PART I

Background

1 Savoy opera and its discontents: the theatrical background to a quarrel

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The West End theatre as we know it is a Victorian inheritance. Many theatre buildings still stand from this period, but more importantly the methods of production and patterns of audience behaviour which we take for granted were established then. Those who work in the contemporary theatre often take exception to this state of affairs. They look on theatre-land as hideously bourgeois and seek, albeit in vain, to reclaim it for the working class. The Victorians experienced the same problem in reverse. For them the challenge was to overcome the disrepute of working-class association and establish the theatre as a domain of the respectable bourgeoisie. The Savoy operas have their full share of this ambition; but they are end products rather than prime movers. Their roots lie deep in the eighteenth century, or earlier, and we regard them as 'entirely original' only because we have ceased to be aware of those roots. Above all it should be understood that their ancestry does not lie in 'opera' as the term is generally used, but in the popular London alternatives to it.

Theatre regulation

Following the Puritan interregnum, which banned all forms of public entertainment, King Charles II in 1662 granted letters patent to Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant for the performance of 'tragedies, comedies, plays, operas, music, scenes and all other entertainments of the stage'.[1] One patent became established at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, while the other eventually devolved upon the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden. In 1766 George III granted a summer patent to Samuel Foote at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket, which duly became the third Theatre Royal. Theatres operating outside the patents were technically illegal, and ran under constant threat of interference by the authorities.

A situation already sufficiently complicated was made more so by censorship, instituted by the Licensing Act of 1737. The purpose of the Act was partly to protect the patents, partly to suppress political attacks on the government – notably those of Henry Fielding, whose *Pasquin* (1736) was seen as a satire on the corrupt Walpole administration. By the terms of the Act all

new plays had to be read and licensed by the Lord Chamberlain's office, and the non-patent theatres were abolished. In practice the unlicensed theatres continued to be tolerated provided they eschewed politics, particularly personal attacks on identifiable politicians. Social satire, exposing the follies of the age, was less objectionable to the censor, but the puritanical objection to *all* theatre remained as a significant social and religious force throughout the century and beyond.[2]

Avoiding regulation

As might be expected, the proprietors of the three patent theatres jealously guarded their rights. Anyone who wished to run a non-patent or 'minor' theatre had to find ways of producing works to which the terms of the patents did not apply. The result was a lengthy, sometimes rambunctious, battle between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' drama, only ended by the Theatres Act of 1843, which brought the minor theatres into a licensing system. At the same time the rapid expansion of Westminster in all directions created new audiences, eager for entertainment of any kind. So far from being the grey-haired middle-class minority with whom we are familiar, these audiences really did include the great unwashed. They were vociferous in their likes and dislikes, and not above a riot when sufficiently roused, as for example in September 1809 when audiences created uproar for days on end after the Covent Garden management tried to raise ticket prices.[3]

Much of the strife between the patent and minor theatres arose because the terms of the patents seemed to embrace almost anything that could be put on the stage. Broadly speaking the patent theatres saw themselves as the guardians of Shakespearean drama and tragedy, spoken comedy, and opera, normally Italian opera. The minor theatres turned to mime and circus – because they contained no spoken language – and imported an Italian mongrel form, generically known as burletta, which 'proved a very elastic term, comprehending opera, serious and comic, farce, pantomime, melodrama, burlesque, in fine, anything except tragedy and comedy; the one hard and fast rule being that a certain number of songs should be introduced, and the notes of a piano occasionally struck throughout the performance'.[4]

As an almost infinitely flexible form the burletta became a staple of all theatres, patent and non-patent alike. It embraced ballad opera like *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) but differed from comic opera such as Arne's *Thomas and Sally* (1760) in that it required no composer because the songs were adapted from existing popular sources. The dialogue might be in prose

or verse, including blank verse, and the story might be a straightforward comic tale, or a burlesque of a familiar subject. Lampe's *Dragon of Wantley* (1737) is a burlesque in both words and music. A further distinction lay in the performers: 'Ballad opera was designed for the player who could sing, comic opera for the singer who could make some attempt at acting'.[5] And the form persisted. The popular *Midas* (1766) is formally indistinguishable from the burlesque of a century later – the dialogue is in rhymed couplets, the songs are popular tunes fitted with new words, and the characters are the gods of Olympus brought down to earth.

