

GILBERT AND SULLIVAN

I guess the first time I heard of Gilbert and Sullivan was in junior high school. Our music teacher came up with the idea of putting on HMS Pinafore. Our class didn't have any strong feelings, one way or the other. We had been singing folk songs, and holiday songs the previous year, so learning songs from something called a comic opera seemed like fun. It would be a change from "Low bridge, everybody down..." and "We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing..."

I was designated a "listener" so I knew I would not get a solo part. I wouldn't be Sir Joseph Porter or Dick Deadeye. But I was permitted to sing in the chorus as a sailor, and I still know all the words to "We sail the ocean blue..." I don't remember which of my classmates had the male leads, but I distinctly remember that Normie Perlmutter played Little Buttercup, and I thought that it was real "macho" on his part to play a woman. Sol Rauch may have been the Captain because for many years afterward, Sol would sing "I am the Captain of the Pinafore..." and I would reply, "And a right good captain too..."

The class practiced, learned the edited dialogue, and all those great songs. Sir Joseph had the best songs in the play: "When I was a lad I served a term as office boy to an Attorney's firm..." And a couple more like that. I later found out that they were called "patter songs" and since they were more spoken than sung, I tried to memorize them. Every song had fantastic rhymes. We performed Pinafore for our junior high Assembly and everybody loved it. And I developed a love for Gilbert and Sullivan.

A few years later, in a "music appreciation" class in high school, one of my classmates suggested to the teacher that we listen to recordings of some of the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, as a break from the usual fare. To my surprise and delight, the teacher agreed. Recordings by the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company were played, and everybody had a wonderful time. I learned that there were many more operettas besides Pinafore, Pirates of Penzance and Mikado. I also learned that the operettas were broadcast every Saturday morning on WQXR. I was hooked.

I was 16, I didn't own a phonograph, but we had a radio, and Saturday morning did not interfere with my mother's radio listening. Week after week for the next five or six years, I would listen to the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company recordings, of ALL the G and S comic operas. When I entered CCNY and discovered "The Modern Library" editions in our college bookstore, I flipped. There was "The Complete Plays of Gilbert and Sullivan," and for \$1.95! And I still have it. Saturday mornings, I would open it to the operetta being broadcast, and follow along.

What I also learned was that there was a lot of dialogue in between the songs, which were not recorded. And when I read the dialogue, I finally understood the plots, and enjoyed the operettas even more. Gilbert was my kind of guy. He made fun of bureaucracy, the establishment, the 1%, like Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, George Carlin, and Lennie Bruce. Gilbert and Sullivan pioneered musical comedies which led to Rogers and

Hammerstein, George and Ira Gershwin, and the songs of Tom Lehrer, and Alan Sherman. And of course, Sylvia Fine, who wrote all those patter songs for Danny Kaye.

In 1949, I had bought my mother a wire recorder. She wanted it for the same reason I am writing this stuff—to record her memories, her thoughts. When my mother wasn't looking, I took her wire recorder to record G and S off WQXR. She was outraged. That was not what her wire recorder was for. A couple years later, I invested in a hi-fi set and bought my own G and S LP recordings. The first album I bought was *Pirates of Penzance* with my new hero, Martyn Green, as the major general. Over the years, I acquired several more. When we moved to the condo in which we are now living, I got rid of several hundred records. I kept all of my G and S albums, and I play them from time to time. Time for me to get them on CD.

Early on, I began to read about William S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, and their producer, Richard D'Oyly Carte, who created the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, and built the Savoy Theatre for them. After Richard died, his son Rupert took over, and then Rupert's daughter Bridget, whose name is on the cover of most of my albums. The Company must have been aware of what a fan I had become. They came to New York in the late '40s and a few members of the Company appeared at CCNY. I saved the clipping from our college newspaper, which I placed inside my book. They returned to Broadway a few years later, and I finally got to see a live D'Oyly Carte production. The Company stopped touring in the '80s, but there continue to be countless performances of all the operettas by amateur and professional groups all over the world.

In New York, a clever Yiddishist named Al Grand translated *Pinafore* into Yiddish, and it has been performed before very appreciative bilingual audiences. Here is a couplet sung by Buttercup (Putershisel): "A many years ago, when I was young and charming./ As some of you may know, I practiced baby-farming." Now in Yiddish: "Amol mit yorn tsurik, Ikh bin geven a sheyne./ Tsvey kinderlakh hob ikh, gevizn zise, kleyne." He also translated *Pirates of Penzance* (*Yam Gazlonim*) and my favorite patter song: "I am the Very Model of a Modern Major General." "Ikh bin der groyser general un ikh bin oikh a guter Yid." I did a take-off of that (in English) when my daughter Martha married: "I am the very model of a father of the modern bride./ I ruined a half a dozen shirts by puffing up my chest with pride."

Here in the Boston area, the Sudbury Savoyards produce an operetta a year, as do the Harvard, MIT and Brown University G and S clubs. There are a lot of "Savoyards" around, despite the fact that G and S have been dead for over 100 years. Of course, we still play and sing music and read books written hundreds of years ago, and that may be the point: Good stuff lasts. And to me, there is nothing as good as Gilbert and Sullivan.

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