patrick Frei as Frederick and Ann, at very short notice, as Mabel) from *The Pirates of*



Penzance set the scene for Tom's short introduction, before launching into the supper proper, but not before Peter Hilton had said grace. Naturally, the haggis was traditionally piped in and traditionally addressed:



the Society was extremely fortunate to have Roger Vuille, the founder of the Pipes and Drums of Basel, as piper. The Address, given by Tom, was ‘translated’ into Baseldytsch (or Baseldütsch) by Felix Rudolf von Rohr, ex-President of the Basel *Grosser Rat* and for many years *Obmaa* of the Basel Fasnacht. It was he who has been largely responsible that the Fasnacht is now on the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Felix’ rendition of the Address rightly (almost) brought the house down!

The supper was, naturally, equally traditional and here it’s appropriate to mention Zaraz and his team. They have served us since the first Burns Supper; indeed, we were Zaraz’ first customers and the Society has never had cause to regret it. They do an excellent job and are always friendly; this year they helped us with the preparations and I do not think that we would have been able to cope and finish on time without this help. Applause, applause and our heartfelt thanks!!



After the supper and a break to replenish glasses, the traditional continued: Tom’s speech to the Immortal Memory and, by Felix, the Toast to the Lassies, with Johanna MacLeod Honegger replying. (At this point, thanks also to her husband Eric for manfully manning the bar.) Between these, we were treated to songs by the Ayrshire lassies Ann, Florence Hood and Barbara Laurie. After the second break and further replenishment – listening to so much culture is thirsty work – there were solos by Ann (two!) and Florence and a recitation by Philip Grubb. Before the evening ended with us singing “Auld Lang Syne”, I was given the pleasurable task to thank everyone – which I do again here, and include Sarah Ebner for directing our chorus and Tiffany Butt for being our ever-amicable pianist.



By common consent, this was the best Burns Supper to date, and Ann and Tom deserved all the applause they received as the curtain figuratively fell on a wonderful evening. [Thanks to Tracy Crevar Warren for the photographs; see later for more on her company, Hallo Foto.]



Dialogue workshop – 3rd March 2018

Despite the inclement weather in the days preceding, and a not very favourable forecast for the actual day itself, five hardy souls wended their way to the Pantokeller for a morning of induction into essential theatre skills, with an emphasis on dialogue delivery. As three of the original participants were unable to attend and, even numbers were required to perform the dialogues, G&S Society President Stephan Arthur, whom Barbara had asked to officiate as her assistant director for the course, bravely stepped in as an (unprepared but very game) sixth aspiring actor.

The participants had been sent four short dialogues, three of which we were required to learn in advance of the workshop (two from *The Gondoliers*, one from *Princess Ida* and a back-up text from *Utopia, Limited*) and we had been assigned roles. In preparation for learning our lines and embodying our assigned characters more convincingly we had to think, in advance, about the following four questions with regard to each character we were to play in each dialogue: ‘What do you want? What’s stopping you? What’s at stake? What can you DO to get what you want?’

At the start of the session Barbara asked each of us what we hoped to obtain from the course and what our main concerns were as regards acting. Among the concerns raised were conquering nerves, memorising text, diction and voice projection.

Then, after a brief warm-up we launched into the various texts, delivering the lines as we had first envisioned them, then playing with different emotions, some of which were ludicrous in the context of the text, and proved to be very comedic, but helped show the different possibilities of interpretation available. Initial concerns as to whether four hours might be too long and whether the morning might drag a little were quickly discarded, as the morning seemed to fly by and a good time was had by all.

Barbara guided us in a good-natured, patient and very competent manner. The workshop was well-structured, instructive and entertaining. We both learned and laughed a lot. As the only course member with experience of acting on stage and of attending acting workshops, I was able to repeat useful exercises I had learnt elsewhere and I also got some new, helpful tips as to how to channel pre-performance nerves.

I think we all came away thinking we would like to either repeat or build upon this experience. Therefore, I am sure the rest of the class would like to join me in thanking the G&S Society for taking a gamble on organising a non-singing workshop, particularly as the skills taught, including projection, enunciation and breath control are just as valid in a choral singing setting.

“The Joy of Singing Together”, a workshop for ‘learner singers’, Part 2 – 10th March 2018

While more established singers are preparing for an exciting new venture for the Gilbert & Sullivan Society, we continue our commitment to the advancement of less experienced singers, whether “just” for their own enjoyment, or, in addition, for the future benefit of the Society!

After the well-attended and very popular first workshop last November, 11 hopeful singers, 6 “graduates” from Part One and 5 newcomers, met on Saturday 10th March for Part Two, this time held in the Zinzendorfhaus in Leimenstrasse, an easily accessed and very central location. We had the use of the Comeniusstube, a well-lit room, opening onto a small courtyard. This room is well equipped for musical rehearsals and for workshops of this size.

Once again Nora Tiedcke used the “getting to know you” round to explore the musical sounds of everyone’s name, highlighting those sonorous consonants that blend into their surrounding vowels, and those plosive consonants that (briefly) interrupt the vowel flow.

