Gilbert & Sullivan



W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan were an unlikely pair. While both yearned to be something else - Gilbert a "serious" playwright and Sullivan a "serious" composer - they collaborated between 1871 and 1896 on fourteen comic operas that, from small beginnings, won them fame, fortune and a place in posterity assured surely beyond their wildest dreams. Gilbert was an impatient, acerbic, crotchety man with a gift for writing that expressed itself first in humorous illustrated poems - *The Bab Ballads* - and then in stories, plays and comic operas. Sullivan, six years younger, was born into a musical family, studied at the Royal Academy of Music and Leipzig, after which, with some success, he took up composing.

Both men cut their comic opera teeth with other collaborators: in the late 1860s, Gilbert wrote six short family-friendly comic operas or "entertainments" for Thomas Reed. Sullivan's first foray into the realm was *Cox and Box* (1866), written with librettist F. C. Burnard for an informal gathering of friends. Then, in 1871, producer John Hollingshead brought Gilbert and Sullivan together to produce a Christmas entertainment, *Thespis*, at his Gaiety Theatre, a large West End house. The piece was an extravaganza in which the classical Greek gods, grown elderly, are temporarily replaced by a troupe of 19th-century actors and

actresses, one of whom is the eponymous Thespis, the Greek father of the drama. Its mixture of political satire and grand opera parody mimicked Offenbach's *Orpheus In The Underworld* and *La Belle Helene*, which (in translation) then dominated the English musical stage. *Thespis* opened on Boxing Day and ran for 63 performances. It outran five of its nine competitors in the 1871 holiday season, and its run was extended beyond the length of a normal run at the Gaiety. But no one at the time anticipated that this was the beginning of a great collaboration. Unlike later Gilbert and Sullivan works, *Thespis* was hastily prepared and its nature was more risqué, like Gilbert's earlier burlesques, with a broader style of comedy that allowed for improvisation by the actors. Two of the male characters were played by women, whose shapely legs were put on display in a fashion that Gilbert later condemned. The musical score to *Thespis* was never published and is now largely lost (more below).

Over the next four years, Gilbert and Sullivan did not work together again, while each became more eminent in his field. Gilbert worked with Frederic Clay on *Happy Arcadia* (1872) and with Alfred Cellier on *Topsyturveydom* (1874), and wrote *The Wicked World* (1873), *Sweethearts* (1874) and several other libretti, farces, extravaganzas, fairy comedies, dramas and adaptations. Sullivan completed his *Festival Te Deum* (1872), another oratorio, *The Light of the World* (1873), his only song cycle, *The Window* or *The Song Of The Wrens* (1871), incidental music to *The Merry Wives Of Windsor* (1874); and more songs, parlour ballads and hymns including *Onward, Christian Soldiers* (1872). At the same time, the audience for theatre was growing because of the rapidly expanding British population, improvement in education and the standard of living, especially of the middle class, improving public transportation and installation of street lighting, which made travel home from the theatre safer. The number of pianos manufactured in England doubled between 1870 and 1890 as more people began to play parlour music at home and more theatres and concert halls opened.

In 1874, Gilbert wrote a short libretto on commission from producer-conductor Carl Rosa, whose wife would have played the leading role, but her death in childbirth cancelled the project. Not long afterwards, Richard D'Oyly Carte, manager of the Royal Theatre, needed a short opera to be played as an afterpiece to Offenbach's *La Périchole*. Gilbert already had available the libretto he had written for Rosa, and Carte suggested that Sullivan write the score. The composer was delighted with it and Trial By Jury was composed in a matter of weeks

With Sullivan's brother Fred as the Learned Judge, the opera was a runaway hit, outlasting the run of *La Périchole*. Provincial tours and productions at other

theatres quickly followed. Gilbert and Sullivan were now in demand to write more operas together. Over the next two years, Richard D'Oyly Carte and Carl Rosa were two of several theatrical managers who negotiated with the team but were unable to come to terms. Carte's real ambition was to develop an English form of light opera that would displace the bawdy burlesques and badly translated French operettas then dominating the London stage. He assembled a syndicate and formed the Comedy Opera Company, with Gilbert and Sullivan commissioned to write a comic opera that would serve as the centrepiece for an evening's entertainment.

Gilbert found a subject in one of his own short stories, *The Elixir Of Love*, which concerned the complications arising when a love potion is distributed to all the residents of a small village. The leading character was a Cockney businessman who happened to be a sorcerer, a purveyor of blessings (not much called for) and curses (very popular). Gilbert and Sullivan were tireless taskmasters, seeing to it that *The Sorcerer* opened as a fully polished production, in marked contrast to the under-rehearsed *Thespis*. While *The Sorcerer* won critical acclaim, it did not duplicate the success of *Trial by Jury*. Nevertheless, Carte and his syndicate were sufficiently encouraged to commission another full-length opera from the team. That - *H.M.S. Pinafore* (1878) - scored for Gilbert and Sullivan their first international hit, after which, for eleven glorious years yielding eight more sparkling gems (to *The Gondoliers*), they never looked back. The pair's penultimate opera, *Utopia Limited* (1893) was a very modest success, and their last, *The Grand Duke* (1896) an outright failure.

Sir Henry Wood:

> *Sullivan has never had an equal for brightness and drollery, for humour without coarseness and without vulgarity, and for charm and grace. His orchestration is delightful: he wrote with full understanding of every orchestral voice. Above all, his music is perfectly appropriate to the words of which it is the setting ... He found the right, the only cadences to fit Gilbert's happy and original rhythms, and to match Gilbert's fun or to throw Gilbert's frequent irony, pointed although not savage, into relief. Sullivan's music is much more than the accompaniment of Gilbert's libretti, just as Gilbert's libretti are far more than words to Sullivan's music. We have two masters who are playing a concerto. Neither is subordinate to the other; each gives what is original, but the two, while neither predominates, are in perfect correspondence. This rare harmony of words and music is what makes these operas entirely unique. They are the work not of a musician and his librettist nor of a poet and one who sets his words to music, but of two geniuses.*

G. K. Chesterton similarly praised the combination of the two artists, anticipating the operas' success into the "remote future". He wrote that Gilbert's satire was "too intelligent to be intelligible" by itself, and that perhaps only Sullivan could have given "wings to his words … in exactly the right degree frivolous and exactly the right degree fastidious. The words' precise degree of levity and distance from reality … seemed to be expressed … in the very notes of the music; almost … in the notes of the laughter that followed it."

The Times (1957):

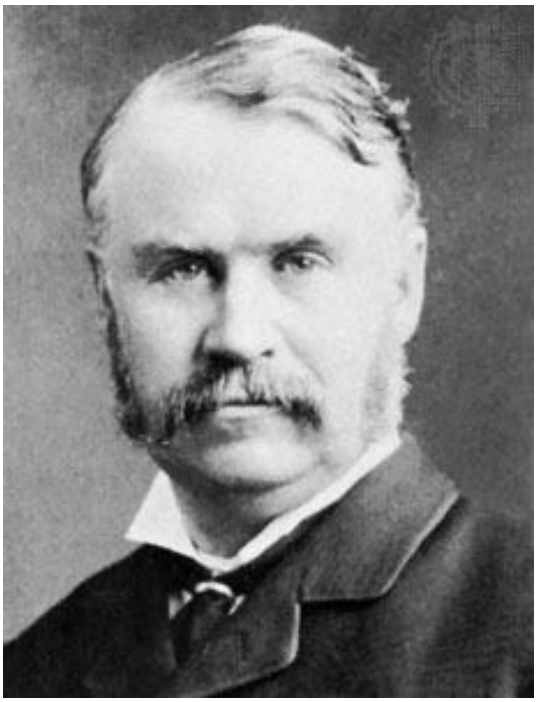
> *They were never really contemporary in their idiom. Gilbert and Sullivan's world, from the first moment was obviously not the audience's world. It was an artificial world, with a neatly controlled and shapely precision which has not gone out of fashion, because it was never in fashion in the sense of using the fleeting conventions and ways of thought of contemporary human society. For this, each partner has his share of credit. The neat articulation of incredibilities in Gilbert's plots is perfectly matched by his language. His dialogue, with its primly mocking formality, satisfies both the ear and the intelligence. His verses show an unequalled and very delicate gift for creating a comic effect by the contrast between poetic form and prosaic thought and wording. How deliciously his lines prick the bubble of sentiment. Of equal importance, Gilbert's lyrics almost invariably take on extra point and sparkle when set to Sullivan's music. Sullivan's tunes in these operas also exist in a make-believe world of their own. He is a delicate wit, whose airs have a precision, a neatness, a grace and a flowing melody. The two men together remain endlessly and incomparably delightful. Light, even trifling though the operas may seem upon grave consideration, they yet have the shapeliness and elegance that can make a trifle into a work of art.*

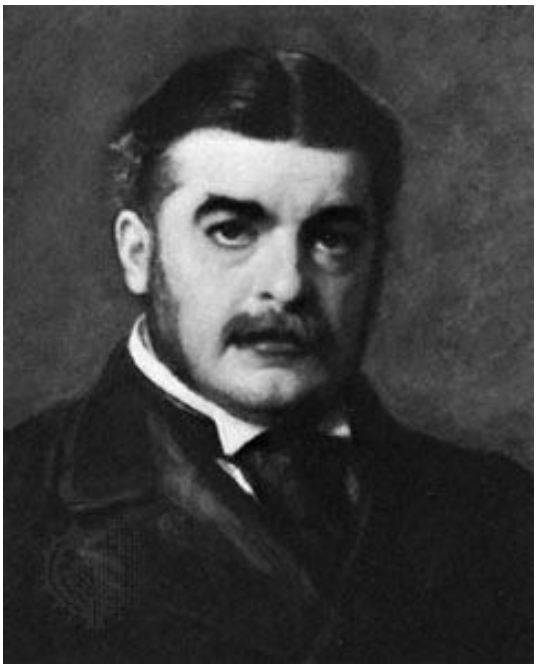
Today, numerous professional repertory companies, small opera companies, amateur societies, churches, schools and universities continue to produce the works. The most popular also continue to be performed from time to time by major opera companies, and professional recordings continue to be released. Since 1994, a three-week-long International Gilbert and Sullivan festival has been held every August in England, with some two dozen or more performances of the operas given on the main stage, and several dozen related "fringe" events given in smaller venues. The Festival sells both professional and amateur videos of its most popular productions. In connection with the 2009 festival, a contemporary critic wrote: "The appeal of G&S's special blend of charm, silliness and gentle satire seems immune to

fashion." There continue to be hundreds of amateur companies performing Gilbert and Sullivan works worldwide.

One selected recording* of each of the fourteen comic operas is reviewed below, together with Mike Leigh's wonderful *Topsy-Turvy* (1999) and Simon Butteriss's informative five-part documentary *A Motley Pair*.

* Note that other recordings are available, and some very good ones too!





W. S. Gilbert (1836 -1911) and Sir Arthur Sullivan (1842 -1900)

THESPIS

A live performance by G&S Players, Philadelphia, USA
Date: 3 August 2000
Venue: Opera House, Buxton
DVD Source: Musical Collectables, Halifax (at www.gsfestivals.org)



Act One

COMMENT *Thespis*, the first of Gilbert and Sullivan's fourteen collaborations, is rarely performed - indeed, this performance is one of only five on DVD I could find online anywhere. With most of Sullivan's original music lost (just two songs* remain), any production of *Thespis* requires a score either cobbled together from other sources (later Sullivan, Offenbach) or written to order - in this instance by stage and musical director Bruce Montgomery. Though Gilbert's 1871 libretto survives more or less intact, don't look for it in Ian Bradley's otherwise splendid *Complete Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan*, because - inexplicably - it isn't there. (Try, instead, either Penguin's *The Savoy Operas: The Complete Gilbert and Sullivan* or find it online.)

* These are Climbing Over Rocky Mountain from Act One and Act Two's Little Maid Of Arcadee. The former was later re-used in *The Pirates Of Penzance*, even though its lyric chimes rather better with an ascent of Mount Olympus than an excursion to the Cornish coast!

