

Entre'acte

The Opera
Supers of
Iowa City
Newsletter

Volume IV, Number 6

July 1989

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Letter from the Editor

This is the last number of *ENTRE'ACTE* for the current volume year. If someone would like to take over the task of writing and editing copy for the newsletter, this is the opportunity to do so. I am quite willing to give up this position. Writing a newsletter for the Opera Supers of Iowa City is a challenge that can provide an outlet for anyone who has an interest in opera or music in general and wants to support the productions of the University Opera Theater in particular. There are other ways to do the newsletter than what I have been doing. I am limited in what I can do by virtue of my lack of musical education and training. I have been able to satisfy my curiosity about things operatic and about matters pertaining to the specific operas put on by the Opera Theater. I have done the research necessary to satisfy this curiosity for the past four years, but now it is time to ask if someone else would like to take over the task. However, if there are no takers, I shall continue in my own personal way, trying to be responsive to changes, additions, and suggestions from the readers. Other than my own limitations, there are limitations to the newsletter imposed by the production, distribution and costs which any new editor would have to take into consideration.

The major content of this issue of *ENTRE'ACTE* has been determined by my curiosity about this summer's opera, *The Gondoliers*. If you are not familiar with *The Gondoliers*, which is very likely, you may find some audio recordings and a video disc recording of the opera in the Rita Benton Music Library which you can review in the library. The Iowa City Public Library also has recordings of many of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas, including an LP album of *The Gondoliers*.

June 12, 1989 Meeting Report

Thirty-one Supers convened for the first meeting of the summer. This was a large turnout despite the fact that a number of regulars were unable to attend. A number of announcements were made: *Carmen*, the spring opera, was a great box office success. The music ticket sales idea for admission to some Music School concerts and recitals has been tabled for the

present. More research as to its advisability and feasibility is to be carried out. Rosemary Lack, the graduate student whose career is of interest to many of us, won a competition held by the Milwaukee Choral Society and will be doing several concerts as soloist with that group. Kimm Julian will be singing in Tucson and Phoenix after his stint with Des Moines Metro and then will be doing Jack Rance in *Girl of the Golden West* for Sacramento Opera in the fall. Professor Glass needs a boy super for the drummer boy in *Gondoliers*. He can also use more singers for the chorus. Shirley Harrison left word that she is leaving the position as chairperson for the Costume Committee. Marlene Stanford agreed to replace Shirley. Jean Kern and Jean Walker volunteered to do the phone calling for strike party food suppliers. The post-performance potluck this summer will be a between-performances affair scheduled for 5:00 p.m. on Saturday, July 29. Opera Supers were asked to help Doris and Bob Eckert with the reception to be given after *Power Failure*, the Paul Drescher/Rinde Eckert event at Hancher Friday, October 27. If Kathleen Battle, scheduled for Hancher next April, does agree to a reception/party, the Supers will conduct the event.

The rest of the meeting was devoted to ideas for promoting *The Gondoliers*. The next meeting will be Thursday, June 29. The meeting adjourned at 8:30 to celebrate Mona Shaw's birthday with cake and coffee.

William Schwenk Gilbert and Arthur Seymour Sullivan: A Commentary

Most of the operas by Gilbert and Sullivan have two titles. There is the main one by which we all know the opera, e.g., *H.M.S. Pinafore*, and then there is the second title either giving a hint of the target concept of the work or representing a whim or even a private joke by the librettist. Thus, it is *H.M.S. Pinafore*, or *the Lass that Loved a Sailor*. By the way, I use the term opera, as most of the G&S works were presented that way, or as "opera comique," and generally as the "Savoy Operas," but you go ahead and use the term operetta if it makes you feel better. *The Gondoliers*, or *the King of Barataria*, "a comic opera in two acts," is our summer presentation.