Those who had attended last year’s workshop were asked what they remembered from then. This led to another exploratory round, learning how the body can breathe most comfortably and efficiently for singing. I think everyone will remember the image of Nike of Samothrace, with her outstretched wings, as well as the movements of bell-ringing!

After many other enjoyable and useful exercises, the participants revised (or learned) three of the canons that had been sung in November, and finally “graduated” to their first G&S chorus, well, to an extract of one, singing “Now pray, what is the cause of this remarkable hilarity?”, from *The Gondoliers*. A fun passage and at the same time an exercise in singing in thirds, followed by the singing of a whole-tone scale.

The morning ended appropriately with the singing of the Bye-Bye canon.

Altogether a most successful and enjoyable workshop, geared once again to the needs of the participants, who this time included three men, to the relief of last year’s sole male singer.

The Wit of Mr W. S. Gilbert – 13th April 2018

The superstitious amongst us may have had doubts about attending the G&S Evening in the Lohnhof, but our concerns were quickly put to rest. As the room filled up, it was clear that we had responded well to our Chairman Stephan Arthur’s enticing invitation to learn about W. S. Gilbert’s early days, how he met and teamed up with Arthur Sullivan, and the sources of the wit that runs through all the Savoy Operas.

Some of Gilbert’s wit, maybe caustic and disrespectful sometimes but unfailingly humorous, harked back to his early childhood. As a baby, not yet two, he was kidnapped by bandits while his parents were in Naples on a European journey. The hired maid handed the little boy over to a band of brigands, and his distraught parents handed over the princely sum of £25 for his safe return. One need only think of the plots of the hugely successful Savoy operas *The Pirates of Penzance* or *The Gondoliers* to see that his father’s initial investment of £25 made an enormous return of many tens of thousands of pounds for the grown-up Gilbert!

Before meeting and collaborating with Sullivan, Gilbert wrote and illustrated a regular series of witty poems for the magazine *Fun*, which he called “The Bab Ballads”, “Bab” having been his nickname as a baby. In writing the Bab Ballads, Gilbert developed his unique “topsy-turvy” style, where the humour was derived by setting up a ridiculous premise and working out its logical consequences, however absurd. The Ballads also reveal Gilbert’s cynical and satirical approach to humour. They became famous on their own, as well as being a source for plot elements, characters and songs that Gilbert would recycle in the operas.

Another fascinating story – especially for us in Switzerland – revolves around the chorus “Climbing over Rocky Mountains” in *The Pirates of Penzance*. This chorus may well have alluded to the craze for travel to the “rocky mountains” of Switzerland, first attempted in 1863 by the Junior United Alpine Club, the first group tour organised by Thomas Cook. This craze later developed into today’s package holiday business, where the name of Thomas Cook still features. These early adventurous days of Swiss travel are beautifully described in Diccon Bewes’ book *A Slow Train to Switzerland*.

Stephan led us through many examples of the wit of W. S. Gilbert with great knowledge, enthusiasm and humour, and was given resounding applause by an appreciative audience. It is a lesson to anyone who sings Sullivan’s timeless melodies that close attention to Gilbert’s text

will bring a greater understanding of the unique brilliance of this evergreen partnership. It might even revive the age-old question: “Which came first, the words or the music?”.

Finally, a very big “Thank You” is due to the Society, and to Stephan in particular, for a very enjoyable evening, which was naturally rounded off with an apéro, where we had the chance to meet friends old and new and share our thoughts on the wit of W. S. Gilbert!

Spotlight on ... Gaby Felix



Being born and raised in the Basel area, I didn't grow up with Gilbert and Sullivan like somebody born in the UK might have— my operetta fare was more *Der schwarze Hecht* or *Die Czardasfürstin*. It was Barbara Laurie who introduced me to the world of English operetta. I'm not sure about the exact date – it must have been shortly after the Gilbert & Sullivan Society in Basel had been founded. We met at the Professional Women's Group, both attending the PWG Women Entrepreneurs meetings. Her promotion of the Society's activities led to my and my husband's attending the events and enjoying them, and finally joining the Society. And then, in 2011, G&S offered the first workshop. I knew immediately I was going to participate. There were three rehearsals of about three hours each, plus a run-through before a small performance in the Pantokeller. That did it – I was hooked. I was amazed at what could be achieved in such a short time. And I loved standing in front of people and sing with a chorus. I had always enjoyed singing, but had somehow forgotten how much. I participated in a second workshop by G&S, took up vocal coaching and also became member of a choir.

In 2013, the Society put on *Trial by Jury*, and I was in it! It was a thoroughly enjoyable experience – not only the performances themselves, but also the rehearsals and workshops that led to the final product. It was a lot of work, but our musical coaches, Barbara and Lisa, managed to get the best out of every singer. And there was the comradeship, the jokes, the laughter – I particularly remember a weekend rehearsal, when our two producers, Sarah and William, surprised us with a beer and pizza lunch. I also enjoyed picking costumes, trying out hairdos, choosing props and accessories. The performances themselves left me wondering if there was a stage hog inside me wanting to get out....