This August 2000 production from the 7th International G&S Festival in Buxton faithfully follows Gilbert's libretto, with minor additions to (a) restore / expand the part of Venus, (b) explain the strangely Roman appearance of Act Two's supposedly Greek temple and (c) throw in a gratuitous *Pinafore* joke. After a tasteful starry dawn opening sequence, the fog lifts and the lights go up, from which point an energetic and well-rehearsed company proceed to give their audience (both real and virtual) a night and performance to remember. All costumes and both sets (see screenshots) please the eye. Individual performances range from impressively good (Mercury, Sparkeion) through accomplished (Daphne, Jupiter) to enthusiastic but unconvincing (no names - all deserve praise for giving so freely of their time and having a go). The music, at least to my untutored ear, sounded suitably Sullivanesque. The DVD, proficiently edited, offers sound and picture quality of professional standard. Though lacking a functional menu (only post-2007 DVDs from this source are fully authored), chapter marks to assist navigation are included.



Act Two

NOMINATIONS / AWARDS

Best Supporting Actor: Brendan O'Brien (Mercury)
Best Male Voice: John Dennison (Thespis)

RUNNING TIME Overture (played under images of Buxton, the Opera House and preparations for the show): 6:44, Act One: 57:12, Act Two: 51:16, Adjudication: 10:58, DVD total: 2:07:15

RATING An engaging and solidly performed production of a rarely performed piece scores 17. Recommended.



Brendan O'Brien (Mercury)



Jeffrey Coon (Sparkeion)



John Dennison (Thespis)



Julie C May (Daphne)

* * * * *

THE SORCERER

A live performance by South Anglia Savoy Players
Date: 13 August 2003
Venue: Opera House, Buxton
DVD Source: Musical Collectables, Halifax (at www.gsfestivals.org)



After a splendid Ring Forth Ye Bells opening ...

COMMENT It's 8:45 pm on 17 November 1877. At the Opera Comique in London's Wych Street, *The Sorcerer* is about to be presented for the first time. The first two-act Gilbert / Sullivan / Carte collaboration, much - more, indeed, than any of them can know - will depend on how it is received. And all goes well. "The audience (were) diverted from the rise of the curtain to the fall, and the laughter was incessant" reports the next day's *Times*. Gilbert and Sullivan were called "amid applause, the genuine nature of which could never once have been mistaken."[1] And the rest, as they say, is history. Moving now swiftly 126 years on and 160 miles north to a 2003 summer's evening in Buxton where, in the town's beautiful Opera House, maybe the 7,037th performance of the same work is due. What would Gilbert, Sullivan and Carte make of it? Or of the three week annual festival of which it is part? They would be proud, surely, and surprised and delighted. And what would George Grossmith (the original Wells), Rutland Barrington (the first Doctor Daly) or Richard Temple (Sir Marmaduke) make of it; of the standard and fidelity of the performance? They, likewise, would surely smile, for in paying full respect to tradition, South Anglia Savoy Players serve their forebears well - while, just as important, amply

gratifying with skill and dedication their contemporary audience too. Festival adjudicator Gillian Humphreys began her post-show remarks like this:

> *… an early nineteenth century, late Jane Austin, early Dickensian atmospheric* Sorcerer; *a really wonderful … strong traditional production …*

and went on to praise the chorus in particular (winners - see below - of 2003's Best Chorus award). And the ensemble singing this night *is* outstanding throughout - men and women in equally fine voice, and not merely spirited and bright but sufficiently schooled and sharp that, very unusually, virtually every word can be understood. And if some of the lead characters (Sir Marmaduke, Mrs Partlet) are slightly more restrained or less colourfully drawn than others, there are no sore thumbs in a wholly impressive performance from this most reliable and sure-footed of companies. Mick Wilson (Alexis), Shane Collins (John Wellington Wells), Charlotte Wattebot O'Brien (Aline) and MD Stephen Kenna have all given freely of their considerable gifts at numerous Buxton Festivals, with this, 2003, no exception. Though Howard Brooks too plays the part of Dr Daly with aplomb, his songs are sung (presumably because of a throat or chest problem?) from the pit by Paul Lazell. And though you might think that a cue for calamity or chaos, the syncing (Mr Lazell's words to Mr Brooks' mouth movements) is done with such precision that, if not for the adjudicator comments and DVD credits that give the game away, it would be easy not even to notice.



… the remainder of the action takes place on this set



Mick Wilson (Alexis) and Charlotte Wattebot O'Brien (Aline)



Howard Brooks (Dr Daly)

NOMINATIONS / AWARDS

Best Character Actor: Shane Collins (John Wellington Wells)
Best Female Voice: Charlotte Wattebot O'Brien (Aline)

Best Director: Pat O'Connell
Best Musical Director: Stephen Kenna
Best Chorus
Best Animated Chorus
Most Traditional Opera
Festival Championship: Third Place

RUNNING TIME Overture (under images of show preparations followed by a Festival montage entitled "10 years 1994-2003"): 5:24, Act One: 59:37, Act Two: 45:12, Adjudication: 9:02, DVD total 2:02:00



Shane Collins (J W Wells)

RATING Like Constance, nearly 18. Recommended.

* * * * *

Source

[1] *G&S, A Dual Biography* by Michael Ainger, OUP, 2009, pp 140-41

with thanks

HMS PINAFORE / TRIAL BY JURY

A live performance by Opera Australia
Date: 2005
Venue: The Victorian Arts Centre, Melbourne
DVD Source: commercially available (Opus Arte, 2006, region-free *et al*.)





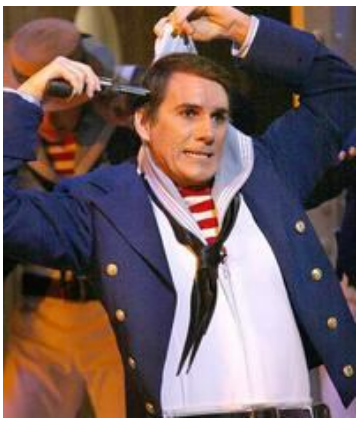
Sets: (1) *HMS Pinafore* (2) *Trial By Jury*

COMMENT In terms of standards and resources, this *Pinafore / Trial* double bill is on a different level to the two others reviewed here, worthy though one of them is. Opera Australia present both operas, complete and unadulterated, in guises traditional (*Pinafore*) and modern (*Trial*), superbly envisioned, staged,

dressed, performed and recorded. Stunning, sparkling, unbeatable stuff - G&S at its wonderful best. Though Colette Mann (Buttercup, pictured below) has a voice notably less "operatic" than those around her, she holds her own well enough. What's more, her untutored delivery chimes perfectly with her character ("poor and lowly … with Gypsy blood"), as written. Like the speck of grit in the oyster that brings forth a pearl, so too her presence, Bohemian and rude - an astringent tincture that sharpens the toothsome whole. Otherwise beyond criticism.



John Bolton Wood (Sir Joseph), Roxane Hislop (Hebe)





David Hobson as Ralph Rackstraw (*Pinafore*) and Edwin (*TBJ*)

OA have released DVDs of a lavish but overly-reworked *Gondoliers*, a fun but panto-style *Mikado*, a rip-roaring Jack Sparrow homage *Pirates*, a fine if slightly stylised *Patience* (all individually reviewed) and this near-flawless two-for-one corker. More please - *Iolanthe* so-oo-on!

RUNNING TIME *HMS Pinafore* 93:40, *Trial By Jury* 35:50, DVD total 2:10:30



Colette Mann (Buttercup)



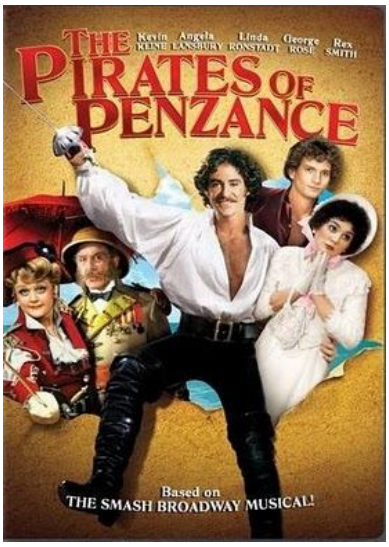
Anthony Warlow, tremendous as both *Pinafore*'s Captain Corcoran and *Trial*'s Learned Judge

SUBTITLES Yes

RATING Since it doesn't come much better, 20 it is.

THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE

A 1983 film directed by Wilford Leach; DVD commercially available (Universal, 2010, widescreen, region 1)





COMMENT For the back-story concerning Joseph Papp's ground-breaking *Pirates of Penzance*, see separate review of the original 1980 Central Park production. Meanwhile, here, considering the 1983 Papp / Leach film, is Marc Shepherd:

> [1983's *Pirates of Penzance*] fails for a variety of reasons. The scenery is kitschy and cartoonish. The camera work is amateurish and constantly calls attention to itself. The characters' reactions are about twice too big, as if no one has told them that they're on a big screen and don't need to play to a Broadway theater balcony … Overall, it is as if the creative team – the same folks that were responsible for the stage production – completely forgot the magic that made Papp's *Pirates* a success on Broadway to begin with.[1]

Jay Seaver agrees:

> It is plainly evident that this film was adapted from a stage production. Indeed, the painted backdrops sometimes appear to come from a high-school play … … [Director Wilford] Leach, the cast and editor Anne V. Coates also have a devil of a time translating stage performances to film – the close-ups kind of kill it. There's no need to play to the balconies when a close-up puts the entire audience in the front row …[2]

Yet 81% of more than 200 Amazon reviewers[3] have awarded this 1983 *Pirates* a full five stars, indicating widespread consumer satisfaction. And there are positive considered critical voices too – Harold Gervais for one:

> (This) *Pirates of Penzance* is something of a cinematic hybrid. It's an odd blend of direct stage adaptation and traditionally constructed movie. It's a little bit of both and none of either. And if that doesn't make any sense, then very often neither does *The Pirates of Penzance.*



Kevin Kline (Pirate King)

> The theatrical production of *Pirates* was very much a self-aware & irreverent affair that had more in common with vaudeville and burlesque that it did with the opera halls where Gilbert & Sullivan productions had been residing for the better part of the previous century and this film adaptation is very much a reflection of that aesthetic. The production of the play and the film was more Marx Brothers than light opera and that subversive streak which so defined the humor associated with The Marx Brothers is very much in evidence here. The usual solution for a stage-to-film adaptation would be to open up the film and go for a more realistic presentation but that would totally undercut the value of the stage production and would render a film version more than pointless. In many ways with the theater, artifice is the thing, but with the film medium, artifice is the one thing which cannot be tolerated. So by design the movie adaptation of *Pirates* is at odds with itself and as such there is an internal tension to the film. It goes without saying that film is a different medium with a different set of requirements and expectations, and to present this kind of musical comedy more or less as is within the confines of a film studio would appear to be flirting with disaster.

To be honest, there are moments where disaster is exactly what *The Pirates of Penzance* offers up. Jokes fail or fall flat while actors' mugging that certainly played to the back rows displays itself onscreen as being awkward. As a modern film-going audience we have been trained to not expect our filmed entertainment to slow down and breathe. Film editing techniques have taken the air out of movies and it's something of a foreign experience to watch an actor deliver a joke or execute a gag and then hold for the laugh or the reaction. In a lot of ways this *Pirates* is a throwback to the very early days of cinema, and specifically to the earliest Marx Brothers movies, which were themselves film adaptations of theatrical productions they spent months performing. As such, taken within a modern context, Wilford Leach's *Pirates* stands proud as some kind of anti-film. Yes it has those moments where it all feels like an experiment gone horribly wrong, but then the movie finishes and somehow it all comes together to form something that feels special and unique. Twist it, pull it, break it up and examine certain parts on their own and the whole thing falls apart. Step back and look at the whole puzzle together and a different judgment forms. It's an unlikely candidate to wear the label *experimental film* but I think that shoe very much fits.



Rex Smith (Frederic)

So if the conceit of the movie is experimental in nature and the performances are barely modulated to adjust for the change in medium, how does one look or judge the performances? Is Kevin Kline just hamming it up? Is Linda Ronstadt just supposed to look pretty and sing like an angel? Is Rex Smith supposed to be as

wooden as the plank he is forced to walk off? Not that the answer is unexpected, but yes, yes and yes. And no. There is nothing subtle about the movie's performances, although Angela Lansbury gives it a go in spots – and it is worth noting she is the singular import to the main cast from productions of the stage version - but subtle isn't what this filmed production is going for. Yes it's broad and it's frequently loud and brash but what's funny is that when the movie goes for sentiment it hits the mark without feeling forced. It's a balance that is unexpected when it appears and it allows the film a certain level of depth that is welcome.



Linda Ronstadt (Mabel)

I would be remiss in my duties if I closed out this section and failed to mention the performance of George Rose as the Major-General Stanley. One of the great character actors of the New York stage, he worked constantly on-stage and on television, especially in the age of live TV, and he is an absolute delight here. Besides making everything his character does funny, he also carries off the show's most difficult musical numbers with the flair and confidence of a master.