Nineteenth-century development

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the theatre remained more or less where Walpole had left it, with the difference that the population of London had grown substantially in the meantime, and more 'illegitimate' theatres such as the Surrey (1782) had grown up to meet the demand for entertainment. The sentimental comedy of the eighteenth century had begun to give way to romantic melodrama, but burlesque and burletta continued as a popular staple, often in the form of an afterpiece.

Later in the century a new force began to enter the equation in the shape of the access provided by omnibus and railway services. These opened up the possibility of theatre attendance by the rapidly expanding suburban middle class, and facilitated the long runs which became an increasingly familiar feature from the 1850s onwards.[6] Henry Morley estimated that 15,000 people per night were attending theatres in the 1860s.[7]

From the point of view of a theatre manager the middle class provided an obvious source of income, the difficulty being that they often chose to protect their new-found status by religion and snobbery. In spite of their potential as audience such people would not go to the theatre for fear of what they might encounter on and off the stage. Clearly reform was required if they were to be attracted into the theatre, and if theatre itself were to lose the stigma of illegitimacy. According to all contemporary testimony the process of change was begun by Elizabeth Vestris (1797–1856) during her tenure of the Olympic Theatre from 1831. Together with her second husband Charles Mathews (1803–1878) she

> introduced for the first time in England that reform in all theatrical matters which has since been adopted at every theatre in the kingdom.
> Drawing-rooms were fitted up like drawing-rooms, and fitted with care and taste. Two chairs no longer indicated that two persons were to be seated.
> A claret-coloured coat, salmon-coloured trousers, with a broad black stripe, a sky-blue neckcloth with a large paste brooch, and a cut-steel eye-glass with

> a pink ribbon, no longer marked the light-comedy gentleman, and the public at once recognized and appreciated the changes.[8]
>
> Madame [Vestris] was an admirable manager, and Charles [Mathews] an amiable assistant. The arrangements behind the scenes were admirable. The dressing rooms were perfect, the attendants well chosen; 'the wings' kept clear of all intruders – no strangers or crutch and toothpick loafers allowed behind to flirt with the ballet-girls; only a very few private friends were allowed the privilege of visiting the green room, which was as handsomely furnished as any nobleman's drawing room, and those friends always appeared in evening dress . . . There was great propriety and decorum observed in every part of the establishment, great harmony, general content prevailed in every department of the theatre, and universal regret was felt when the admirable managers were compelled to resign the government.[9]

In tandem with her managerial reforms Madame Vestris secured the services of J. R. Planché (1796–1880) as playwright. The two worked together over a period of more than twenty years, developing a new, magnificently lavish, production style and an approach to costume based on historical accuracy. Planché's first work for the Vestris management, *Olympic Revels* (3 January 1831), followed a recent appearance by Vestris in *Midas*. Like *Midas*, *Olympic Revels* is a burletta, 'replete with word-play and puns, topical allusions to English life, and a prevailing mood of comic bathos that arises from the incongruity of such utterances in the mouths of classical gods and demi-gods'.[10] Its success paved the way for a series of works in similar style which Planché called extravaganzas. Extravaganza, pantomime and burlesque are virtually indistinguishable on the page.