Since then, I have attended several rehearsals and workshops and actively taken part in several events hosted by the Society. I have also been asked to join the Board of the Society and hope I can help the Society to grow and prosper. It seems only right to help sharing something I've grown to appreciate – Sullivan's tunes and Gilbert's lyrics – with others. And of course, there's still the dream of a real, full-blown G&S opera production at some future date. If we can interest more singers in our activities, this might be a step towards our ultimate goal.

Other items of interest

The Wit of Mr W. S. Gilbert (part 1), by Stephan Arthur (talk given on 13th April)

Prologue

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.

The last time I was asked to give a talk to this Society was at its 2012 AGM, where I was to be rather similar to the filler role initially played by *Trial by Jury* to Offenbach's *La Périchole* in 1875! In either case, within the space of three years, I was elected your President and, more

importantly, Gilbert and Sullivan were to embark on a voyage which would conquer the world in the *H.M.S. Pinafore* (*The Sorcerer* six months earlier had called up sufficient spirits to satisfy the backers). A further three years on, the Savoy Operas would be born with *Patience* – when it transferred from the Opera Comique – but not before the impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte had put on *The Pirates of Penzance* ... and I, after an equal length of time, have decided that it's time to bore you again!

But on which topic could I do so? I know little about theatrical production, so D'Oyly Carte is out; I'm not anywhere close to being a musician, so that puts paid to Sullivan; but I do possess, I think, a certain turn of phrase and can appreciate the wit of the English language, something which Gilbert had in abundance. So, *The Wit of Mr W. S. Gilbert* it'll be!

Before Gilbert's wit can be appreciated – and of course we are primarily concerned with his texts in the Savoy Operas – we need to understand a little of the English theatrical world in the second half of Queen Victoria's reign, as well as Gilbert's own background and pre-Collaboration years.

The English theatre in the 1860s

In 1662, Charles II granted letters for the first Theatre Royal in Drury Lane to be established, and, soon after, a second Theatre Royal in Covent Garden. A century later, in 1776, George III granted a summer patent for what would become the third Theatre Royal, this time in Haymarket. Others outside of London, including Bath, Bristol and Liverpool, were to follow. Theatres operating outside of the patents were technically illegal and subject to closure. The Licensing Act of 1737 – revoked only in 1968 – was, in part, to protect these patents, but also to suppress political or satirical attacks on the government as, for example, practised by Henry Fielding. All new plays were subject to the Lord Chamberlain's approval. However, the non-patented, unlicensed theatres were tolerated so long as they didn't overstep the political 'red line', and they enjoyed increasing popularity.

Basically, the patented theatres saw themselves as guardians of classical drama and tragedy, and opera, normally Italian. The minor theatres, now legitimised in the Theatres Act of 1843, turned to mime, circus and *burletta*, described by Barton Baker in 1889 as "comprehending opera, serious and comic, farce, pantomime, melodrama, burlesque, in fine, anything except tragedy and comedy; the one hard and fast rule being that a certain number of songs should be introduced". This phrase is noteworthy when considering the Savoy Operas.

Another development that was to greatly influence the London theatre especially in the 1850s was the increased mobility provided by omnibus, railway and, from 1863, underground services. The suburban middle class could now go to the theatre and get back home the same evening – London hotels fit for them were even then expensive! However, precisely the primitive nature of the theatres themselves was not likely to attract this potentially lucrative source of income: managerial changes were needed!

These were to be found in Elizabeth Vestris, known as Madame, and her second husband Charles Mathews. She secured the services of the playwright James Robinson Planché, and they were to work together for more than two decades. Planché's *burlettas* were, in the words of Donald Roy, "replete with word-play and puns, topical allusions to English life, and a prevailing mood of comic bathos that arises from the incongruity of such utterances in the mouths of gods and demi-gods" – such would equally apply to Gilbert. However, Planché placed more emphasis on what he termed artistic refinement to satirical sharpness, and this quality in the burlesque would be filled by others, notably Francis Cowley Burnand; remember the name; he'll crop up again.

So, the theatrical setting has been laid; it's now time to consider Gilbert the man, quasi Gilbert BS, before Sullivan.

Gilbert: the early years

To quote Gilbert:

Date of birth: 18th November 1836. Place of birth: 17 Southampton Street, Strand, in the house of my grandfather, who had known Dr Johnson, Garrick, Reynolds, and who was the last man in London, I believe, to wear Hessian boots and a pigtail. I was named William, after my father, and Schwenck after someone or other else, I suppose!

Schwenck was, in fact, his godmother's surname.