The performances in the film underline an aspect of the entire production that hasn't been mentioned yet and that is a constant energy and a real feeling of joy to the production. The movie is in love with its material and that comes through in every aspect of the film. Director Leach adapted the text for its translation to film and some cuts were made to speed things along, but what ended up on-screen sizzles as it quickly moves along. The movie's pace doesn't allow for much thought the first time through as it

confidently asks the viewer to buckle up and just enjoy the ride. Yes there may be some groans at obvious gags or wordplay but there is also a level of confidence to the storytelling that makes me wish Leach had been able to make more films. Unlike stage directors such as Harold Prince, Leach hit on a formula for this one film that transferred what he created for the stage and translated it into a film that existed on its own terms …



George Rose (Major-General)

(This) film is a little miracle … (It) is bright and lively with primary colors being the order of the day, and the cinematography by the great Douglas Slocombe … captures it all beautifully. The film's 2.35:1 aspect ratio underlines and highlights the stage-to-screen roots of the film in a way that embraces what most film adaptations seek to change and / or avoid … I doubt if the movie has looked this good in a long time and I'm thrilled to see it in all its scope glory. If you have waited 20+ years to own *The Pirates of Penzance*, don't hesitate …

While the stage bound aspect of the film will not work for some people, if you give the film a chance and look beneath the surface I think you find a pretty brave and slightly amazing movie. Putting those stage aspects … to the side, those coming into the film cold will find what exists to be a beautifully mounted production with some wonderful music.

I honestly don't know if *The Pirates of Penzance* is a good movie, and I don't know if you can even call it a movie in any kind of traditional sense, but it is something of a treasure …[4]

So, “kitschy” scenery or “pretty brave”? “Amateurish” camera work or “something of a treasure”? Abridged "failure" or "slightly amazing movie"? Or all of the above?



Angela Lansbury (Ruth)

Well, it seems to me that what it depends most on is how much of a purist you are. If you require your G&S untampered with, unrevised, as close to D'Oyly Carte 1880 as you can manage, then leave this *Pirates* be. But if you're prepared to park your preconceptions and take this film on its own terms – not "straight" G&S, perhaps, but a heart-warming approximation – you may well find yourself royally entertained. Hokey and broad, indeed, but fabulous fun too – and in these parlous times that's a commodity too rare to spurn the chance of. The memory and heritage of G&S are not poorly served by Papp's *Pirates* on either stage or screen – if anything, the reverse – so take a breath, jump in and enjoy.



Tony Azito (Sergeant of Police)

RUNNING TIME 1:51:45

SUBTITLES Yes, though exceptionally clear diction throughout makes their presence less important here than elsewhere.





RATING Sizzling celebration from a top-notch troupe. "A little miracle" Mr Gervais called this gladsome gift, and he's right. A sweet 19.

* * * * *

Sources

[1] www.g&sdisc@oakapplepress.com
[2] www.efilmcritic.com
[3] 176 of 218 on Amazon.com and 6 of 7 on Amazon.co.uk
[4] www.dvdverdict.com / Pirates of Penzance / 23 September 2010

PATIENCE

A live performance by Opera Australia
Date: 1995
Venue: Sydney Opera House
DVD Source: commercially available (Opus Arte, 2006, region-free *et al*.)



Sets: Act One ↑

Act Two ↓



COMMENT Wherever you look, this DVD receives strongly positive reviews. Here are some snippets:

The production exceeds the sum of its parts. One has heard all the individual roles sung better elsewhere, but the performance, recorded live, has the electricity many other recordings lack. The only interpretation that fails is Christine Douglas's over-sung Patience, which is neither blithe nor gay, and is often out of tune. Dennis Olsen's Bunthorne reminds one of John Reed in patches, and some may even find it preferable. Anthony Warlow's Grosvenor is delightful.[1]



Heather Begg (The Lady Jane)



Anthony Warlow (Grosvenor)

With so many mediocre Gilbert & Sullivan productions on film, it is great when a really good one appears. I rate this particular production as the best ... G&S ... video I have seen. The cast, most notably Anthony Warlow as Grosvenor, Dennis Olsen as Bunthorne and Heather Begg as Lady Jane, are spectacular. It is well staged, well performed, well directed and well orchestrated.[2]



Dennis Olsen (Bunthorne)

Whenever I can contrive to show this to guests they are surprised and amazed that Gilbert and Sullivan can be such fun! I have three other Opera Australia Gilbert and Sullivans and there is not a dud in the lot - but this is the one I reach for first.[3]

Patience *was never one of my favourite G&S productions … (until) I saw this version.*[4]

… one of the best G&S productions I have ever seen … a Pre-Raphaelite fantasy …[5]

The only consistently negative comments concern Christine Douglas (Patience), both when singing - see (1) above - but, more often, speaking:

… Patience herself has clearly travelled the length and breadth of Great Britain and Northern Ireland accumulating accents …[6]

I found Patience's accent uncomfortable to listen to …[7]



The only slight problem with this production is that Christine Douglas [above] *seems to have acquired her English milkmaid's accent by listening to Cilla Black …*[8]

… my English-born wife strongly echoes the objections of earlier … reviewers about (Patience's) shifting and improbable accent in the dialogue passages …[9]

I'll say little more than that I agree with all of the above. This is a superbly entertaining performance of a seemingly much-underappreciated comic opera. Patience's hopelessly wayward speaking accent is a minor irritant in an otherwise rock-solid, knockout production. Opera Australia (see also their *Pinafore*, *Pirates* and *Mikado* reviews) does it again!

RUNNING TIME 130 minutes

SUBTITLES Yes



Douglas / Warlow OA promo shot

RATING 19 - highly recommended

* * * * *

Sources

[1] Marc Shepherd at www.gasdisc@oakapplepress.com
[2] www.amazon.co.uk
[3] www.amazon.com
[4] The Internet Movie Database at www.imdb.com
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

with thanks

IOLANTHE

A live performance by South Anglia Savoy Players
Date: 6 August 2009
Venue: Opera House, Buxton
DVD Source: Musical Collectables, Halifax (at www.gsfestivals.org)



COMMENT A review of the debut performance of *Iolanthe* back in November 1882 included this speculative prophesy:

> *The Gilbertian school of humour is unique and peculiar. It may not endure, but it has made its mark. Neither Mr. Gilbert as an author, nor Mr. Sullivan as a musician, write for immortality. The school they have founded may not, perhaps, last far beyond their own time ...*[1]

It seems that, no matter how much literate Victorians enjoyed their fix of G&S, they couldn't help but be sniffy about the medium - it was common, vulgar (meaning popular; of the people), it was *theatre*. Sullivan was so often accused of wasting his time and squandering his talent on frivolity rather than devoting himself and his God-given gift to high culture (in his case, "serious" music) that he half believed it himself, to the point where he would tell Gilbert and / or Carte that this or that opera would be his last, only to relent under pressure of friendly persuasion or adverse circumstance and return more or less willingly to the yoke. Though neither Gilbert nor Sullivan had any children of their own,

they *have* set their mark in time another way - arguably a better way - than by fatherhood and, in so doing, proved the above conjecture wrong. Gilbert wrote numerous plays and Sullivan other music, but it's their work together that best endures and will surely continue to do so. And of all their jostling brood of 14 (or 13 if you consider that *Thespis,* their first-born, died in infancy), the one I'm personally fondest of is *Iolanthe*. And of the four *Iolanthe*s reviewed here, much the most rewarding is this outstanding performance, beautifully caught on DVD, by South Anglia Savoy Players, 2009.



Oliver Savile (Strephon), Charlotte Wattebot O'Brien (Phyllis)

When the curtain rises, the first thing we see in the gloom are moving points of light, which prove to be stars in the fairies' hair. Whether deliberately of not, this pays immediate tribute to the original November 1882 Savoy production in which, at the start of Act Two

> *the entrance of the fairies … caused a sensation. The principals had small electric stars in their heads powered by batteries concealed on their shoulders.*[2]

And deference to tradition is maintained as the performance proceeds to present fairies, Lords, dialogue, song, playing, movement, tableaux, costumes, sets and a miscellany of props in a professional, wholly satisfying manner sanctified by time and embellished by ingenuity, inspiration, dedication and sheer hard work. Sterling contributions from all leads - fresh-faced Oliver

Savile introducing his character with a bounding first entrance that promises exuberance and charm duly delivered. (He also remains coolly unphased by an unfortunate Act Two wardrobe malfunction!) Charlotte Wattebot O'Brien, Phyllis to his Strephon, a fine actress and finer soprano. Patrick Gallagher's Private Willis a suitably soldierly, very convincing guardsman. Mick Wilson (Lord Chancellor) whose bang-on, slip-free Nightmare Song capped another solid turn from this most dependable of performers. Adam Sullivan and Philip Lee playing (and singing) Mountararat and Tolloller with practised ease, as though born to it. Lots of imagination from director Shane Collins too: those stars, as mentioned above; the frosty / snowy setting (in contrast to the same company's 2000 *Iolanthe,* summer-themed) with costumes and glitter to match; the recall from her exile of Iolanthe, complete with shimmering, stage-filling, wavy water effect; the magnificent Parade of the Peers, resplendent in hunting red to begin, then, via a flawlessly coordinated transformation routine, robes and coronets; a couple of nice expenses jokes (actually, three - two verbal, one visual); the fairy plane that takes flight to cap a superb finale … and that's only Act One! If I could change two things, they would be our first sight of Iolanthe, which should be rising up out of the stream, *not* walking on from the wings, and her costume, which could have done with a dash of colour to strengthen and better establish her character. Having said that, what such "criticism" reveals most plainly is that this *Iolanthe* is top-notch - about as good, at this level, as it comes. Or, to quote the last sentence of David Turner's post-show adjudication: "If you want a thumbnail description of tonight's performance, how about 'brilliant'?"



Jenny Haxell (Iolanthe)



Mick Wilson (Lord Chancellor)

NOMINATIONS / AWARDS

Best Duet: None Shall Part Us
Best Chorus
Best Animated Chorus
Best Director: Shane Collins

Best Musical Director: Stephen Kenna
Most Traditional Opera
Festival Championship: Third Place

RUNNING TIME Overture (under images of show preparations, the Opera House interior, closely studied, then a little of Buxton): 7:00, Act One: 1:10:36, Act Two, 53:55, Adjudication: 13:51, DVD total: 2:27:55



Act Two set, with Patrick Gallagher (Private Willis) marching off

RATING Given its amateur provenance, exceptional. Highly recommended - 19

* * * * *

Sources

[1] Online resource: The G&S Archive / Iolanthe / First Night Review

(*Iolanthe* opened at London's Savoy Theatre on Saturday 25th and the above review appeared in *The Morning Advertiser* of Monday 27th November 1882. Here's another excerpt, this time right on point, appraising Gilbert:

Coming to the technicalities of writing, his versification is perfect. His rhymes are invariably true, his dialogue carefully polished, and no slipshod sentences are to be found from one to the other end of any play of his. As usual, in "Iolanthe" he turns human nature

upside down, indulges in the most violent outrages against common sense, and puts before us a diverting jumble of the real and the ideal - of prosaic, every-day life, treated from the facetious point of view, and the fantastic proceedings of the fairies. He revels in producing violent contrasts, ultra-ridiculous surprises, and in misrepresenting everything as it exists in human nature. No idea is too ludicrous for Mr. Gilbert to originate and work out, no situation too absurd in which to place his characters … The behaviour of every soul … is intensely unreasonable. Probability, or even possibility, is held of no moment, and is systematically despised. Folly shakes her bells, and reason is beaten out of the field; but in his wildest moments, Mr. Gilbert is the keen satirist. He has a way of bringing truths before his audience, while seeming to desire nothing better than to make them laugh. He turns human nature the seamy side without, but mirthfully; he is not simply a laborious punster, and twister of words, but in his way is an analyzer of character, and a true if severe commentator on the weaknesses, the meanness, and the shame of the world and of men.