Why is it "Gilbert and Sullivan" instead of "Sullivan and Gilbert"? In the early history of opera, the libretto was the dominant factor until the 18th century when the composer of the music came to the forefront. Quoting Mozart (1781), "In an opera the poetry must be altogether the obedient daughter of the music." In no small part the shift in dominance to the musical composer came about because of the increased power of the orchestra requiring the singers to expand their voices to match this power. However, composers, even the most creative among them, need a librettist who is capable of doing the job. Sometimes the composer himself may write his own libretto as did, for example, Wagner. The new-found dominance of the composer over the librettist extended to both the comic opera and opera *seria*. Just as it was a *Mozart* opera libretto by Da Ponte, a *Verdi* opera libretto by Boito, it was an *Offenbach* operetta, libretto by Meilhac and Halévy. Even in American musical theater it has been Rodgers and Hammerstein, not the other way around. But when it comes to *Pirates of Penzance*, *Trial by Jury*, *The Mikado*, etc., it is Gilbert and Sullivan. Is this a matter of dominance of the libretto over the music, or of the personality of Gilbert, who was after all a most autocratic figure? It has been noted by biographers that Gilbert felt frustrated and even angry that audiences would leave the opera singing or whistling the melody but not remembering the words. Gilbert, who was probably exposed to opera earlier than Sullivan, took the conventional view that in *grand* opera, the position of the librettist was secondary, but for *comic* opera it was different. His ideas about the proper function of music in comedy came from his work in burlesque and pantomimes wherein the music consisted of detached songs scattered throughout the action. The function of the music, as he saw it, was to add to the levity produced by the text. Thus it was that when he came to collaborate with composers in theater, he adhered to the comedy-with-songs formula. Arthur Sullivan, however, was no mere songwriter putting music to funny verses. By the time he met Gilbert, he was a recognized composer of serious music in his own right and was considered by many to be Victorian England's musical genius. He was in a position to regard his contribution to any collaborative effort as substantial and equal, if not superior, to that of the librettist. None of the biographies that I have come across adequately attacked the question of why the order of names on all their works is always Gilbert and Sullivan. The answer appears to be found in the fortuitous combination of events that led to their first collaboration in 1876. It began at the instigation of the manager of the then recently opened Gaiety Theatre who asked Sullivan to set music to a two-act Christmas play that had already been written by Gilbert. Thus, it was Gilbert's play

Thespis and the music for it by Sullivan that was produced and performed on the Gaiety stage. *Thespis* flopped after an initially good run, and its music has been lost. The two men would have gone their separate ways if it were not for Richard D'Oyly Carte, who had taken over the management of the Royalty Theatre in 1875 for a season of Offenbach operacomique. He was looking for a curtain raiser to put on with Offenbach's *La Perichole* which, while highly popular, was too short for an evening's entertainment. He needed a piece that would be very English and just as amusing as Offenbach. In walked Gilbert by chance and after listening to Carte's description of his problem offered him a piece he had written recently about a mock trial, hoping to get Carl Rosa (impresario of grand opera) to write the music for it and get Rosa's wife, a popular soprano, to appear in the lead. Carte, having seen *Thespis* and being impressed by it, suggested to Gilbert that Sullivan should compose the music, not Rosa. At Carte's insistence, Gilbert took the script to Sullivan, who agreed to do the music. Thus was *Trial by Jury* born, to appear on a D'Oyly Carte program with Offenbach's *La Perichole*. It was a smash hit with the English, who could enjoy the ridicule of one of their national institutions, the legal court system. It was a new kind of opera, ridiculous but not rubbish, and far more intelligent than the usual comic opera fare of the times. Thirteen more comic opera works by Gilbert and Sullivan, produced by D'Oyly Carte, were to follow. Much has been written about the conflict between the two men throughout the years of their collaboration. There were clashes of personality, production, content, division of labor and spoils, but the works were truly products of collaborative genius. *The Gondoliers* was the eleventh opera written by the two after *Trial by Jury*.

A Most Brief Synopsis of *The Gondoliers*, or *The King of Barataria*

The story of the opera is based on a favorite theme of Gilbert-- a child who is stolen at birth. Gilbert himself had been kidnapped for a brief period during his family's visit to Venice (note the locale of the opening of the opera). Two gondoliers, Giuseppe and Marco Palmieri, have come into the city of Venice to choose brides. The two have been raised as brothers, but one of them is supposed to be a king's son who had been kidnapped as a baby and given away. The trouble is that no one knows which of the two brothers is the prince, as the old gondolier who had raised them had died without revealing the truth. It is decided that both brothers will have to reign together, balancing their powers between them. Meanwhile, the most regal but broke Duke of Plaza-Toro arrives on the scene with his daughter,

Casida. She was betrothed as a baby to marry the prince but is secretly in love with her father's servant, Luiz. Guiseppe and Marco travel to the kingdom of Barataria, where they are supposed to rule together. The pair try to rule the kingdom following the precepts of republicanism (a topic of interest in Gilbert's time), with the result of a rather topsy-turvy court. The plot unwinds to reveal that, in fact, neither of the brothers is the lost prince. The real king-to-be, you guessed it, is Luiz. Thus, Casida is able to marry her own true love, and the gondoliers do not have to give up the wives they had chosen in Venice.

Don't be surprised if you think you hear echoes of *Carmen* in the opera. The *Daily Telegraph* (London, 1889) said, "*The Gondoliers* conveys an impression of having been written *con amore*." You should not miss it.