Gilbert, the eldest of four children – all of his siblings were girls – was born of distant and stern parents in reasonably comfortable circumstances. His father was a naval surgeon and the family were often abroad, sometimes for considerable lengths of time: the two older sisters were born in Milan and Boulogne respectively. It was when in Italy that Gilbert, aged two, was to experience something that he'd later put to good use in *The Pirates of Penzance* and *The Gondoliers*; but let Jessie Bond – the duo's mezzo-soprano soubrette from H.M.S. Pinafore on – tell the story herself in her autobiography of 1929 when she was almost 77:

When he [Gilbert] was only two years old his parents were travelling in Europe, making the Grand Tour of those days. While in Naples he was out walking with his nurse one day, when two men accosted her and said that the English gentleman had sent them for the baby. She surrendered the pretty child – Gilbert was remarkable for his infant beauty – perhaps believing the tale, but more likely she had no choice in the matter. The little boy was taken up into the mountains by his captors, he distinctly remembered riding on a horse in front of a man up a steep path cut in the hill; and years afterwards he recognized the Via Posilipo as the road which he had never forgotten. The distracted parents sent carabinieri to search for him; the brigands were tracked; and for a ransom of twenty-five pounds English money they gave up their little prisoner, none the worse for his adventure. In fact, he was probably much the better in the long run, when that extremely well-invested twenty-five pounds brought him in a golden harvest of plots concerning brigands, pirates, babies changed at nurse, and all the rest of it.

At school, he was “clever but lazy, good-looking but unpopular” and distinctly domineering. He became Head Boy at 16, distinguished himself for translating Greek and Latin verses, and wrote satirical verses, which did little to endear himself to his fellow pupils!

On leaving school, again in Gilbert's words, written to the magazine *The Theatre* in 1883:

When I was 19 years old, the Crimean War was at its height, and commissions in the Royal Artillery were thrown open to competitive examination. So I gave up all idea of Oxford, took my BA degree at the University of London, and read for the examination for direct commissions, which was to be held at Christmas, 1856. The limit of age was 20 and as, at the date of the examination, I should have been six weeks over that age, I applied for and obtained from Lord Panmure, the then Secretary of State for War, a dispensation for this excess and worked away with a will. But the war came to a rather abrupt and unexpected end and, no more officers being required, the examination was indefinitely postponed. Among the blessings of peace may be reckoned certain comedies, operas, farces and extravaganzas which, if the war had lasted another six weeks, would in all probability never had been written. I had no taste for a line regiment,

so I obtained, by competitive examination, an assistant clerkship in the Education Department of the Privy Council Office, in which ill-organised and ill-governed office I spent four uncomfortable years.

Uncomfortable or not, it did at least carry a salary of £120 a year (around four times the then average), allowing Gilbert to leave home and reside in a Pimlico boarding house, to visit the theatre and, according to Hesketh Pearson in his 1957 book *Gilbert: His Life and Strife*, “to flirt with the girls who took his fancy”. He also had both the time and energy to write, and so we come to his *Bab Ballads* and the magazine *Fun*.

The *Bab Ballads*

Gilbert himself explained how the *Ballads* came about:

In 1861 *Fun* was started, under the editorship of Mr. H. J. Byron. With much labour I turned out an article three-quarters of a column long, and sent it to the editor, together with a half-page drawing on wood. A day or two later the printer of the paper called upon me, with Mr Byron’s compliments, and staggered me with a request to contribute a column of ‘copy’ and a half-page drawing every week for the term of my natural life. I hardly knew how to treat the offer, for it seemed to me that into that short article I had poured all I knew. I was empty. I had exhausted myself: I didn’t know any more. However, the printer encouraged me (with Mr. Byron’s compliments), and I said I would try. I did try, and I found to my surprise that there *was* a little left, and enough indeed to enable me to contribute some hundreds of columns to the periodical throughout his editorship, and that of his successor, poor Tom Hood!

For ten years Gilbert wrote articles and poems for the weekly magazine *Fun*, and was also its drama critic. His first *known* contribution is a drawing titled ‘Some mistake here’ in the 26th October 1861 issue of *Fun*, just five weeks after the magazine’s founding by the actor, writer and playwright Henry James Byron. The earliest pieces that Gilbert himself considered worthy to be collected as *Bab Ballads* started to appear in 1865, and then much more steadily from 1866–69.

Although I’ll return to the *Ballads*, we need to leave them for a while and get back to Gilbert’s life, which was to enter a new phase, and which would again serve him well, indeed very much better than he could ever have expected.

“And I, my Lords, embody the Law.”

Once more, let Gilbert tell his story:

Coming unexpectedly into a capital sum of £300, I resolved to emancipate myself from the detestable thralldom of this baleful office; and on the happiest day of my life I sent in my resignation. With £100 I paid my call to the Bar (I had previously entered myself as a student at the Inner Temple), with another £100 I obtained access to a conveyancer’s chambers, and with the third £100 I furnished a set of chambers of my own, and began life afresh as a barrister-at-law.