In writing his extravaganzas Planché made frequent use of the magic world of eighteenth-century French *féerie*. He also introduced the dead-pan acting style which we associate with W. S. Gilbert: 'Planché's major innovation as stage manger was to insist that the characters of his extravaganzas be played "straight". Whatever the nonsense they spoke, however absurdly or grotesquely they were called on to behave, their manner should be intent and matter-of-fact.'[11]

The new burlesque

Unfortunately Planché's innovations were not wholly positive. 'Lowness (figuratively speaking) is the Sublimity of Burlesque', said Henry Carey, the librettist of *The Dragon of Wantley*.[12] In Planché's works the satirical sharpness of Fielding and Foote, and the 'sublime lowness' of burlesque, give way to something he would have called artistic refinement, and we can only call genial pap. 'This is not a burlesque', said Thackeray, 'it is an

idyll'.[13] Others said that he 'wrote in white kid gloves' or that he 'lived on honey and nectar'.[14] Theatrical reformers welcomed his achievement, but audiences had by no means abandoned their taste for something more invigorating.

This left room for a further development of burlesque by a group of writers of whom H. J. Byron (1834–84) and F. C. Burnand (1836–1917) are the best remembered. The new burlesque, beginning in 1850,[15] took advantage of Planché's reforms, but rejected his good manners. It was irreverent, vigorously danced and acted, and above all characterised by far-fetched puns. The practice of writing words to existing popular music was retained, as were cross-dressing and the use of rhymed couplets in the dialogue. Its modern expression is the Christmas pantomime. The high-minded case against it was put by Henry Morley in some comments on Burnand's *Ixion*, or *The Man at the Wheel* (1863):[16]

> The whole success of the piece was made by dressing up good looking girls as immortals lavish in display of leg and setting them to sing and dance, or rather kick burlesque capers, for the recreation of fast blockheads. If Miss Pelham only knew how she looks in the eyes of the better half of any audience when she comes forward with sandy beard and moustaches disfiguring her face, and with long pink legs wriggling her body into the ungainly gestures of burlesque toeing and heeling, the woman in her would rise in rebellion against the miserable vulgarity of the display. As for the Hon. Lewis Wingfield, who dressed his thin figure in petticoats and spoke falsetto as Minerva – every man to his taste! His great success was an idiotic dance in petticoats that might stand for something in competitive examination for admission into the Earlswood Asylum, but as a gentleman's first bid for the honours of the English stage was a distressing sight to see.[17]

It was at this point in the history of burlesque that W. S. Gilbert made his entrance. Gilbert's ambition was always to succeed Planché – he subscribed to the testimonial edition of Planché's extravaganzas – but he began his career with a series of operatic burlesques, expertly carried out in the punning manner of Byron, who no less than Planché contributed substantially to the ethos we call Gilbertian.[18] Finally, in his first collaboration with Sullivan, Gilbert produced a classical burlesque in the time-honoured manner: *Thespis* or *The Gods Grown Old* (Gaiety Theatre, 23 December 1871).

In describing the theatrical ancestry of Gilbert's work we are also drawing attention to what was really new in his collaboration with Sullivan, namely the provision of original music by a gifted composer. Most of the music of *Thespis* is lost, but one of the choruses, 'Climbing over rocky mountain', was redeployed in *The Pirates of Penzance*. Here, in place of the traditional reach-me-down material, is music of beauty and dramatic presence such as

the English stage had not heard since the death of Purcell. Sullivan's arrival transformed burlesque into opera.

Burlesque and satire

Because his best-known works were written in the 1880s it is easy to forget that Gilbert's earliest and most intense theatrical experiences were of pantomime in the 1840s. He wrote about pantomime,[19] and once said modestly that burlesque 'in its highest development calls for high intellectual power on the part of its professors'.[20] It is in this context that the various reforms attributed to Gilbert must be understood. Seeing greater potential in burlesque than his contemporaries, and determined to return it to its Planchéan state, he moderated the objectionable features of Byronian practice as described by Henry Morley, creating in the process an allotropic form peculiar to himself – 'burlesque in long clothes' as John Hollingshead called it. Above all the desire for respectability which had motivated the Vestris management returned with Cromwellian vigour in the mind of Gilbert – the 'Immaculate Schwenck'[21] – who boasted to William Archer of his ambitions in that direction:

> It is a mistake to suppose that I ever complained of the influence of the 'young girl in the dress-circle'. It is to her that I attribute the fact that most of the plays produced in the 'sixties and 'seventies were sweet and clean. I have always held that 'maxima reverentia' is due to that young lady. I am so old-fashioned as to believe that the test whether a story is fit to be presented to an audience in which there are many young ladies, is whether the details of that story can be decently told at (say) a dinner-party at which a number of ladies and gentlemen are present . . . I have always kept this test well before me in writing plays, and I have never found myself inconveniently hampered by it.[22]

Gilbert never explained why he thought these principles were desirable, and yet in adopting them he denied himself a very wide field of expression. His mind was too sharp for mere Planchéan good nature, but his determination not to bring the blush of embarrassment to the cheek of innocence made it impossible for him to perform the task of the satirist, which is to bring the blister of shame to the cheek of guilt. Like all writers of burlesque he made political jokes, but the official sensitivity that led the Walpole administration to suppress Fielding led in his case only to a letter of congratulation from the Prime Minister himself, Mr Gladstone, on the 'good taste' of *Iolanthe*.[23] A proper understanding of the nature of burlesque, and of the difference between burlesque and satire, is essential to any discussion of Savoy opera:

> He [Gilbert] has been honoured with the name of satirist. He was not a satirist. His wit was strongly ironical, but it was a burlesque wit. He has been widely considered as the originator of an entirely new style of writing. He was not that either. At the beginning of his career he wrote so-called burlesques on popular successes, and, like all the other humorists, he wrote in rhymed couplets garnished with puns. He was an extravaganza writer, deriving, as they all did, directly from Planché. But whereas Henry J. Byron, the Broughs, and the à Becketts were illegitimate descendants, denounced and denied by their parent, Gilbert was the acknowledged heir.[24]

It is their root in extravaganza–burlesque–pantomime that makes the Savoy operas so apparently difficult to classify. Just as Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* is derived from opera seria, opera buffa, and the lost Viennese suburban theatrical entertainments, so they are an outgrowth of the forgotten repertoire of the London theatre. Once the hinterland is excavated they become altogether more comprehensible. Katisha and Widow Twankey are sisters under the skin.[25]

English comic opera

The story of the founding of the partnership between Gilbert and Sullivan is well known. Richard D'Oyly Carte, then the assistant manager and musical director of the Royalty Theatre, was in need of a short companion piece for Offenbach's *La Périchole* – he had already, in 1870, suggested 'the starting of English comic opera' to Sullivan.[26] Now he approached both Sullivan and Gilbert, and was given *Trial by Jury* (25 March 1875). The success of *Trial by Jury* and the ambition of Carte combined to make the further collaboration of Gilbert and Sullivan a matter of deliberate policy. It is important to recognise that without the initiative of Carte, and without the binding contractual obligations incurred by Sullivan (especially) and Gilbert towards him, the famous partnership might never have come into being, and would certainly have ended earlier than it did.

In agreeing to compose for the burlesque stage Sullivan was well aware that the dyer's hand must be subdued to what it works in. His father had been a clarinet player in the orchestra at the Surrey Theatre, and his approach to music was entirely professional and pragmatic – one has only to look at his bohemian life-style to realise that he was not born to follow Beethoven up the winding stair. On the other hand he had been educated in the European tradition, and his creative capacity was altogether broader and deeper than anything required by burlesque. His extraordinary ability to invest a textual skeleton with living musical flesh made him the ideal partner for any librettist, but his ultimate purpose was to create English

opera in the proper sense by giving expression to human emotion through musical drama.

Gilbert for his part realised that he must accommodate the values of Sullivan, but he stood apart from them because his horizons did not really extend beyond the execution of his own reforms. He was additionally fearful that his contribution would be devalued in full-blown opera. As a result he made concessions to music without any fundamental departure from his base camp in burlesque. His marked egocentricity made him a difficult collaborator, and in the end an impossible one.