Theresa Goble (right foreground) as Queen of the Fairies

[2] www.lyricoperasandiego.org / Resource Library / Iolanthe

with thanks

PRINCESS IDA

A live performance by The G&S Opera Company
Date: 15 August 2009
Venue: Buxton Opera House
DVD Source: Musical Collectables, Halifax (at www.gsfestivals.org)



Act One set /opening tableau

COMMENT In a review of G&SOC's *Iolanthe* (2010), Raymond Walker wrote that "these Buxton productions ... as with *Princess Ida* last year ... can match a West End show."[1] After watching the DVD of that *Iolanthe* (see review), I felt less inclined to believe him than before. But now, having been very pleasantly surprised by the 2009 *Princess Ida* to which he refers, I'm starting to come round to his way of thinking, for it is very good indeed. Having been decidedly underwhelmed by and consequently critical of the sets of two 2010 G&SOC productions - the above *Iolanthe* and a *Mikado* - it occurs to me now that I should perhaps give more consideration to (and so make due allowance for) the circumstances in which the shows are mounted and the company operates. Here, writing about this *Ida*, is Barry Purves:

> *This production, in the spirit of the festival, was put together with remarkable haste, and the only real evidence of that was a serviceable set, though some beautiful costumes and witty staging ideas certainly made up for that.* [2]

I suppose that the amateur companies who perform at Buxton prepare for their big night at rather more leisure, thus allowing for greater painstaking -

still it doesn't detract from the truth that the best of them hold their own with and sometimes outshine their pro counterparts which, when I attended the Festival in 2011, both surprised and disappointed me. (Why? Because, perhaps naively, I expected from the pros a special something not always there.) This 2009 *Ida*, though, surely did deliver. Here's Mr Purves again:

> Princess Ida *is an uncomfortable piece when played seriously - it did contain a truly terrible racist lyric, and the idea of women seeking education being ridiculed by men is awkward, but here the director made the men ridiculing the women look ridiculous. Some great pieces of business, and the women arriving to fight armed with saucepans and whisks a clever and obvious one, but made genius by Jill Pert as Lady Blanche arriving with a kettle* [actually a large teapot] *as a helmet.*[3]



Philip Cox (King Gama)

Who directed? The story is taken up by Robert Beale, who reviewed the show in Greater Manchester's *City Life*:

> *... (Buxton Festival's) new production of* Princess Ida*, directed by Jeff Clarke, was a welcome breath of fresh air. It showed that in this world of entertainment, where tradition can seem all-important, innovation has its modest place. Mr Clarke is the brilliant creator and director of Opera della Luna ... ... To direct a*

production by the festival's own professional Gilbert & Sullivan Opera Company is a favour Mr Clarke accepted this year for the first time and clearly took with due seriousness. There was a time when woe betide the director who strayed from the hallowed path, and he did not set out to cause undue dismay, even in 2009. But he had some delicious new ideas which, as far as I'm concerned, added enormously to the fun of a piece.

Romantic hogwash

The story itself is pure Romantic hogwash, with rival kings, a hero prince and a princess who forsakes men in favour of study and female superiority. Gareth Jones (Hildebrand), Philip Cox (a classic portrayal of the obnoxious Gama), Oliver White (Hilarion) and Chloe Wright (Ida) played all these roles pretty straight and sang finely. The fun came with the support: James Cleverton and Tobias Merz (Florian and Cyril) brought a touch of exaggeration in character (more than a touch in the latter's case) that lifted their roles as Hilarion's friends to comic cameos, and Ian Belsey, Terence den Dulk and Alastair McCall were magnificent as Gama's gormless, heavyweight sons. Among Ida's maidens, Victoria Byron twinkled as Melissa and Jill Pert was magnificent as the dried-up Lady Blanche, with Lisa Anne Robinson (Lady Psyche) completing the trio. Amid all this, the tableau opening to each act drew deserved applause, and the gentle send-up of the encore tradition (indulged in the hilarious cross-dressing scene when the lads enter the maidens' realm) worked to great effect as Ida finally yielded, not to superior force, but to the threat of yet another repetition of one of those maddening songs.[4]



Victoria Byron (Melissa), Jill Pert (Lady Blanche) / Chloe Wright (Princess Ida)

The "repetition" in question is of King Gama's song Whene'er I Spoke and Ida does indeed cut her father off as he's about to embark on a second encore. But not before, for a first, he produces a verse (Upon the stage ...) found in the first American edition of the libretto but no longer the British[5] - i.e. a novel Gilbertian inclusion, cherry on the cake of this cracking ensemble piece with nary a flaw. Okay, so maybe Chloe Wright ("Let no-one care a penny how she looks / Let all your things misfit ..." Ida says) was too well-groomed; her character's feisty Amazonian mien too little accentuated. Still, in the opera's most challenging role she acquits herself with credit if not quite credibility to spare, so let it pass.

Just one caveat, too, concerning the show's recording. Prospective purchasers should be aware that the unzoomed pictures on this DVD are a shade darker (see first screenshot) than they might be, lending to the whole an unwelcome gloomy pallor. Since the close camera work is fine and since this is not the only 2009 DVD on which this fault is evident (see FPI's *Gondoliers* review), a recording rather than theatre-lighting gremlin would seem to be indicated. Mind, it neither detracts a candle from the luminosity of the performance nor spoils viewer enjoyment, so don't be deterred on the strength of this minor nitpick alone.

RUNNING TIME Overture (under images of Buxton Opera House interior and Festival): 4:10, Act One: 29:05, Act Two: 1:06:55, Act Three: 32:35, DVD total: 2:14:40

RATING 19. Recommended.

* * * * *

Sources

[1] www.musicweb-international.com / Live reviews / *Iolanthe* 2010: a review of G&SOC's Buxton *Iolanthe* (performance date 31 July) by Raymond J Walker

[2] www.barrypurves.com / Diary & Forum / Frame By Frame Forum / Reviews / Princess Ida (August 2009)

[3] Ibid.

[4] www.citylife.co.uk Robert Beale: "Ambitious *Princess Ida* Is A Festival Hit", *City Life* News & Reviews, Monday 17 August 2009

[5] *The Complete Annotated G&S* introduced and edited by Ian Bradley, OUP, 2001, page 536

with thanks

THE MIKADO

1939 film, directed by Victor Schertzinger, commercially available on Image Entertainment, 1998; Simply Media (2010) *et al*, or, digitally remastered, as part of The Criterion Collection (2011).



This is not *The Mikado* as we know it, but an adaptation of *The Mikado* filmed in 1939 (i.e. nearer in time to the opera's 1885 debut than the present day) with not merely the blessing (itself a first) but the active cooperation and participation of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company. Running just 91 minutes, cuts and revisions are substantial, so a like-for-like comparison between this and other *Mikado*es is not really fair. But does Victor Schertzinger's film stand as a fully realised work of art on its own merits or is it more a G&S curiosity of tangential interest only?

Well, for a start, it's of significant historical interest in that it features not only the then-current D'Oyly Carte chorus, but also two of the Company's biggest pre-War stars – Martyn Green (Ko-Ko) and Sydney Granville (Pooh-Bah) – the latter old enough to have worked, albeit briefly, with Gilbert himself. But, concerning the degree of respect granted by film and/or G&S buffs to this *Mikado*, opinion, not for the last time (see Jonathan Miller's ENO *Mikado* review), is divided. The first and most strident complaint levelled against the film and its begetters (director Victor Schertzinger and former D'Oyly Carte musical director Geoffrey Toye) centres around not what is preserved but,

rather, lost. First, yes, because as soon as plans to make the film were announced, and well ahead of its eventual release, Schertzinger began receiving letters – "sometimes 3,000 … a week"[1] – protesting change. Clocking in at 91 minutes (i.e. some 40 to 50 less than the average stage production), it was always inevitable that this celluloid *Mikado* would contain cuts, and so it does, in number. A discomfited IMDb reviewer compiled this little list of absent friends:

- Pooh-Bah's Young Man Despair
- Ko-Ko's As Some Day It May Happen
- So Please You, Sir, We Much Regret
- Much of the Act One Finale
- See How The Fates Their Gifts Allot
- Katisha's Alone And Yet Alive
- Katisha and Ko-Ko's Beauty In The Bellow Of The Blast

plus significant passages of dialogue[2]



Martyn Green's Chaplinesque Ko-Ko preserved for posterity

(Other songs, while not cut entirely, lose verses and one – The Sun Whose Rays – first crops up not only in the wrong Act but the wrong mouth (Nanki-Poo's, though Yum-Yum later sings it too).) A second adverse IMDb review is headed "A Cheap And Chippy Hatchet Job."[3] Posting on the G&S Discography web-page, Chuck Mathias, too, notes the film's "appalling number of cuts."[4] Yet it

was never intended to be a straight capture of a theatrical performance and the significant challenges associated with adapting a stage production into something capable of standing up on screen should not be underestimated. Here's M. Enois Duarte:

> *One of the many unique aspects of the musical is the fact that its style and performance is distinctly meant for the stage – a production incredibly difficult to translate to film, where a bit of paraphrasing is a requirement … Despite some minor alterations to the storyline … Schertzinger's film stays fairly true to Gilbert & Sullivan's original intent and the opera's wonderfully comedic spirit … Schertzinger clearly respects the material, retaining much of its animated jubilance and witty banter. He also makes audiences feel they're watching a stage production rather than a movie version of the comedic opera. When Katisha arrives in Titipu searching for her fiancé and the entire ensemble sings in the Finale (of) Act I, we know the story is in expert hands as the camera moves about the whole set dramatizing the convivial confrontation.*[5]

The dichotomy inherent in the separate disciplines of stage and screen production is also explored by James Kendrick:

> *Schertzinger and … Toye … take a few careful liberties with the original text - just enough to open it up for the screen and introduce some fundamentally cinematic elements to its treatment, but not so much that it unduly tampered with what Gilbert and Sullivan fans had come to prize as the definitive approach to the material. The result is a mish-mash … …*
>
> *Critics at the time recognized that* The Mikado*, at least in this iteration, didn't comfortably make the leap from stage to screen. (New York Times critic Frank S. Nugent, although largely generous in his review, still couldn't help but wonder "whether it ever should be taken away from the footlights, from the realm of unabashed nonsense and make-believe.") Although there is a clear attempt to maintain the idea of exotic fantasy in the film version (note the painterly clouds that float through the foreground in one of the opening shots and the studious lack of disguising the painted backdrops), the film version still feels grounded, partly because of the tension between its semi-theatricality and the inherent transcendence of the camera lens. Because it is based on Gilbert and Sullivan, the film can't help but be fun, full of memorable*

songs and whimsical moments of humor, much of which is anchored to a satirically dark, morbid sensibility (I can't remember ever having seen a musical so obsessed with beheading). So, while not a particularly good film, The Mikado *is still a worthy historical artifact, best seen as a pioneering first attempt to translate the immense popularity of Gilbert and Sullivan from one medium to another.*[6]



Kenny Baker (Nanki-Poo) and Jean Colin (Yum-Yum)

And Roman Martel:

The best way to approach this version of The Mikado may be to think of it as pure fantasy inspired by an Englishman's perception of Japan. Everything in the film feels ... like a dream. Exteriors are obviously filmed on expansive stages. The songs have an operatic feel, but you've got Kenny Baker doing his best '30s style crooner. The costumes appear Japanese at a glance, but you'll see a variety of Asian influences combined with exaggerated and highly stylized designs. The acting is very stagey at times, not surprising coming from a crew so well versed in the stage productions of Gilbert and Sullivan's plays. Even this adds a dimension of the surreal to the whole thing. In short, it plays out like a Gilbert and Sullivan fever dream. But I can't deny that it is entertaining.[7]

Now Marc Shepherd:

> *The film takes considerable liberties with the libretto; it must be admitted that these would be unacceptable in stage production. For example, the film opens at the Mikado's court, with Nanki-Poo's father* ***telling him*** *that he must marry Katisha within a month or perish ignominiously on the scaffold. Cinematically, this strikes me as correct, since it is always better in the movies to* ***show*** *something happening rather than have a character* ***talk about it*** *after the fact. This is a luxury that Gilbert the playwright, who is constrained to set each act in a single time and place, doesn't always have. It is a forgivable liberty, however, as it only makes sense that a film director should take advantage of the medium where doing so enhances the story-telling. This master-piece is indispensable.*[8]



Sydney Granville (Pooh-Bah, left): a distinguished performance

So finally some positive adjectives – *worthy*, *entertaining*, *indispensable* – start to appear. What seems clear is that, if only in the interests of impartiality, the temptation to make (implicitly negative) comparisons to the Gold Standard theatrical template – to "traditional" Savoy Theatre G&S – must be resisted and the film allowed to stand or fall on its own intrinsic, artistic merit. More IMDb voices:

It ought to be a disaster but it is, in fact, highly enjoyable.[9]

… an unexpected delight.[10]

Both of those viewers obviously came to the film with prior expectations which they were then open-minded enough, on seeing and enjoying it, to let go.