Happy Gilbert may have been, but a success he was not. In his book *Foggerty’s Fairy and other tales*, published in 1890, there is the chapter “My Maiden Brief” which he claims is autobiographical. As defence counsel to a woman accused of pick-pocketing on an omnibus, he noted that the accused was a regular churchgoer, was on her way to a tea-and-prayer meeting, and that she carried a hymn-book in her pocket. Gilbert, in his cross-examination of the arresting policeman, continues:

‘You say you found the purse in her pocket, my man?’ ‘Yes, sir.’ ‘Did you find anything else?’ ‘Yes, sir.’ ‘What?’ ‘Two other purses, a watch with the bow broken, three handkerchiefs, two silver pencil-cases, and a hymn-book.’
(*Roars of laughter.*)

Not surprisingly, the woman is convicted, at which:

No sooner had the learned judge pronounced this sentence than the poor soul stooped down, and taking off a heavy boot, flung it at my head, as a reward for my eloquence on her behalf; accompanying the assault with a torrent of invective against my abilities as a counsel, and my line of defence. The language in which her oration was couched was perfectly shocking. The boot missed me, but hit a reporter on the head, and to this fact I am disposed to attribute the unfavourable light in which my speech for the defence was placed in two or three of the leading daily papers next morning.

During his four years at the Bar, Gilbert averaged only five clients a year – his total income therefrom can be imagined. He would earn more from *Trial by Jury*.

Courtship and marriage

Gilbert therefore had, once more, time on his hands, and, when called to the Bar in 1863, was 27, of marriageable age, but with little income, and the only regular income, £1 for each weekly contribution to *Fun*, insufficient to support a wife and family. However, in Annie Hall Thomas he found a kindred – and, importantly, financially independent – spirit. Ms Thomas was both unusual for her and of the Age: two years younger than Gilbert, she was to become one of the most prolific authors of romantic fiction during the Victorian era. She published her first novel at the age of 24, followed by a three-volume novel three months later, and three three-volume novels soon after. Many of her earliest novels were considered highly controversial and dealt with subjects such as the sexuality of young girls and illegitimate pregnancy. The publisher, William Tinsley, with whom she was closely associated, noted that Thomas was a “light-hearted girl, and a writer of bright, easy-reading fiction, of which she could write almost acres in a short time. But when she found time to write so much was often a puzzle to me, for she seemed always to be out and about. She was in a bright and merry set at the time, many of whom had ‘at homes’, dinner parties, dances, and merry meetings of different kinds, including some theatre-going.” It was presumably at one of these ‘theatre-goings’ that she met Gilbert, and there would have been no lack of conversation at their subsequent meetings. However, in spite of this – or perhaps because of the clash of strong-willed spirits – she refused his offer of marriage in 1866, marrying instead, a year later, the very different Reverend Pender Hodge Cudlip, bearing him six children.

Although Gilbert was known to ‘flirt with young girls’ right up to the end of his life – and were, in a sense, causal in his death – his marriage to Lucy Agnes Turner on 6th August 1867, to whom he referred as ‘Kitty’ or ‘Missus’, was harmonious and happy. Eleven years his junior, this was largely due, according to Hesketh Pearson, that “she never attempted to impose her will on his, but was clever enough to get what she wanted by making him wish it, first. She quickly realised that his habit of forming attachments to other young women and his admiration for pretty faces sprang from some deep need in his nature.” Furthermore, “it might be said that the master of the establishment released all his irritability in quarrels with actors, critics, managers and neighbours, and was peaceful at the fireside from sheer exhaustion.” The couple had no children, but kept a menagerie consisting of bullfinches, parrots, pigeons, cats, dogs, monkeys, ring-tailed lemurs and even a resident faun that became very attached to the pet donkey! All were treated as part of the family, with the cats and dogs dining with the couple, each with their own separate tablecloth on the floor.

Supplementing his income

Consequently, by the summer of 1867, Gilbert must have felt sufficiently capable of providing for both himself and a young wife who was, after all, the daughter of a captain in the Honourable East India Company Engineers, and who could soon be reasonably expected to provide him with children. In fact, in the four years that he had been at the Bar, he had been extremely busy, not only writing for *Fun*, but also as a drama critic for *The Illustrated Times*. It was as such that Gilbert reviewed the one-act comic opera, *Cox and Box*, with a libretto by Burnand – remember him? – and music by a certain Arthur Sullivan. The opera was heard for the first time with full orchestration (completed by Sullivan only a few hours before the first rehearsal) on 11th May 1867 at the Adelphi Theatre, and repeated a week later at the Royal Gallery for Illustration, to which we'll return a little later. Of that inaugural performance, Gilbert wrote:

Mr. Burnand's version of *Box and Cox* ... is capitally written, and Mr. Sullivan's music is charming throughout. The faults of the piece, as it stands, are twain. Firstly: Mr. Burnand should have operatized the *whole* farce, condensing it, at the same time, into the smallest compass, consistent with an intelligible reading of the plot. ... Secondly, Mr. Sullivan's music is, in many places, of too high a class for the grotesquely absurd plot to which it is wedded. It is very funny, here and there, and grand or graceful where it is not funny; but the grand and the graceful have, we think, too large a share of the honours to themselves.

