

## WORDS AND MUSIC

I was in London a few years ago and while strolling on the Thames embankment below the Strand I noticed a handsome portrait plaque on a bridge pillar and in bold letters: *His foe was folly, his weapon wit*. It was the monument to William Shwenck Gilbert with dates: 1836-1911.

Suddenly I could hear my father in my memory singing in the shower as he often did in his baritone voice: *I am a pirate king, I am a pirate king. And it is, it is a glorious thing to be a pirate king*, that proud song from the *Pirates of Penzance*, the wildly successful comic opera Gilbert and his partner Arthur Sullivan, wrote in 1880. Not far away on a neatly manicured lawn on a Victorian marble pedestal replete with a mourning bronze muse her harp at her feet, stood the noble bust of Sir Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900). It was close, but not too close to Gilbert.

Who were these guys whose words and music my father had memorized? My father was born in New York the year Sullivan died in London. He loved the tricky lyrics and very singable melodies that characterized their work and of course, he was not alone. Generations have past but the attraction to the work by these uneasy 19<sup>th</sup> Century collaborators: W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan persists. I will try to explain.

Gilbert and Sullivan each had fairly successful careers before they first collaborated to become the most successful musical team the world has ever seen. Gilbert, the poet and Sullivan, the musician were introduced to each other by accident after collaborating with others in not too successful ventures. Their first effort: *Thespis or the Gods grown Old*, 1871, ran only two months, 64 performances but it was good enough to launch their remarkable careers together. Today we think of Rogers and Hart, Rogers and Hammerstein, or Lerner and Lowe but they were nothing to Gilbert and Sullivan. Between 1871 and 1896 they wrote a total 14 comic operas. One, the Mikado, 1885, remains so popular that it is thought at any moment to be in production somewhere in the world. At one point soon after opening in New York, the official production of *The Pirates* was itself pirated with no less than three unauthorized versions going on at the same time. Through the production genius of Richard D'Oyly Carte, Gilbert and Sullivan became fabulously successful and wealthy. It was in partnership with D'Oyly Carte that they opened their own modern theater lights to stage their productions. It was the Savoy off the Strand, the first in London to have electric lights which made

following Gilbert's lyrics much easier by the audience. Gilbert and Sullivan fans still call themselves *Savoyards*. The D'Oyly Carte Opera Company continued producing the various G & S operas in London and on the road until soon after the death of the impresario's granddaughter just a few years ago. The D'Oyly Carte Opera company is no more. The venerable Savoy Theater has burned down but the plays of Gilbert and Sullivan live on. San Francisco has its own G & S resident repertory company which is celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this season. Such companies exist in other cities as well. There are at least thirty Gilbert and Sullivan web sites. The *Mikado* has been made into at least two films and is commonly produced in Japan! There have been several books and two full-length movies made about the two men and their careers. *Topsy-Turvey*, the most recent, gave a wonderful picture of the theater in Victorian England and vivid portraits of the two men. Pretentious and self important public officials continue to be called *Pooh Bahs*, Gilbert's name for the character in the *Mikado*. Chief Justice Renquist put on his Savoyard chancellor's robe from his role in *Iolanthe*, for his Chief Justice role in the Clinton impeachment. While everyone recognizes Sullivan's melody *Hail, hail, the gang's all here*, from the *Pirates*. In this paper I will attempt to explain the interest Gilbert & Sullivan have for me. I am sure there are many here who

are much more expert, and I hope they will fill many of the inevitable gaps.

Gilbert was the son of a well-to-do doctor. After attending London University he was employed as a clerk in the Office of the Privy Council, London. While there he began to submit satirical prose and verse to the magazine, *Fun*. He accompanied the verse with pen and ink sketches which he signed "Bab". These were collected and published initially in 1869 and a second volume appeared in 1872. These "Bab Balads" were successful and went into several printings. He wrote a one act burlesque in 1866 and after a three year hiatus following *Thespis*, he and Sullivan opened the very popular one-acter, *Trial by Jury*. The rest as they say is history. Performances of their plays went on for years. Original productions and revivals made the three partners very wealthy. Gilbert lived a comfortable conventional life of a proper Victorian gentleman who never let a suggestive or obscene word escape his pen or his mouth. His wit was acerbic but never bitter. Few institutions in Victorian society escaped his notice and satire.

Great Britain at this period was at the height of its imperial power.

However many of its institutions were in serious trouble. Poverty in the

Dickensian sense was rampant. The middle classes with tremendous newly acquired economic power had yet to achieve political power. The army which aside from minor skirmishes against Afghans and the like had not fought a war since Napoleon except against the Russians in 1855. In that little affair, corruption and incompetence nearly caused total English defeat. The Navy, commanded by admirals who owed their rank solely to family connections could not even hold maneuvers without losing ships and men through collisions and the like. Promotion in civil life was also rife with preferment and favoritism. All this produced grist for Gilbert's pen and his and Sullivan's productions permitted an acceptable way for the London audience to address some of the serious defects in Victorian England.