Of the Mikado*es I have seen … I would say this is the best one out there. This is G&S performed the way it should be … the only disadvantage being that there's not enough of it*.[11]

Meanwhile, back at the G&S Discography, James Moffat sees the film as neither fish nor fowl; as

a curious hybrid … neither completely rethought from the then-current D'Oyly Carte production nor … a photographed stage play. It falls somewhere in between.[12]

Jamie S. Rich pursues this notion further:

Though (Schertzinger's) take on The Mikado *was apparently criticized for being too "stagey," I actually found it to be an interesting melding of two theatrical disciplines. Sure, his* Mikado *has a lot of starch in its collar, but I like how he had the actors perform as they would when strutting the boards, even while he takes advantage of the larger sets and multiple camera angles. The way he arranges his actors and how they move in that space may be theatrical, but Schertzinger's work in the editing room was definitely cinematic*.[13]

So too Gary Tooze:

There's something about The Mikado *which makes one wonder whether it ever should be taken away from the footlights, from the realm of unabashed nonsense and make-believe. Take the matter of make-up: on the stage the upslanting eyebrows and smudges of green greasepaint delightfully enhance the air of unreality into which Savoyards escape whenever the D'Oyly Carte troupe comes to town. But on the screen, when the close-ups zoom, those facial extravaganzas are a distraction. Take Ko-Ko: on the stage he's a pretty funny fellow; his capers, eye-rolling, music-hall mannerisms seems written into the part. But on the screen – well, Mr. Green does grow a bit tiresome; wasn't it during the Keystone days that comedians used to kick their heels before running?*

> *But this isn't criticizing the picture, but the project; and that should be Universal's business, not ours. As a film edition of the most popular item in the G&S repertoire, it must be recognized as one of the most luscious productions of the operetta in history. Never were there such costumes or sets, never such colors – mother of pearl, dun, peach, orchid, all the pastel range. The voices are first rate, possibly excepting that of Jean Colin's Yum-Yum, and the microphone has the goodness to let us hear the lyrics instead of making us supply them from memory. Count those as assets, and the chorus work of the D'Oyly Cartes and the substitution of the London Symphony Orchestra for the usual eleven-man band in the pit. On the score of score, this* Mikado *ranks high*.[14]



Kathleen Naylor, Jean Colin, Elizabeth Paynter: Three Little Maids

Still not much nearer a consensus then. And nor, outside the confines of your own skull – nor even (Mike Leigh: "Good in parts, soppy in parts"[15]) within it – are you likely to find one any time soon. Towards the end of a particularly penetrating review, Joseph Jon Lanthier advises that one must view Schertzinger's "largely dreadful" *Mikado*

> *as an abridged document rather than an adaptation; it's a snapshot of where the D'Oyly Carte was in the '30s, made by film-makers who couldn't quite convert their respect for Gilbert and Sullivan into artful understanding.*[16]

Yet still M. Enois Duarte is right to note that

> *both the movie and musical play continue as classic figures with a permanent place in the collective consciousness of popular culture*[17]

and what it comes to, finally, is this: what other people tell you doesn't matter a jot. Watch, rather, with as open a mind as you can muster and decide for yourself.



John Barclay (The Mikado) – possibly cast to help swell the film's Australian audience[18] as Baker (Nanki-Poo) was the American

RUNNING TIME (Criterion DVD)

- *The Mikado*: 91 minutes
- Video interview with *Topsy-Turvy* director Mike Leigh (18:09)
- Video interview with *Mikado* scholars Josephine Lee and Ralph MacPhail Junior (29:07)
- Short silent film promoting the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company's 1926 stage production of *The Mikado* (3:41)
- As Some Day It May Happen deleted sequence (2:45)
- Excerpts from 1939 radio broadcasts of *The Swing Mikado* (Three Little Maids: 1:56 / Flowers That Bloom: 1:59) and *The Hot Mikado* (Tit Willow: 2:48 / Medley: 5:53)

The Criterion DVD also includes a sixteen page booklet featuring *Celluloid Savoy*, an informative essay by Geoffrey O'Brien.

SUBTITLES Yes

RATING If you want or expect a standard *Mikado* you'll be disappointed and so would be better advised to spend your money elsewhere. But if you're prepared to regard Schertzinger's film as something other, unto itself, then you might well find yourself agreeing, as I do, with Marc Shepherd: this masterpiece is indispensable, he said. Indeed so – it's a lush and lovely treat. A point off for sadly harsh and flat orchestral sound makes 19. Enjoy!

* * * * *

Sources

[1] Ralph MacPhail Jr. in *The Mikado* (1939) Criterion Collection DVD bonus chapter "Scholars"
[2] The Internet Movie Database at www.imdb.com
[3] Ibid.
[4] The G&S Discography at www.gasdisc.oakapplepress.com
[5] M. Enois Duarte, 29 March 2011 at www.blueray.highdefdigest.com
[6] James Kendrick (undated) at www.qnetwork.com
[7] Roman Martel, 28 March 2011 at www.dvdverdict.com
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Jamie S. Rich, 23 March 2011 at www.criterionconfessions.com
[14] Gary W. Tooze, 28 March 2011 at www.dvdbeaver.com
[15] *The Mikado* (1939) Criterion Collection DVD video interview
[16] Joseph Jon Lanthier, 28 March 2011 at www.slantmagazine.com
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

with thanks to all

RUDDIGORE

A live performance by South Anglia Savoy Players
Date: 4 August 2002
Venue: Opera House, Buxton
DVD Source: Musical Collectables, Halifax (at www.gsfestivals.org)



Act One set

COMMENT Any production good enough to win a Buxton Festival Championship is likely to be worth watching. But if it does the double by scooping the Most Traditional Opera award too, then the odds on satisfaction guaranteed become shorter still. In 2002, South Anglia's *Ruddigore* - a multi award winning dose of delicious entertainment artfully presented by a company that seldom lets you down - did that very thing. As in many another year, Mick Wilson and Charlotte Wattebot O'Brien lead the way with compelling turns as Richard Dauntless and Rose Maybud respectively. Though I wasn't very impressed by either Glynn McKay or Christine Anson in SA's 2004 *Pinafore* (see review), both acquit themselves creditably here, perhaps because given roles (Sir Roderic and Hannah) more suited to their particular talents. Nicholas Clough, too, makes a wholly convincing bad baronet, though a less engaging good one. The two relative weak links in the cast are Howard Brooks as Robin / Sir Ruthven and Elizabeth Elliott as Mad Margaret, for, while both sound and secure, neither seems able to commit quite as wholeheartedly as Act Two requires. If Victorian melodrama is to be successfully satirised, the performances of the "dark character" actors must be extravagant, colourful, highly charged, slightly OTT (i.e. suitably *melodramatic*). Mere straight playing, in this context, is not enough. Having said that, no-one here disgraces him or herself or lets down either their fellows or their audience, whether real or virtual.



Act Two set and company

This *Ruddigore* is not only complete, but additionally includes three long-deleted verses restored to Robin and Adam's duet at the start of Act Two, in the course of which Adam renames himself Gideon Crawle. This makes sense of an otherwise bemusing use of that name later in the act. Plymouth G&S Fellowship's 2010 *Ruddigore* (see review) retains this one use of the name without restoring the missing verses. It's attention to minor details such as this (well done, South Anglia) that separates the best of these G&S productions from the rest. Two contemporary jokes are also worked into the libretto - one (concerning the Millennium Dome) still wears well enough nine years on, while the other (referencing positive drug tests at the 2002 Commonwealth Games) does not.



Elizabeth Elliott (Mad Margaret)



Nicholas Clough (Sir Despard)



Charlotte Wattebot O'Brien (Rose Maybud), Mick Wilson (Richard Dauntless)



Christine Anson (Dame Hannah), Glynn McKay (Sir Roderic)

NOMINATIONS / AWARDS

Best Male Performer: Mick Wilson (Richard Dauntless)
Best Female Performer: Charlotte Wattebot O'Brien (Rose Maybud)
Best Male Voice: Mick Wilson (Richard Dauntless)

Best Female Voice: Charlotte Wattebot O'Brien (Rose Maybud)
Best Supporting Actress: Elizabeth Elliott (Mad Margaret)
Best Character Actor: Patrick Gallagher (Old Adam)
Best Concerted Item: Madrigal
Best Chorus
Best Animated Chorus
Best Director: Patrick O'Connell
Best Musical Director: Stephen Kenna
Most Traditional Opera
Festival Championship: Winners



Howard Brooks (Robin / Sir Ruthven), Patrick Gallagher (Old Adam)

RUNNING TIME Overture (under images of Eastbourne town and Devonshire Park Theatre - venue for part of this year's Festival; Buxton Opera House and more): 6:58, Act One: 1:14:47, Act Two: 51:06, Adjudication: 15:06, DVD total: 2:29:45

RATING 17 - recommended

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THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD

A live performance by The G&S Opera Company
Date: 13 or 14 August 2010 (not stated)
Venue: Buxton Opera House
DVD Source: Musical Collectables, Halifax (at www.gsfestivals.org)



Set: central platform added for each finale only …



… with occasional curtain + chandelier + table & chairs variation

COMMENT Here, very slightly reworked, is a review by Raymond J Walker of this 2010 *Yeomen* production:

> *Yeomen* … the only tragedy in Gilbert and Sullivan opera … takes a believable glimpse of 16th Century life. Consequently, a director is clearly limited when taking a new interpretation if he is to convey the action convincingly. In Jeff Clarke's production [a sequel to his excellent … *Princess Ida* staged … last year] he is sensitive to the retention of plot detail and focuses on a high standard of acting to provide good characterizations. This production is outstanding with all actors giving polished performances and convincing portrayals of their characters. It is fresh interpretations like this that will help G&S survive for another 100 years.



Richard Gauntlett (Jack Point)



Charlotte Page (Elsie Maynard)

> The charismatic Richard Gauntlett was superb with his extrovert and cheeky portrayal of Jack Point. His entry, featuring juggling and acrobatic cartwheels, was as impressive as his singing and clear diction. His partner, strolling player Elsie Maynard (Charlotte Page), gave a heart-wrenching performance and delivered a suitable level of pathos to the fate that eventually befalls Point. Her expressiveness and timing … were faultless and her singing was as delightful as her confident acting. Old D'Oyly Carte productions used to make little of the role of Phoebe until the Act One finale but here, from the start, Ciara Hendrick's convincing spinning and coquettish interaction with Shadbolt lifted the character considerably. Philip Cox's Shadbolt was magnificent … To reinstate his lost song 'Jealous torments' … fitted the plot well and allowed more time for delivery of the stolen cell key: its removal with a fishing net and … return by fishing rod brought unscripted moments of amusement. Oliver White as

Fairfax also sang well and carried that aloof authority expected of the Colonel. However, his mood swings seemed exaggerated and his haughty approach to Elsie rather harsh, considering that she had favoured him in marriage.



Jill Pert (Dame Carruthers)



Bruce Graham (Sergeant Meryll)



Nicholas Warden (Lieutenant), Oliver White (Fairfax)

Good support was provided by Nicholas Warden as the resplendently dressed Lieutenant and Bruce Graham gave a believable performance as Sergeant Meryll trying to duck the persistent approaches of Dame Carruthers. Jill Pert as the Dame sang ‘When our gallant Norman foes’ with majestic pride and later rightly revealed her authority to some incompetent

> Warders. The interaction between this domineering Dame and a meek Sergeant was excellent. Matthew Kimble made as much as he could of the shallow character of Leonard Meryll … … The chorus contributed considerably … with their strong singing and convincing acting. The orchestra under John Owen Edwards were faultless and gave a lovely rendering of the Overture …



Ciara Hendrick (Phoebe)



Philip Cox (Shadbolt)

> … A bleak angular set with unusual perspective was a bold experiment used for both Acts, but with changing lighting and chorus groupings … became perfectly acceptable. To lower a backdrop, chandelier and table with chairs for interior inset scenes in both Acts was a fresh touch which worked a treat, giving a greater feeling of intimacy that married nicely with the libretto. I liked the freezing of crowd, yeomen and characters when the soloists were involved in intimate engagement or when they soliloquized.[1]

RUNNING TIME Overture (under half-screen images of Buxton Opera House and town): 4:48, Act One: 1:16:47, Act Two: 1:05:56, DVD total: 2:29:40

RATING Mr Walker's "outstanding" tells it true. 19 - recommended.