Clearly, Gilbert felt that he could do better, but it would still be some years before that were to prove the case.

But Gilbert was otherwise busy: between 1863 and his marriage, he wrote a one-act comedietta (it is thought in collaboration with his father), two burlesques, a pantomime and two extravaganzas (a form of drama made popular by Planché, who we met earlier). The first of these latter, *Dulcamara, or the Little Duck with the Great Quack*, was Gilbert's first solo stage success and played at St. James's Theatre. Somewhat overwhelmed, Gilbert had forgotten to pre-arrange a fee. Asked, mid-run, by the manager, Ruth Herbert, how much he wanted, Gilbert suggested that "since the play was such a success, £30 would not be considered too great a price." Herbert promptly paid and then gave Gilbert the following advice: "Never sell so good a play as this for £30 again." Gilbert would not do so: less than five years later, and 19 days before *Thespis* was to open at the Gaiety Theatre, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, a 'three-act fairy comedy', would eventually earn Gilbert £40,000!

In the three years between his wedding and July 1870 – the date, as we shall see, is important – Gilbert wrote a further three one-act farces, a pantomime, three extravaganzas, a three-act comedy and two one-act musical entertainments. The last of these, *Ages Ago*, opened at the Royal Gallery for Illustration on 22nd November 1869, and the music composed was by Frederic Clay.

[As somewhat of an aside, but one which it is important to bear in mind, neither Gilbert nor Sullivan, even during their collaboration, worked together to the exclusion of everything else, nor did they work solely for D'Oyly Carte. Gilbert continued to write libretti for Clay until after *Trial by Jury*, while *TopsyTurveydom* is a one-act operetta with him as librettist and Alfred Cellier as composer; and Sullivan's librettists included Burnand (on another occasion), Grundy, Hood and Pinero. A further aside is that Burnand, although a popular and prodigious burlesque writer, was nevertheless intensely envious of his contemporary Gilbert and his success as a comic opera librettist. He was, in contrast to Gilbert, prodigious in another respect, fathering, with two wives (sisters!), 13 children.]

The Royal Gallery for Illustration was managed by Thomas and Priscilla German-Reed, a theatrical couple who specialized in brief, humorous musical sketches and impersonations

aimed at a ‘respectable’ middle- to upper-class audience. They were also interested in attracting young composers, including Clay, Cellier and ... Arthur Sullivan.

And so, probably in July 1870, Frederic Clay invited his good friend, Arthur Sullivan, to come along to watch a rehearsal of *Ages Ago* with Gilbert present. Under the watchful eyes of the impresario German-Reed, the two men met for the first time, and the meeting appears to have been cordial. So much so that German-Reed wrote to Sullivan soon after proposing he compose the music for a comic one-act entertainment written by Gilbert. Although nothing came of this, the two had met and history and their fortunes were to take their course.

The meaning of wit

Wit: there’s the general and the particular, there’s the crude and the subtle. In general terms, we know the phrases “To live by one’s wits” (not necessarily a complement), “To be at one’s wits end” or “To have your wits about you”. These suggest a native or natural wit, i.e. something with which you’re born, or at least something acquired. The particular is a form of humour, and can be ‘barbed’, i.e. sarcastic, political or at least opinionated. It can also be much milder, a play on words, resulting more in a mild chuckle than a downright guffaw. It can also disguise other, more poignant feelings. However, common to all is that the repartee must be quick and to the point; as Shakespeare remarked: “Better a witty fool than a foolish wit.” Gilbert was undoubtedly far closer to being the former than the latter.

It’s not all in the title

The titles of Gilbert’s early works tended to emulate the burlesques typical of the time, and were somewhat clumsy and blatant: we’ve already seen *Dulcamara, or the Little Duck with the Great Quack*; another was *The Merry Zingara; or, The Topsy Gipsy and the Pipsy Wipsy* and yet another, more excruciating, *Robert the Devil; or, The Nun, the Dun, and the Son of a Gun!* All were parodies of operas by, respectively, Donizetti, Balfe and Meyerbeer. Burnand, who wrote the libretto for *Cox and Box* – in actual fact, the libretto was not original, but his adaptation of the popular farce *Box and Cox* – had successes with *Guy Fawkes, or the Ugly Mug and the Couple of Spoons, Fowl (F-O-W-L) Play, or, A Story of Chicken Hazard* and, perhaps worst of all, *The Rise and Fall of Richard III, or, A New Front to an Old Dicky*.

What makes Savoy Operas different is that they were not parodies at all and their titles, or even their sub-titles, where they existed, were not intended to mislead a potential theatregoer in thinking such – with the possible exception of *Thespis, or, The Gods Grown Old*. But, once in the theatre, this became a very different matter, whether it be poking fun at the legal system and its judges (*Trial by Jury*), politics (*H.M.S. Pinafore, The Pirates of Penzance, Iolanthe*), the fashion of aestheticism (*Patience*), women’s education and liberation (*Princess Ida*), the Japanese craze, but, in actual fact, a further attack on English customs and institutions (*The Mikado*), royalty – after a fashion – (*The Gondoliers*), or all of them at once (*Utopia, Limited*). No wonder the public loved them.