The outline of all future problems can be clearly discerned in *The Sorcerer* (17 November 1877), the first of the deliberately planned works by Gilbert and Sullivan. The demands of the composer meant that the musical element of the new opera could not consist simply of a few comic songs – more was required. The effect is seen in concerted numbers, in a lengthy concerted finale to the first act, and in the way in which the chorus functions as a character in the action. All of these became standard features of later works. In deference to Sullivan *The Sorcerer* is also an English work, set in an English village, performed by English artists. A manifesto by D'Oyly Carte published in *The Era* sets out the stall in unmistakable terms:

> It is many years since the manager of any theatre in London devoted to musical performance has relied for his opening programme entirely on the products of an English author and composer. But the taste of English audiences is turning in this direction, and it is a matter of fact that of all the light operas native and foreign that have been given of late years the most remarkably successful has been the little piece *Trial By Jury*, the joint work of our English dramatist Mr W. S. Gilbert, and our English composer Mr Arthur Sullivan. In arranging, as I am happily able to announce that I have done, for a new opera of more important dimensions by the popular author and composer above named, I believe that I have secured an attraction which will at any rate – whatever be its ultimate result – command the attention of all who are interested in a legitimate lyric performance, a performance which will depend for its success simply on its merits and not on any meretricious displays of costume – or rather absence of costume – or by any objectionable suggestiveness of motive or dialogue. To such a performance I believe many will come who have stayed away from fear of having to sit through hours of dull and unwholesome frivolity . . . Author, composer, singers and actors are all English. I appeal to the public to come forward and support the undertaking.[27]

Thus far the composer is satisfied; but in the matter of the performers the old tension between singers who could not act and actors who could not sing was never resolved, leaving a permanent effect on the music as Sullivan adapted it to the limitations of the cast. It was Gilbert's fixed opinion that acting can

be taught by repetitive drill, like soldiering, and he managed the production of his works accordingly.[28] A group of obedient novices was recruited for *The Sorcerer* and its successors because no established artist would have submitted to such parade-ground methods. Insofar as they put an end to the old approach to production which allowed the principals to wander the stage at will,[29] these methods made for reformation. Unfortunately they also made for mediocrity and ossification as Gilbert and his heirs refused to allow 'any deviation whatever' from the dialogue and stage business once they had been determined by him.[30]

The lozenge plot

A marked tendency to perseveration and rigidity informs the Gilbertian imagination at large. Sullivan experienced it most acutely through what he famously called the lozenge plot, of which *The Sorcerer* is the first example. Reduced to essentials, the lozenge is a charm of some kind which has the effect of creating magic but mechanical transformations in the characters; the 'plot' is the sequential process by which the charm first takes hold, then has its effects reversed. In the case of *The Sorcerer* the lozenge becomes a potion which causes the villagers of Ploverleigh to fall in love with each other *à tort et à travers*, as Sullivan put it; the spell is broken by the self-sacrificial death of John Wellington Wells.

With or without magic the very nature of burlesque is inimical to the expression of emotion. It is, in the words of Goethe's Mephistopheles, the spirit that denies. *The Sorcerer* is more inclined to the musician than some of the later operas, but even here the dominant force is the automatic effect of the love potion. The emotional lyrics are inserted into burlesque situations, and are sung by characters who emerge in their prose dialogue as the merest of logic choppers. This uncomfortable mismatch between the characters as they appear in prose and their emotional qualities as expressed in music is one of the defining features of Gilbert and Sullivan opera. Moreover Alexis, the tenor hero, shows the first signs of the sadistic streak in Gilbert that was later to drive Arthur Quiller-Couch 'almost out of the theatre' in nausea.[31]

At first the difficulties did not seem to matter. The extraordinary success of *HMS Pinafore* (1878), *The Pirates of Penzance* (1879) and *Patience* (1881) brought wealth to both collaborators and established a formula which the public have been determined to accept ever since. Before the writing of the next opera, *Iolanthe* (1882), Gilbert proposed the lozenge in the form of a coin as the subject of the plot; Sullivan rejected it as unreal and artificial.[32]

Princess Ida (1884), the successor to *Iolanthe*, is treated as an aberration by modern audiences because the dialogue is in blank verse. In Gilbert's own