* * * * *

Source

[1] www.musicweb-international.com / Live Reviews / Search: Yeomen 2010 / “Buxton International G&S Festival 2010 (3) - The Yeomen …

with thanks

THE GONDOLIERS

A live performance by Festival Productions, Ireland
Date: 20 August 2009
Venue: Buxton Opera House
DVD Source: Musical Collectables, Halifax (at www.gsfestivals.org)





Sets: Acts One* (above) and Two

*Concerning the scene of Act One, Ian Bradley writes:

> *Gilbert's stage direction establishes that the audience is looking at the Piazzetta from the north side … To be totally faithful to the location, the backcloth for*

> *(Act One) should show the lagoon with the island of San Giorgio Maggiore in the distance and, in the fore-ground, the two great columns which were brought from the east in the twelfth century and erected at the top of the steps leading down to the water's edge. One is surmounted by a winged lion … and the other by a statue of Saint Theodore …*[1]

This, indicative of FPI's willingness to go the extra mile, is exactly what tonight's audience *does* see. Excellent indeed!

COMMENT A magnificent show by the 2009 Festival Champions (their third consecutive win) with barely a flaw - strong leads (notably Adam Lawlors' Alan Rickman-like Grand Inquisitor) backed with a tremendous chorus: enthused, energetic, vivid, often stage and sometimes theatre-filling. Dazzle and élan throughout a confident, giving company brimming over with brio. Superb costumes. Two fine sets (above). All in all, *bellissimo!* My one gripe concerns insufficient lux, resulting in anyone moving away from centre stage retreating more often than not (see screenshots) into shade. It occurred to me that this might be more of an issue on the DVD than on the night, and maybe so. Here's Chris Angelico:

> *The opera house was entirely sold out (so we) watched … from the Paxton* [Suite, in Buxton Pavilion, adjacent to the Opera House] *… where the projector screen was put to good use. The video link was a good thing, but nothing like actually being there; it felt more like watching a recording than attending a live show … (But) what a show.*
>
> *The lighting was less than stellar, unfortunately, leaving the edges of the stage and, often, the downstage area in a not-very-congenial gloom, although the middle of the stage was always brightly lit. The performers would have done well to hang around in the light, but they went all over the stage, and sometimes had only the follow spots to keep them from being in complete darkness.*

In reply, "Brian" says:

> *Re lighting - sorry you weren't able to get in the theatre, but the lighting was effective in there, if constantly changing. Having since bought the DVD, I'd say the problem was in the camera exposures not*

matching - most long shots were underexposed. Apart from that, the DVD is well worth buying.[2]

Yes, but look here:




(1) Emma Walshe (Giannetta, centre stage) with Adam Lawlor (Don Alhambra) in semi-darkness. But when (2) she moves past him to the extreme edge of the stage, she remains spot-lit and he in the gloom …

so where the fault lies is (rather like some of the pictures) unclear. What a pity to produce so appealing a spectacle then not light it better! But, that said, if everything at Buxton was even close to good as this, we'd all be in clover. A night, show, troupe and performance to remember.




Wilfred Pyper and Jackie Curran-Olohan as Duke and Duchess

NOMINATIONS / AWARDS

Best Male Performer: Wilfred Pyper (The Duke of Plaza-Toro)
Best Character Actor: Adam Lawlor (Don Alhambra)
Best Character Actress: Jackie Curran-Olohan (Duchess)
Best Male Voice: Brian Gilligan (Marco)
Best Female Voice: Nicola Mulligan (Casilda)
Best Chorus
Best Animated Chorus

Best Director: Vivian Coates
Best Musical Director: Aidan Faughey
Festival Championship: Winners




Nicola Mulligan (Casilda) and Barry McGonagle (Luiz) / Jamie Rock (Giuseppe, front) and Brian Gilligan (Marco)

RUNNING TIME Overture (played under a miscellany of shots of Buxton Opera House, town and Festival): 5:48, Act One: 1:08:14, Act Two: 1:01:20, Adjudication: 14:37, DVD total: 2:31:45




RATING Shines through the shadows – 19

* * * * *

Sources

[1] *The Complete Annotated G&S* introduced and edited by Ian Bradley, OUP, 2001, page 864
[2] www.rosuav.blogspot.com / 2009 / August

with thanks

UTOPIA LIMITED

A live performance by The G&S Opera Company
Date: 19 August 2011
Venue: Buxton Opera House
DVD Source: Musical Collectables, Halifax (at www.gsfestivals.org)



Act One

COMMENT Here's almost all of a review by Raymond J Walker of this 2011 *Utopia* production:

> **A brilliant production of Utopia Ltd**
>
> A professional production of *Utopia Ltd* has been eagerly awaited by the Festival patrons for a number of years, so, once advertised, the three performances have been a sell-out. On the strength of the success of tonight's performance it is hoped that this, the 13th of Gilbert & Sullivan operas, will be re-staged next year.
>
> The D'Oyly Carte Opera Company did not revive the opera after its early 1900s tours until a special 1975 production was staged (in association with a Decca recording). Only occasional amateur performances have been seen until recent years. This first professional production for 34 years consequently carries an air of importance.

[Director] Andrew Nicklin's production is brilliant and pays excellent attention to subtleties in the script as well as staging detail. The characters take on an extra dimension of believability and the libretto is amusingly delivered … We lose the *Tarantella* (not without fair reason) and have the bonus of a new, well-written overture of the traditional kind, arranged especially for this occasion by [musical director] John Owen Edwards. A good set brought applause when the curtain went up for Act Two; and colourful costumes, echoing a South Seas / Hawaiian island style for the women and Tibetan monk orange for the men completed the picture.



Act Two

Central to the action is King Paramount (Donald Maxwell) whose character was superb. Commanding with an air of importance and a continuously smiling face he first entered riding astride an authentic-looking (electric) turtle. The two meddlesome Wise Men (Simon Butteriss and Ian Belsey), who hold the King in check, complemented each other ideally in their looks, singing and activity. Their shark's teeth and shell necklaces were a nice touch as were the garlands that were put on the towering lifeguards with hilarious consequences. A public exploder with a Hitler-like appearance was wired as a typical suicide bomber and was effective in using explosive caps.

Lady Sophy (Jill Pert) in Safari attire amused us with her Margaret Rutherford / Miss Marple mannerisms and dictatorial stance.

> Trotting out the two young princesses as circus performers to provide graceful poses at the command of her ever-waving stick provided an extra dimension, as did the stage routines with the King, politely following his sitting and lying positions as a mark of respect, however uncomfortable. In fact there was much original stage business introduced for this production. We hear a plane fly in before the appearance of Captain Battleaxe and a logo board with UTOPIAIR appears from a wing. Zara, now a graduate from Girton, was sincere in her portrayal but it was a pity that her delivery wasn't always strong enough to reach the gallery as words were missed. Captain Battleaxe commanded a well turned out row of lifeguards … who sang well.
>
> The orchestra played exceptionally well … … The chorus were strong and well rehearsed. This was a Buxton occasion not to be missed …[1]



Ian Belsey (Phantis), Simon Butteriss (Scaphio)

I read the above before watching this DVD and wasn't reassured. An "electric turtle"? A "public exploder with … Hitler-like appearance … wired as a typical suicide bomber"? Besides, could *anyone* put on a "brilliant" *Utopia Limited*? But I should have had more faith – not for the first time (see G&SOC's *Yeomen* review) Mr Walker proves a reliable witness and this superb 2011 production really does justify his lavish praise. Perhaps you've prayed for years for a *Utopia Limited*, professionally mounted, fully realised? Sometimes prayers *are* answered.

Where to start with the plus points? Well, in contrast to SavoyNet's 2003 effort (see review), we get a virtually complete libretto – King Paramount's first song (here a composite of extant and deleted lines) and the excision of two short ensemble pieces were the only changes I noted, making a solid foundation on which to build. Then, crucially – perhaps most importantly – the performance of a fully-committed cast of seasoned pros is tremendous: Donald Maxwell's King, Jill Pert's Lady Sophy and Simon Butteriss's Scaphio all shine, but it's not really fair to pick out individuals, since everyone exploits their opportunity and flexes their talent to the max. It's hard not to feel a little sorry for Richard Gauntlett, whose weakly-drawn part of Tarara, the Public Exploder (a short-straw allocation if ever there was one) gives him precious little to work with. His best Bernard Cribbins impression imparts a certain individuality; his "suicide-bomber" get-up the culmination of his gradual familiarisation with the tools of his trade – but if his overall contribution pales beside that of some of his colleagues, the blame for that is all Gilbert's. We see two fine sets (shown above) with costumes to match, and the turtle is a here-and-gone hoot. All in all, exemplary.



Duncan Maxwell (King Paramount)



Jill Pert (Lady Sophy)

Rupert Christiansen, another reviewer of the production (which he "thoroughly enjoyed"), noted that

> *the choruses are as good if not better than any in the canon, and other highlights include a duet of almost Verdian beauty for tenor and soprano, a show-stopping patter septet, a deliciously camp number for the stomping Life Guards, and a wittily Betjemanesque hymn to English girls of five foot ten and eleven stone two.*[2]

Can't argue with any of that either. Time, then, to pay G&S's unlucky 13th some belated attention? You could do worse.

RUNNING TIME Overture: 5:18, Act One: 1:21:48, Act Two: 48:18, DVD total: 2:27:05



Oliver White (Fitzbattleaxe), Deborah Norman (Princess Zara)

RATING Two previous Andrew Nicklin directed G&SOC productions - *Princess Ida* (2009) and *Yeomen* (2010) - proved to be top-notch and, glory be, with this magnificent *Utopia Limited* he's turned certified sow's ear (*a mirthless travesty*; *'Limited' … in more senses than one*)[3, 4] into silk purse to make it three for three. Though the piece itself may be no *Mikado* or *Iolanthe*, this is as impressive and rewarding a rendition as you could reasonably hope to find. The prospect of next year's *Grand Duke* tantalises; fingers crossed for another gem. As for this one? A thoroughly deserved 19.

* * * * *

Sources

[1] www.musicweb-international.com / Live Reviews / Search: Utopia 2011 / "Buxton G&S Festival 2011 (5) – A brilliant production of Utopia Ltd"

[2] www.telegraph.co.uk Utopia Ltd, Buxton Opera House, review by Rupert Christiansen, 22 August 2011

[3] *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 9 October 1893

[4] *Punch*, 28 October 1893

with thanks

THE GRAND DUKE

A live performance by SavoyNet
Date: 12 August 2009
Venue: Buxton Opera House
DVD Source: Musical Collectables, Halifax (at www.gsfestivals.org)



COMMENT The Minneapolis-based G&S Very Light Opera Company "find it disappointing to see a Gilbert and Sullivan production in which the words and even the music have been changed." They believe, however, that "there are situations in which revisions … can be appropriate and even necessary … [for example] when there is an established tradition of changing Gilbert's words to make [a song] more topical [e.g. *The Mikado*'s "Little List" song, or] to restore something … original [e.g. the second verse of *Patience* song The Soldiers Of Our Queen, or - and this is where it gets interesting -] when a company decides to produce *Utopia, Limited* or *The Grand Duke*." These two "operettas", their webpage declares, are "in their original forms … all but impossible to stage." And why, exactly? Because "the dialogue in both is overwritten, they include some poor music, they contain unfinished plot lines and both are simply too long."[1]

Next, an illuminating aside (with **emphasis** added by me) dropped by Raymond J Walker into a review of *Utopia Limited*:

> *This [2011* Utopia Limited*, the first pro production in 34 years] was a Buxton occasion not to be missed … Some patrons were*

asking if The Grand Duke *will be similarly revived … **but there would be so much work needed to revamp the libretto** that I would sooner suggest a stage production of [Sullivan oratorio]* The Martyr of Antioch on Ice …[2]



So, one step back from "all but impossible …" but still, the inference is, a major challenge. Gilbert himself termed his fourteenth and last collaboration with Sullivan an "ugly misshapen little brat"[3] - and that just two days after its premiere. Hardly the words of a proud or doting parent, and indicative that he himself perceived "issues" with its structure. Here's Paul McShane:

> *Many critics consider* The Grand Duke *to have been a failure, and the least worthy of all the surviving G&S operas …* [In the July-August 1995 edition of *Paradox*, the magazine of the Sydney G&S Society,] *Peter Duffy … opined that the plot is puerile, the words are pathetic and it contains no spontaneously attractive music. Can Gilbert and Sullivan really have produced something this bad? Let us try to reach some conclusions …* [After a close examination of plot, dialogue, characters and songs, Mr McShane concludes] *that its setting is good, its characterisations OK, its plot typically Gilbertian, its dialogue uninspiring, and its lyrics and music varying from brilliant to dreadful. Could we say the same thing about other G&S operas? To some extent, yes, but on the whole,* The Grand Duke *adds up to something less than most of its predecessors. I rate it as a tie with* The Sorcerer *for last place*.[4]

So not the favourite of many. But "all but impossible to stage"? The Gilbert & Sullivan Opera Company are to mount a production at the 2012 Buxton Festival. Of course, there's no telling yet to what extent it will retain its "original form", though their 2011 *Utopia Limited* was played straight and uncut, to great acclaim. But the clinching argument is historical: *The Grand Duke* self-evidently can't be "all but impossible to stage" since, after opening at the Savoy in March 1896, it ran for 123 performances. It's supposed to be widely held among aeronautical engineers that nothing built along the lines of a bumble bee could possibly fly - but bumble bees, blissfully unaware, fly anyway. So too *The Grand Duke* - 123 performances say it can be staged (while tending, at the same time, to confirm Gilbert's callous but candid assessment of its merit).