But Gilbert also had his foibles which made Sullivan cringe on more than one occasion. One of these was everything and anything magical. This was to be the core theme of *The Sorcerer* to which Sullivan – early days – acquiesced. But he drew the line of a fantastic lozenge with magical properties which Gilbert suggested as a theme after *Ruddigore*: not only did Gilbert back down graciously (unusual for him), but their next work, *The Yeomen of the Guard*, was to be, in Gilbert’s words, “a step in the direction of serious opera”; one wonders whether he really approved of that direction. The odd man out, in almost every respect, *The Grand Duke*, was the duo’s last joint venture and the plot, such as it is, seems to revolve around sausage rolls. *The Musical Standard* wrote, in its review, “we may be pardoned if we call *The Grand Duke* a ghost of a Gilbert and Sullivan opera.”

Let me consider the Savoy Operas, even those which were not, as such, such, in their order of first appearance.

Thespis; or The Gods Grown Old: Although only one song survives – no vocal score was ever published – “Climbing over rocky mountains” which also appeared in *The Pirates of Penzance*, we do have the libretto: let’s take a look at some of it.

On seeing mortals climbing to the summit of Mount Olympus:

*Goodness gracious
How audacious
Earth is spacious
Why come here?
Our impeding
Their proceeding
Were good breeding
That is clear.*

And:

*What fools to give themselves so much exertion?
A government survey I'll make assertion.
Perhaps the Alpine clubs their diversion.
They seem to be more like a “Cook’s” excursion.*

The first, the chorus: simple, concise and clever; the second: likely to raise a smile and, at the same time, record the burgeoning interest and availability of The Grand Tour for the middle classes to, largely, Switzerland, aided, to a great extent, by the expanding railway systems in Europe.

A touch of cynicism wanted? The following from a couple, the woman first, nota bene on their wedding day!

*Daphne would flirt with anybody.
Anybody would flirt with Daphne. She is quite as pretty as you and has twice
as much back-hair.
She has twice as much money, which may account for it.
At all events, she has appreciation. She likes good looks.
We all like what we haven't got.
She keeps her eyes open.
Yes – one of them.
Which one?
The one she doesn't wink with.*

And finally, advance notice on what was to come in the political line:

*A premier in Downing Street forming a cabinet,
Couldn't find people less fit for their work.*

Although later considered by Gilbert a failure, it ran for 63 performances, outliving many of the Christmas productions of that year. *The Times*, one of several newspapers reviewing this new *opera bouffe* the day after the premiere, had, inter alia, this to say of it:

The dialogue throughout is superior in ability and point to that with which ordinary burlesque and extravaganzas have familiarized us; so much so, in fact, that it was a daring experiment to produce such a piece on such a night. It met, however, with an excellent reception, and on any other occasion than Boxing-

night the numerous merits of the piece cannot fail to secure for it in public estimation a high place among the novelties of the season. The opera, for which the merit of entire originality is claimed, has been written by Mr. W. S. Gilbert, and the music composed by Mr. Arthur Sullivan. In honour of the occasion, Mr. Sullivan conducted the orchestra in person, and was warmly applauded on taking his seat for that purpose.

The review is of interest as it notes, from the start, the not inconsiderable, perhaps major, part played by Gilbert. Indeed, *The Daily News* starts its review with: “*Thespis; or, the Gods Grown Old* is the title of the new burlesque provided by Mr. W.S. Gilbert for this theatre.”

But let’s leave *Thespis* and the critics.

Trial by Jury: As most of you know the songs in this 40-minute piece – unique in the Savoy Operas as it’s the only one in one act and there is no spoken dialogue – I will read you some of a piece of the same name submitted by Gilbert and published in the magazine *Fun* on 11th April 1868, seven years prior to the G&S version, and intended even then by Gilbert as a *Dramatic cantata*. He was paid £1 5s 6d for the text and £1 5s for the illustrations, i.e. 2½ guineas in all; the operatic version would earn him somewhat more! So, to parts of the *Fun* piece: I suspect that some of it will sound familiar.

*Hark! The hour of ten is sounding,
Hearts with anxious hopes are bounding,
Halls of Justice crowds surrounding,
Breathing hope and fear –
For to-day in this arena
Summoned by a stern subpoena
EDWIN sued by ANGELINA,
Shortly will appear!*

[...]

*Silence in court, and all attention lend!
Behold the Judge! In due submission bend.*

[...]

*Picture, then, my client naming
And insisting on the day,
Picture him excuses framing,
Going from her far away,
Doubly criminal to do so
For the maid had bought her trousseau!*

[...]

*In the course of my career
As a Judex, sitting here,
Never, never, I declare,
Have I seen a maid so fair!*

Ah! Sly dog!