Let me quote some of Gilbert's lines in their context: the law: all thieves who could my fees afford depended on my orations and many burglar I've restored to his friends and his relations; the army: the modern major general who could not tell at sight a rifle from a javeline; the navy: the first lord of the admiralty whose most important qualification was to carefully polish the handle of his company's big front door; parliament: members had to leave their brains outside and vote only how their leaders told them to; the House of Lords: bright will shine Great Britain's rays as

long as noble statesmen do not itch to intrerfere in matters which they do not understand; socialism: when every one is somebody the no one's anybody; the police: when constabulary duty's to be done, a policeman's lot is not a happy one. Once heard, pompous march of the peers with cymbals and trumpets demanding: Bow! Bow, ye lower middle classes. Bow! Bow, ye tradesmen, bow ye masses; is something one never forgets. At the same time the cynical Gilbert was blatantly patriotic. His pirates meekly surrender merely at the mention of Queen Victoria's name and having the common seaman in *HMS Pinfore* resist all blandishments to remain an Englishman. For some reason the pair never focused in on doctors, to me an obvious target. Gilbert traveled little. He restricted his life to London and its environs. He was happily married and lived a long and active life.

Sullivan was of an entirely different stripe. Where Gilbert was large and imposing, Sullivan was short and slight.

Where Gilbert was sober and abstemious, Sullivan lived the high life spending much of his time in the season in Italy and Monte Carlo. He was the son of an Irish military bandmaster and was brought up entirely in music At eight he wrote his first anthem. He won the first Mendelssohn

Scholarship at fourteen. He wrote religious music with a fervor. *The Lost Chord*, was one of his more famous songs and his *Onward Christian Soldiers*, remains perhaps the most popular of all English hymns. Aside from his comic operas he wrote a grand opera and several major choral works which led him and his supporters to believe he was Britain's answer to the serious music of the German composers: Liszt, Brahms and Mendelssohn. He received many musical accolades and he was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1883. Sullivan had a schizoid personality: musical genius versus society darling, serious composer versus popular song writer. However, he never achieved the recognition he thought he deserved, blaming it on his involvement with the highly lucrative music of the stage. Although he considered his work with Gilbert trivial he is remembered now for little else. He traveled a great deal and spent a great deal of money, much time in the company of various ladies single and married. He never married himself. He died young at 58.

Because of their obvious personality differences and expectations, Gilbert and Sullivan never had more than a distant but politely cordial relationship. Gilbert would submit a script to Sullivan who would critique it, often in severe terms as being trite or unlikely. He would occasionally

flatly refuse to cooperate. Often with the intervention of D'Oyly Cart and his wife, Gilbert would do some rewriting or make some adjustment and then make up the song lyrics which Sullivan would put to music. One on one collaboration was minimal and each was extremely jealous of his own prerogatives. Gilbert often complained that his clever lyrics were being drowned out by the music. He was known to stand at the back of the theater at rehearsal insisting that the performers : "enunciate! enunciate!" . Gilbert's plots were often thought by Sullivan to be contrived, silly and repetitious. And as zany as the plots often were they were retrieved by the funny and clever verses. In any event the audiences loved them. Their least successful opera, their last in 1896 ran over 4 months. Gilbert had to await the accession of Victoria's son to achieve his knighthood. The old queen, it seemed, was not amused.

The story of the Gilbert and Sullivan partnership is not complete without a description of its breakup. The three equal sided arrangement with D'Oyly Cart as successful as it was for all involved, was like a three legged stool, non too stabile. Like a G & S opera it broke up over a triviality, a carpet. A new L10,000 carpet for the Savoy Theater was bought by Cart with Sullivan's agreement without first clearing it with Gilbert. Gilbert who

took offense at being left out of the decision in making what he considered an unwarranted and exorbitant expenditure, a serious breach of their partnership agreement. Nothing could make things right and the two never agreed to work together again. The corpus of their work has remained and though much of the humor was peculiarly topical the human foibles and subjects for satyr remain as universal today as when the plays were written. Gilbert's use of the language constantly amazes and intrigues each new generation that is exposed to it. Sullivan's music is as melodic and appropriate to the plots and as perfect accompaniment to the words as ever.

Gilbert and Sullivan remain an institution and Savoyards everywhere never tire attending the productions and listening to their recordings. They agree with the pirate king that my father so admired: *For what, we ask, is life without a touch of poetry in it?*