Angela Lowe (Baroness), Ronald Orenstein (Ludwig)

Yet the Victorian era is long gone and so too G&S - highly successful in their day, to be sure, but now arguably little more than a quaint, jingoistic, anachronistic relict; a cultural trilobite. And where, in these digital, dot-com modern times is the market for fossils? So “all but impossible …” - a tough pitch, anyhow - may be right after all. But if it is no-one told SavoyNet. Or perhaps they did, only to draw the response "Really? That's what *you* think!" Unimpressed by their lukewarm 2003 *Utopia Limited* (see review), I came to this DVD with modest expectations. So, *quelle surprise!* Either they upped their

game in the course of six years or possibly 2003 was an unfortunate one-off - whichever, this 2009 SavoyNet *Grand Duke*, mostly complete (minor cuts to dialogue and some songs) is not half bad.



Sara Clark (Lisa)

If there were no stand-out shining stars in the production, the exemplary team ethic - the entire company pulling together to ensure the success of the whole - more than compensated. And there *were* scene stealing turns from Angela Lowe (Baroness) and Ian Henderson (a very *Franshe* Prince of Monte Carlo). And some delicious singing from Jane Brendler Buchi (Julia) and Sara Clark (Lisa). Ronald Orenstein (Ludwig) led ably and also coped calmly, not missing a beat, with an untimely wardrobe malfunction. Samuel Silvers (Rudolph) was as solid and on-message here as he was irritating in *Utopia*. Matt Hughes as theatre company manager Ernest held his own - was it just coincidence that he looked uncannily like Richard D'Oyly Carte? I hope not. Watch out for a cameo from Marc "the Very Well-known Costumier" Shepherd, whose name appears more than once elsewhere in these pages. It's clear from the post-show comments of adjudicator David Turner[5] that Notary William Revels lost his way during Act One, but the only hint of this on the DVD is an abrupt and otherwise puzzling edit. And, finally, the get-up of the Prince's six hired super-numeraries makes for a lovely and easily assimilated in-joke. Sets (first two pics above) good, costumes good, lighting good, DVD recording good, opera good in parts, "interesting" in others, performance just the job.

NOMINATIONS / AWARDS

Best Character Actress: Angela Lowe (Baroness)
Best Supporting Actor: Ian Henderson (Prince of Monte Carlo)
Best Supporting Actress: Jane Brendler Buchi (Julia Jellicoe)
Best Supporting Actress: Sara Clark (Lisa)

RUNNING TIME Overture (under a miscellany of images): 5:38, Act One: 1:14:51, Act Two: 1:01:28, Adjudication: 12:57, DVD total: 2:36:44



Jane Brendler Buchi (Julia)



Ian Henderson (Prince of Monte Carlo)

RATING Impossible to stage, no - but worthwhile? Surely. A fine job by all concerned - 18.

* * * * *

Sources / Reference

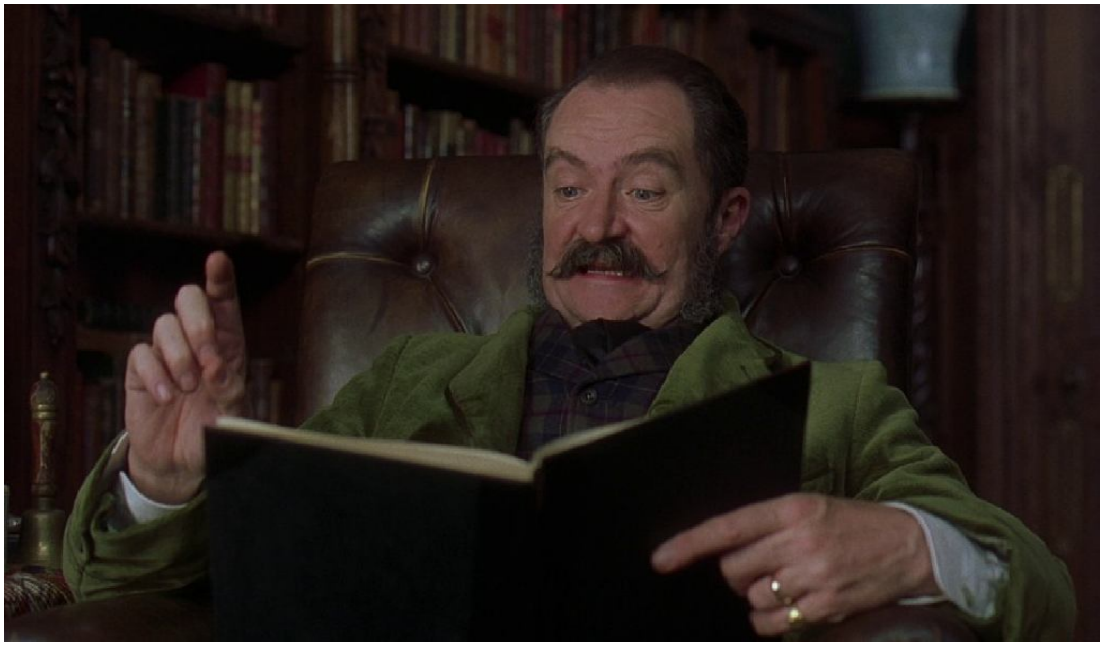
[1] www.gsvloc.org / About Us / G&S Revised
[2] www.musicweb-international.com / Live Reviews / Search: Utopia 2011 / "Buxton G&S Festival 2011 (5) – A brilliant production of Utopia Ltd"
[3] *G&S, A Dual Biography* by Michael Ainger, OUP, 2009, page 360
[4] Online resource: The G&S Archive / Grand Duke / The Last Centenary
[5] www.rosuav.blogspot.com / 2009 / August / Grand Duke (Savoy-Net) has a full transcript of this show's adjudication

with thanks

TOPSY~TURVY

Commercially available DVD.

Anyone interested enough in Gilbert and Sullivan to be reading these pages is likely to have seen *Topsy-Turvy* for themselves – but, in case you haven't, rest assured, you've a treat in store. My Pathé 2000 DVD release includes an informative director's commentary. As of March 2011, the film is also available as part of the Criterion Collection series (again with director's commentary – presumably the same one – plus other extras).



Jim Broadbent as W. S. Gilbert

Topsy-Turvy is a 1999 musical drama film written and directed by Mike Leigh. Starring Jim Broadbent as W. S. Gilbert and Allan Corduner as Sir Arthur Sullivan, the story concerns the fifteen month period prior to the 14 March 1885 premiere of *The Mikado*. Though not released widely, *Topsy-Turvy* won a number of film festival awards, two design Academy Awards and was generally favourably reviewed. Here, for example, is blogger Terry Teachout:

> *Topsy-Turvy* is the smartest backstage movie ever made, a deeply knowing fictional study of how a theatrical production takes shape. The acting, especially that of Jim Broadbent as the irascible, anxiety-ridden Gilbert, is as convincing as it is possible to be ...

And this (copy date 2nd October 1999) is *New York Times* film critic Janet Maslin:

> Mike Leigh's grandly entertaining *Topsy-Turvy* is one of those films that create a mix of erudition, pageantry and delectable acting

opportunities, much as *Shakespeare In Love* did last year ... ... As the film begins, the newly knighted Sir Arthur Sullivan (the excellent Allan Corduner) has begun to turn away from the kind of comic operetta that won him wealth and celebrity. He has also grown so distant from the not-yet-titled Gilbert that the two men do not cross paths until well into the story. The dour Gilbert, played with wonderfully literate crankiness by Jim Broadbent, is too prim and stubborn to understand his partner's dissatisfaction. Only when the famous impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte (Ron Cook) tries to force his stars to settle their differences does Gilbert have to acknowledge a problem.

Though the differences between these two strong personalities are deftly captured, *Topsy-Turvy* (which takes its title from Sullivan's dismissive view of Gilbert's tidy plot contrivances) is much bigger than their story. Its aspirations are thrilling in their own right. Mr. Leigh's gratifyingly long view of life in the theater ... includes not only historical and biographical details but also the painstaking process of creating a Gilbert and Sullivan production from the ground up. The film details all this with the luxury of a leisurely pace, as opposed to a slow one.

The Gilbert and Sullivan turnaround begins with a lightning bolt of inspiration, in the form of a London exhibition on Japanese culture. Gilbert's wife (Lesley Manville) drags him to see this, and somewhere in the midst of the kimonos and Kabuki, *The Mikado* is born. The latter half of *Topsy-Turvy* describes everything about creating this operetta, as in a wonderful sequence that creates the famous fluttering and tippy-toeing (of the) "Three Little Maids From School."

Then there are Gilbert's priceless ideas about how to direct actors. Mr. Broadbent's role is beautifully written ("I'm sure we shall reap the benefits of your remonstrations in the fullness of time," he tells one complainer), as is the actors' side of the story. One performer is heard to complain about management "particularly when the management have difficulty in locating the various whereabouts" of the posterior and the elbow.

As *The Mikado* takes shape, the film offers exultant excerpts performed by actors who are as comfortable in full stage regalia as they are behind the scenes. Well trained by Gilbert to pronounce words like "persiflage" and "corroborative," the performers (a fine troupe including Timothy Spall, Shirley Henderson and familiar faces from earlier Leigh films) make it a palpable triumph. But for Gilbert, who calls his mother "the vicious woman who bore me into this

ridiculous world," there are no happy endings. "There's something inherently disappointing about success," he insists.

Mr. Leigh's *Topsy-Turvy* ... is delightful proof to the contrary.



Allan Corduner as Sir Arthur Sullivan

And here's director Mike Leigh himself, talking on 11 November 1999 before an audience at the British Film Institute to *The Guardian*'s Michael Billington:

MB Welcome to Mike Leigh, though as he told me, I think he's now done five appearances on this stage during these talks. You hardly need a welcome, you're obviously an old hand at this.

ML But when I told you, I didn't think you would kick off by saying that!

MB Oh well, I'm full of surprises. What I would like to do is to start off by talking about *Topsy-Turvy* since I guess a large proportion of the audience will have seen it in the last couple of days. And I suppose there will be some surprise that a director who has spent most of his time dealing with contemporary Britain has made a film about Gilbert and Sullivan. Why this particular subject?

ML It's the coming together of a number of things. I felt it would be a good thing to make a film about us, what we do, we who suffer and go to hell and back taking very seriously the job of making other people laugh. And indeed it's not just those of us who are artists or in show business, I mean people who make chocolate and beer who do take it very seriously. I just felt I wanted to turn the camera around on us and our problems. Though part of that are the creative problems of creative people.

For some reason which I don't think I can define, I'm more attracted to that in the context of artists making popular art than esoteric art, really. I very much wanted to do a period film, partly because everybody else does, so why shouldn't I, and I was particularly drawn to the nineteenth century and my last theatre piece in 1993 was *It's A Great Big Shame* at Stratford East and that in fact, apart from being what it was for its own sake, was also discreetly an experiment - for anyone who didn't see it, the first act was set in 1893 and the second act in 1993 - and that was an experiment to see what would happen if we tried to create a period piece.