*See her sinking on her knees
In the Court of Common Pleas –
Place your briefs upon the shelf
I will marry her myself!*

[...]

*Trial la law! Trial la law!
Singing so merrily, Trial la law!*

Gilbert, always the perfectionist as we'll see when we come to *H.M.S. Pinafore*, was able to well employ both here and in *Trial by Jury* his knowledge of the Bar, and its accuracy only served to underpin the buffoonery – someone with less or little knowledge would have undermined that. But on to Gilbert's lozenge.

End of Part 1: there will now be a short intermission ... of around two months ...

A review of the English National Opera's latest production of *Iolanthe* – “The Oldie”, Spring 2018

It's said that, in the heyday of the 'Dear Bill' letters in *Private Eye*, a suspicion arose that there was a mole inside No 10. Such was the accuracy of the accounts of some of the more bizarre goings-on within government that the fictional Denis Thatcher was relaying to his old quaffing partner Bill Deedes.

There was no mole, of course. Just John Wells and Richard Ingrams thinking the unthinkable. It was much the same with W S Gilbert, whose theatrical masterpiece *Iolanthe* has just received a superlative new production from English National Opera.

At one level, Gilbert's keen-witted, though not unaffectionate, lampooning of Parliament, the hereditary system and the law he once served is the stuff of classic comedy. At another level, the one activated by Gilbert's love of the inside- out, upside-down world of topsy-turvy, the comedy turns surreal.

That said, at a time when sexual identity, environmentalism and a dozen other contemporary shibboleths threaten to give us the kind of nightmares the Lord Chancellor experiences in that greatest of all Gilbert's patter songs, it's possible to think *Iolanthe* is not so surreal after all.

One recalls Strephon, the lovelorn swain, who's a fairy down to his waist and a chap thereunder: an idea *Punch* thought 'not quite pleasant'. Or Strephon's assertion that birds, trees and thunderclouds have 'rights'. The Lord Chancellor declares Strephon's evidence inadmissible but adds that 'a few words on oath from a heavy shower' would certainly receive the attention they deserve.

'Gilbert sketched a new piece. Ld Chancellor, Peers, fairies, &c – funny, but at present vague,' noted Sullivan in his diary in October 1881. What came of that germ of an idea, after thirteen months of heavy lifting by his famously industrious librettist, is a piece that emerges, Houdini-like, from the toils of its own complexity to provide a tale of fairies and ermined lords that any four-year-old can wonder at and understand.

Not the least of the joys of Cal McCrystal's new production is that – the odd visual gag aside – there's no attempt to update the piece. Why offer updates when Gilbert's script needs so few?

There are no updates either in the designs of the late Paul Brown, who manages to recreate Gilbert's scrupulously documented *mises en scène* in magical new ways (Arcadia after the manner of Samuel Palmer, for instance). As Brown said, why put your cast before some futuristic titanium ball when no one knows where they're meant to be? Or embrace Victorian pantomime when the medium is alien to Gilbert's style?

There is pantomime in this production, as you might expect from the director of the

National Theatre’s comic hit *One Man, Two Guvvners*. But it’s principally confined to the Lord Chancellor’s gormless, lamppost-thin page (Richard Leeming). He, quite literally, becomes the show’s fall guy in the sportive Act Two Trio (‘Nothing venture, nothing win’) for the three lovesick peers.

Directors need to invent. I well remember Frank Hauser’s 1962 production of *Iolanthe*, the work with which Sadler’s Wells celebrated the moment when the operettas finally emerged from behind the Berlin Wall of D’Oyly Carte’s eighty-year monopoly.

We’ve learned since how, in the right hands, the best G&S is more than a match for the finest continental operetta.

Much of this is down to Sullivan’s music. For me, he is the English Mendelssohn, and *Iolanthe* is his greatest score, be it some of the most exquisite of all English music in the pastoral vein or the imperial bluster of the peer’s arrival – a moment Brown and McCrystal greet with a visual *coup de théâtre* it would require a spoiler alert to reveal. Only Elgar had so complete a feel for these two contrasting idioms.

And just as Gilbert can combine parody and affection in a single gesture, so Sullivan, as he nears the work’s potentially devastating end, writes music that both pokes fun at Wagner and draws on elements of the old wizard’s genius that can move an audience to tears.

The ENO cast has no weaknesses. Yvonne Howard’s Fairy Queen, a miniature Brünnhilde, fully commands the stage. So does Samantha Price’s Iolanthe, holding a packed Coliseum spellbound during her moving plea to the Lord Chancellor – music Sullivan wrote in the wake of the death of his own beloved mother. Here conductor Timothy Henty adds fresh laurels to his crown by giving the ballad the breathing space it so richly deserves.



There is some fine choral work; not least from the peerage whose ‘period’ pronunciation ‘Baoh, baoh, ye lower middle classes’ (a usage still extant on Eton High Street) is typical of the attention to detail that’s gone into the making of this superb production.

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