Barataria: Where and What?

Were audiences of the Gilbert and Sullivan Savoy operas concerned about the location of Barataria? Did they know, or even care? Should the assumption be that this is just the title of a fabled land invented by W.S. Gilbert as one of many inventions in his poems, burlesques and puns, or does it have a special significance? I had to satisfy my curiosity and, as the first step, searched for any references in the few biographical sketches of Gilbert and Sullivan and the accounts of their works. That having revealed no answer, the next step, of course, was to look in geographical atlases and dictionaries. And there is a Bay of Barataria located among the island-dotted bayous of Louisiana! I suppose if I had asked a New Orleans native, I would have learned about this Bay of Barataria. It was the hiding place of the infamous Jean Lafitte, pirate, who operated from various parts of the bay. The residents of the area were even called Baratarians. If Gilbert had known of Lafitte and his hiding place, what possible reason would he have for using the name of the bay in the opera? Was it something to do with piracy, hide-outs, or the like? This is not satisfying to any appreciation of the opera or of Gilbert, even though he wrote parodies of pirates and pirate hunters in other works (*Pirates of Penzance*). I had to read on. The clue came from a reference to Gilbert's being fond of *Don Quixote* by Cervantes. One might have called Gilbert a *cervantista*, who admired the wit, sarcasm, and critical parody of treasured social, political, and religious institutions that are found in *Don Quixote*. They were certainly close to Gilbert's way of thinking. Going through 900-plus pages of the Putnam translation of *Don Quixote* was not a task to my liking, so instead I focused on the section of notes and rapidly scanned them for sight recognition of the word Barataria, and lo and behold, there it was! In

Part II, Chapter XLV, there is a tale relating how Sancho Panza takes over the governorship of an island called Barataria Island. *Don Quixote* was written well before Louisiana was named, let alone any of its bays. Barataria, the main village of the island, was described as having about 1,000 inhabitants. Cervantes tells us it was named by reason of the *barato*. *Barato* is a Spanish adjective meaning cheap, but in old Spanish it is also a noun signifying "a jest." Sancho Panza was to govern the land of a joke? According to Putnam, Barataria was said to be a favorite "hunting ground for political allusions with *cervantistas*." In the tale, Sancho is declared *Don Sancho*, but he rejects the title, stating that there never had been a don in all the generations of his family. It was his intention to weed out all the dons in Barataria, "who were probably numbered more than stones on the island."

Considering the story of *The Gondoliers* and the iconoclastic nature of Gilbert, it makes sense to have the subtitle be *The King of Barataria*. Thus is my curiosity satisfied. I venture to guess that the bay off Louisiana where Lafitte hid out was named Barataria by a *cervantista*.

POST SCRIPT: I have just learned that two operas have been written about Sancho Panza's adventure on Barataria as described in Cervante's *Don Quixote, Part II*. These are *La Insulata Barataria* by Arrieta (1864) and *Le Gouvernement de Sancho Pança* by Legouix (1903). I do not know if they have ever been performed.

Miscellaneous Notes, News, etc.

Our special thanks and appreciation go to Shirley Harrison for her having served as the liaison person for Costumes these past four years. Shirley has asked to be replaced, and Marlene Stanford has agreed to take over that role.

The post-performance potluck supper after *Carmen* was its usual success and well attended by Supers, Opera Theater Staff and, much to our joy, student members of the cast. Remember, the potluck supper for the summer opera will be a *between-performance* affair on Saturday, July 29th, 5:00 p.m., at the home of Linda & Douglas Behrendt, 822 Park Road, Iowa City. The potluck will feature English fare, but bring whatever you like. Please call Linda (337-5342), Miriam Canter (338-1217), or Mona Shaw (335-1667) if you are planning to come.

While the horses in *Carmen* got most of the publicity in the newspapers, it should be known that the Big Three Super supers who took roles in the production drew accolades for their performances. After all, it did take courage to run out on the stage between the second and third horses!

Important Numbers

Arthur Canter, newsletter, 338-1217
Miriam Canter, hospitality, 338-1217
Marlene Stanford, costumes, 354-0600
Linda Behrendt, publicity, 337-5342
Mary Wall, scenery, 338-2618
Marilyn Somville, Director of the School of Music, 335-1601
Beaumont Glass, Director of Opera Theater, 335-1669
Mona Shaw, Public Relations Coordinator, 335-1667
Dwight Sump, Opera Production Manager, 335-1153
Margaret Wenk, Opera Designer, 335-2899

Next Meeting: Tuesday, July 18, 1989, 7:00 p.m.,
Music Building Lounge (Room 1028).

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