Shirley Henderson as Leonora Braham / Yum Yum

As to the Gilbert and Sullivan aspect of the thing, having been born in 1943 and grown up in the forties and fifties when Victorian people were still around and having grown up in a great Victorian city [i.e. Manchester] – Victorian architecture, Victorian school, Victorian teachers – we lived in a Victorian [milieu] and, of course, any amount of Victorian art, culture and everything from Dickens and Hardy to Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear and Gilbert and Sullivan. And I'm always amused by the fact that, for a fair number of people, including myself, this is part of our popular culture, and it becomes fascinatingly closet and repressed. And it's fantastically, wonderfully un-PC.

MB That's what I wanted to get at: nothing divides people more than Gilbert and Sullivan. It seems to be either aficionados or detesters. I randomly picked up a quote from Peter Hall who says he can't stand them because they are "sexless and camp". What do you say to that view of Gilbert and Sullivan?

ML Well, I think Peter Hall would know what sexless and camp was!

MB You didn't know he was coming tonight!

ML I think that's true, but the interesting thing about doing this film and the practical project of making it happen is that a huge number of people got together last year and worked on it, and what we tackled was a work of 100 years ago which has its own kind of real, organic spontaneous freshness and came out of a culture and spoke to an audience in its own way, within its own context. And by looking at it, [we] very quickly realised that this work is not inherently sexless and camp. What Peter is referring to, and I think he's right, actually, is a kind of tradition, an approach to Gilbert and Sullivan which has grown up over the last 75 or 80 years.

MB You mean the rather ossified way of staging it?



Timothy Spall as Richard Temple / The Mikado

ML Indeed, which is indeed highly sexless and deeply camp. But to be honest, this aspect to things, in other words, the thing that offends people most about the mention of Gilbert and Sullivan because they had some horrible uncle who used to whistle it in the bath, I think that is kind of irrelevant to what we tried to do with *Topsy-Turvy*, which was to get to the roots of what was happening to popular theatre in that period. But with particular focus on these guys who were interesting and with whom I certainly identified in various ways, and that is one of the other reasons to do a kind of film where one could look at oneself and one's creative activity.

MB Staying with this "sexless and camp" quote, it's very interesting because a moment ago you mentioned some of the great Victorian figures - Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. Watching your film its strikes me that there is a certain affinity between Gilbert, Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, not obviously great Victorian humorists delighting in the absurd, but is there not something odd about their sexuality? There is either a kind of sexual reticence or a neutral quality about all

three of them. Is there any importance in that fact? Was this Victorian delight in the absurd a reflection of a fear of sexuality?

ML Could be. It's a hard one, because having paid close attention to particularly Gilbert in the work that Jim Broadbent and I did in preparation for this, the interesting conclusion we came to was, compared to Lewis Carroll and certainly compared to Edward Lear, whose writing is extremely limited and genuine nonsense in that it isn't about anything, it's simply about itself - there are more resonances and concerns in the broader span of his work with aspects of life.

MB You're into different territory with the research here, aren't you? You're dealing with historical characters, with recorded fact, the commercial failure of *Princess Ida*, the discovery of the source of *The Mikado*, etc. How did the fact that you were dealing with known incidents and known historical characters ... affect your working methods, because in the normal course of events, actors come to you and characters are discovered (whereas) here the characters pre-existed?

ML Whereas, normally, with all the other films, it's about creating a world, here the vast majority of events are more or less based on what happened. It is improvised and the whole film comes out of improvisation, apart from the musical extracts. What I've done really is, after making lots of films and plays in this way, I've simply applied all those processes and techniques to this particular problem. The truth is that whether or not you start with a completely blank canvas or whether you start off by breathing life into a character who you can read about copiously in books, the actor still has to be the character in the flesh anyhow. What we simply did was to research all these people and assimilate as much as we could, but it varies from character to character because there are characters like Gilbert and Sullivan who we can read a great deal about and put together a fairly full assumed portrait. There are other people, like Richard Temple, who Tim Spall plays, about whom there are certain facts known but nothing is really known about what he was like. That allowed Spall and myself to indulge ourselves (in the realisation of) a modern contemporary character who spoke a kind of Dickensian language and to create this Victorian "actooor" character which we very much enjoyed for Richard Temple. But even in the case of Gilbert or Allan Corduner's Sullivan, however much you read, you always have to make an organic characterisation happen and that is not merely the embodiment of a collection of ideas; it's got to have a consistent behavioural wholeness and logic, and so far from being constrained by the history, in a way it was part of the motivating process.

I never really got into a situation where I thought: "Well it's a shame that happened, it would have been much better if something else had happened." I mean, there are instances in the film where I have in the dramatic structure of the film made very definite and deliberate departures from historical fact. The most important one is that Gilbert thought of *The Mikado* - which solved the problem of their impasse - before the Japanese exhibition came to London. But, when it

came, he was immediately attracted by it and indeed did, as we have in the film, have Japanese folk from the exhibition come to The Savoy Theatre to show the actors how to be Japanese. But the order is different. I just thought dramatically it was more interesting for him to get the inspiration by going to it and indeed be reluctant to go to it in the first place and have to be persuaded by his wife.

MB One of things I love about the film is the atmosphere of Victorian theatre. I think my favourite scene is the rehearsal scene which is conducted by Gilbert with four or five actors. I should imagine that is built out of your actors' imagination of what a Victorian rehearsal was like. It was full of that insecurity, (that) jokiness that rehearsals always have.



At the 2000 Academy Awards, *Topsy-Turvy* won Oscars for Best Costume Design and Makeup

ML As a number of actors have said, whilst we always research pretty copiously for all these films, normally the first thing that people research is the job their characters do. Now we rehearsed very copiously for this film, but nobody had to find out what being an actor was about. We did research what the Victorian theatre was like pretty thoroughly.

MB Another point that comes across very strongly was that Victorian England was a place of novelty. It was full of new inventions. It was a society that was changing. There is a wonderful scene with a telephone, it's a strange instrument which they have to learn how to use. Self-filling pens, even the Japanese exhibition becomes a sign of novelty. Was that part of your interest in the subject, a society in transition?

ML Yes, I think it was very much the way the western world was. Another thing which is interesting, which I hope we've brought out in the film, is the fact that middle-class society was quite outward-looking, it was quite Europe-orientated

and indeed, to some extent, America-orientated. But certainly the feeling that this was at the end of a century and moving into a new age is something implicitly there and again that's interesting to where we are, really.

MB This film was very popular at the Venice Film Festival, it won Best Actor for Jim Broadbent. Are you confident this film is going to reach out into societies where Gilbert and Sullivan are not known?

ML I don't think the film is "about" Gilbert and Sullivan. What it is actually about and what I hope we really tackle and deal with are things to do with creative process, with theatre, with relationships - between men and women and working relationships. All of those things. Hopefully those are the things that will talk to people. Having said that, I see absolutely no reason why the actual musical aspect of the thing ... and the film is, on another level, an unashamed celebration of Sullivan's music - it is, as far as I'm concerned, very accessible, sexy music and I can't see why anybody in the world shouldn't be able to tap their foot to it, unless they've got some terrible hang-up about it, which apparently some people have. We've already talked about that. Peter Hall will no doubt enjoy the film. I don't see why it shouldn't travel provided it's distributed with enthusiasm.

MB I also got the impression, because a large proportion of the film is a recreation of the staged production, that you were really a very frustrated Gilbert and Sullivan director.

ML Not at all. There's nothing I'd like to do less. It was very interesting to reconstruct those pieces of action [short excerpts from *Princess Ida* and *The Sorcerer* plus extended passages of *The Mikado*] in the same way it was interesting that the people with the telephone was interesting, or the people with the fountain pen was, but to me the fact that some of the events of film are people on a stage doing things, it is in the same territory as what you find in many of my films where we're looking at people working. It's a human activity. We had a lot of fun putting those extracts together, but I'll be honest about this, the groundwork wasn't done by me. It was done by Gary Yershon, the musical director, who got actors singing and kept an eye on all matters musical from every point of view and by Francesca Jaynes, who was the choreographer, and we worked from the original prompt copies and they got together the main shape of it and I dealt with it in some detail and worked out how to shoot it. I really have no interest in directing such things at all because they don't really come up under the heading of what really motivates me as a director, which is depicting the real world, and whatever these comic operas do, they don't do that.

RUNNING TIME 154 minutes

SUBTITLES Yes

RATING Not to be missed - 20

G&S ~ A MOTLEY PAIR

Commercially available DVD (Capriol Films, 2010) containing the five-part Sky Arts series *G&S – A Motley Pair* and, on a standalone bonus disc, *Grossmith, Gilbert and Sullivan – A Salaried Wit.*

First, re ***A Motley Pair***, here's an amalgam of copy from Sky Arts and Capriol:

> The first lyricist-composer double-act who sought to transform the conventions of Victorian music halls and operas to make them more accessible, Gilbert and Sullivan enjoyed extraordinary successes with their innovative and whimsical works, including *The Pirates of Penzance*, *HMS Pinafore* and *The Mikado*. Yet their musicals still polarise opinion: while they are loved and performed by their fans to audiences around the world, their detractors dismiss them as embarrassingly overblown.



> This major series questions why G&S are so enduringly popular and admired across the world and why their work lives on in performances from village halls to the Prom concerts, from the West End of London to the back end of beyond. Tracing the origins, triumphs and disasters of the famous pair, its five episodes include contributions from Valerie Masterson, Michael Ball, Germaine Greer, Sir Jonathan Miller, the late Sir Charles Mackerras and more. *A Motley Pair* is presented in a thought-provoking and absorbing fashion by renowned G&S performer Simon Butteriss (above), whose trademark intellect and onscreen charm never fail to engage the viewer.[1]

First shown on Sky Arts in 2010, *A Motley Pair* relates cheerily, briskly but comprehensively – 1860s to the present – the G&S story. In five half-hour episodes writer / presenter Simon Butteriss visits locations associated with their past, conducts around 25 interviews variously sampled throughout the series and reenacts with a small, purpose-recruited company scenes from most of the operas from *Trial By Jury* through to *Utopia Limited*. When at the end of episode four Butteriss as Jack Point leads his troupe through a particularly melodramatic I Have A Song To Sing O, you can't help but feel that the entire enterprise is as much a showcase for his own abounding talent as anything else. But, since he is indeed very good at what he does, and takes considerable pains to recount his tale in a lucid and compelling manner, then so what? You either take the series for what it is – informative, well crafted, easily assimilated TV – or leave it be. Interviewees include former D'Oyly Carte stalwarts Valerie Masterson and Thomas Round, conductors Sir Charles Mackerras and Jane Glover, National Theatre director Nicholas Hytner, performers Michael Ball, Felicity Palmer, Gillian Knight and Felicity Lott, also Germaine Greer (hard on fans), Jonathan Miller (who comes up with some remarkable quotes), Edward Seckerson and more.

* * * * *



The subject of 2006's ***A Salaried Wit*** is George Grossmith (above), the original D'Oyly Carte "patter man". Once again the programme is written, presented and principally acted by Simon Butteris – and once again, while contriving unashamedly to produce a vehicle for his own particular schtick (several patter songs performed in part or full), he manages at the same time to tell, ably and convincingly, a fascinating tale of Victorian (comparative) rags to riches. Here's part of the programme's Sky Arts blurb:

The world of the arts is littered with individuals for whom the artistic imperative proved too strong for the 'ordinary' careers fate had bestowed upon them: Rod Stewart is a former gravedigger; comedian Billy Connolly was a shipyard welder, and a young Sean Connery used to polish coffins at his local undertakers. Thank goodness then, that George Grossmith abandoned his less-than-illustrious career as a legal reporter and journalist and became Gilbert & Sullivan's original 'patter man'.





Butteriss as Grossmith as *Iolanthe's* Lord Chancellor (above) and *Yeomen's* Jack Point

He found success on the London stage as a comedian famed for his improvisational skills and became a regular member of Richard

> D'Oyly Carte's Savoy Theatre company. Soon a major star and crucial influence on the operas' comedic elements from *The Sorcerer* to *The Yeomen of the Guard*, he remained with the company for twelve years before leaving to write his bestselling book, *The Diary of a Nobody* ...[2]

While no substitute for the operas themselves and though one viewing may well prove enough for most, still it is unlikely that anyone with more than a passing interest in G&S will regret time spent with either one of these two anodyne but engaging DVDs.



A Motley Pair, episode one: Simon Butteriss shows off ... ... his talents

RUNNING TIME Each of the five episodes of *A Motley Pair* runs 28 minutes, giving a series total of 2:20:00. *A Salaried Wit* runs 59 minutes.

SUBTITLES None

RATING 17

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Sources

[1] www.skyarts.co.uk / www.capriolfilms.co.uk
[2] Ibid.

with thanks