

**William Schwenk Gilbert**  
(1836-1911)



**Arthur Seymour Sullivan**  
(1842-1900)

# Precious Nonsense: The Operas of Gilbert and Sullivan

Osher Lifelong Learning Institute

College of William and Mary

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**Patience:** Well, it seems to me to be nonsense.

**Lady Angela:** Nonsense? Yes, perhaps. But oh, what precious nonsense.

*Patience, Act I*

# Lecture 3 May 20

- Ruddigore 1887
- The Yeomen of the Guard 1888
- The Gondoliers 1889
- Utopia, Limited 1893
- The Grand Duke 1896

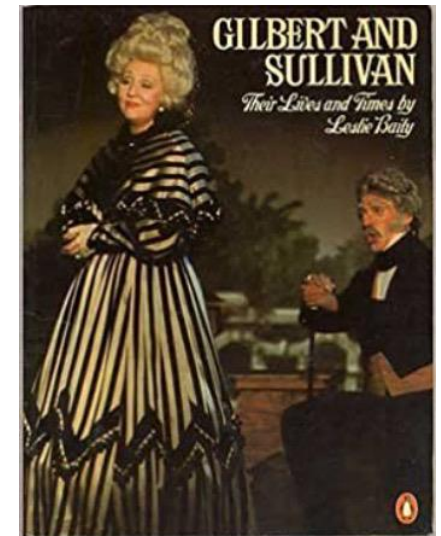
# Resources: Online

- [Gsarchive.net](http://Gsarchive.net)
- [Gsopera.com](http://Gsopera.com)
- [Gsopera.tv](http://Gsopera.tv): Paid subscription service of the International G&S festival
- YouTube
- Wikipedia

# Resources: Print

- Martyn Green's Treasury of Gilbert and Sullivan
- Leslie Baily:
  - The Gilbert and Sullivan Book 1952
  - Gilbert and Sullivan, Their Lives and Times, 1979
- Asimov's Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan
- Harry Benford's G&S Lexicon (available on [gsarchive.net](http://gsarchive.net))
- First Night Gilbert and Sullivan
- Final Curtain

Many of these are out of print, but may be available on Ebay or Amazon

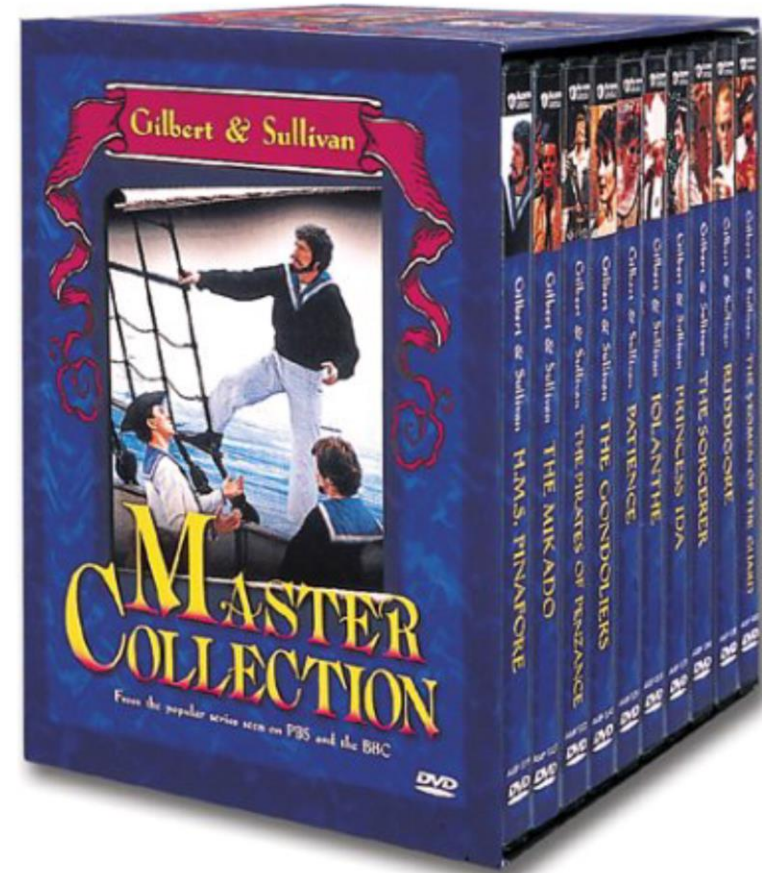


# Brent Walker videos

The 11 standard repertory operas,  
plus Cox and Box

Shown on BBC and PBS in the  
early 1980s, available on DVD  
from Amazon

Many excerpts available on  
YouTube



# New York Shakespeare Festival Pirates of Penzance

Two versions available on DVD:

1980 live performance in Central  
Park

1983 Feature film

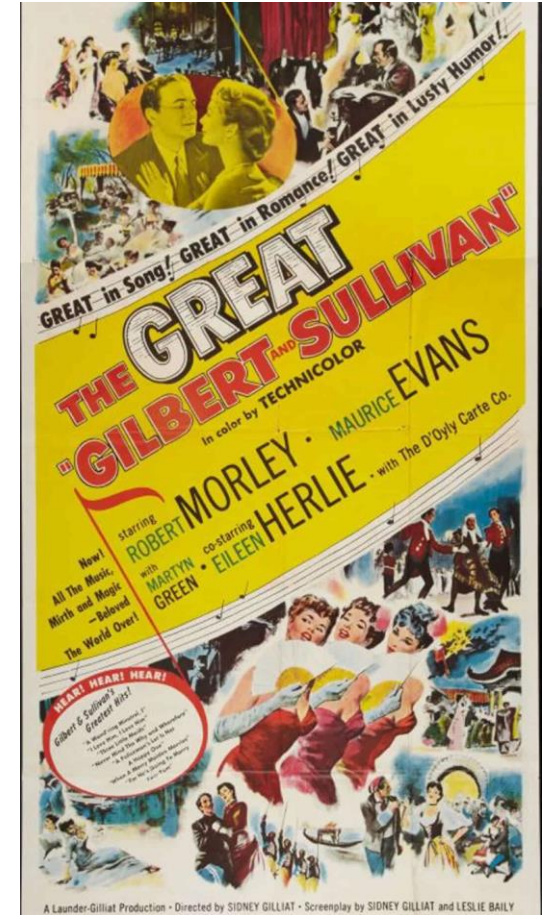
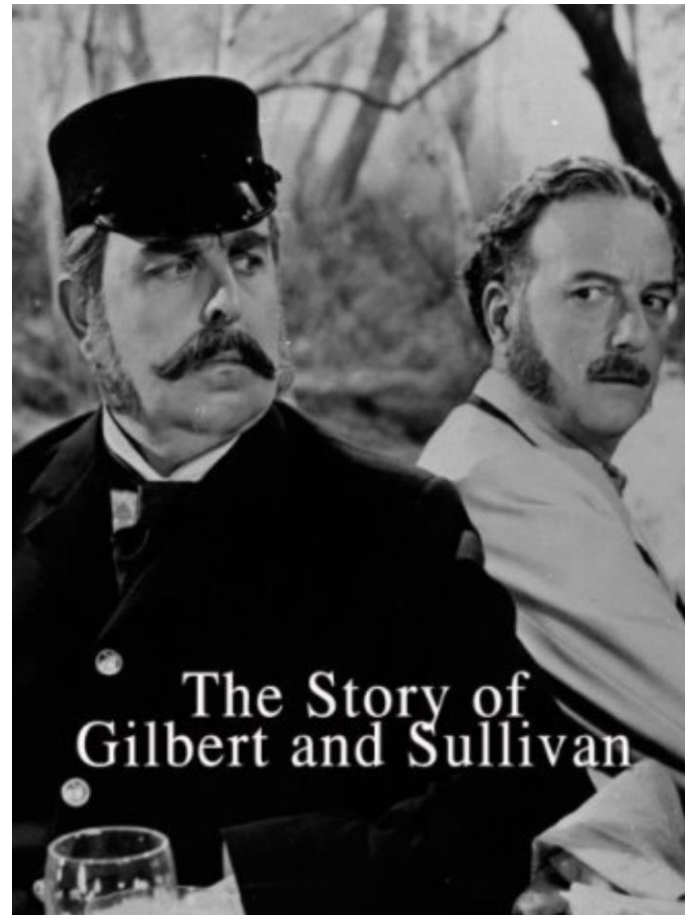




# The Gilbert and Sullivan Story (1953)

Conventional 1950s biopic, featuring musical numbers by Martyn Green and other D'Oyly Carte performers of the period.

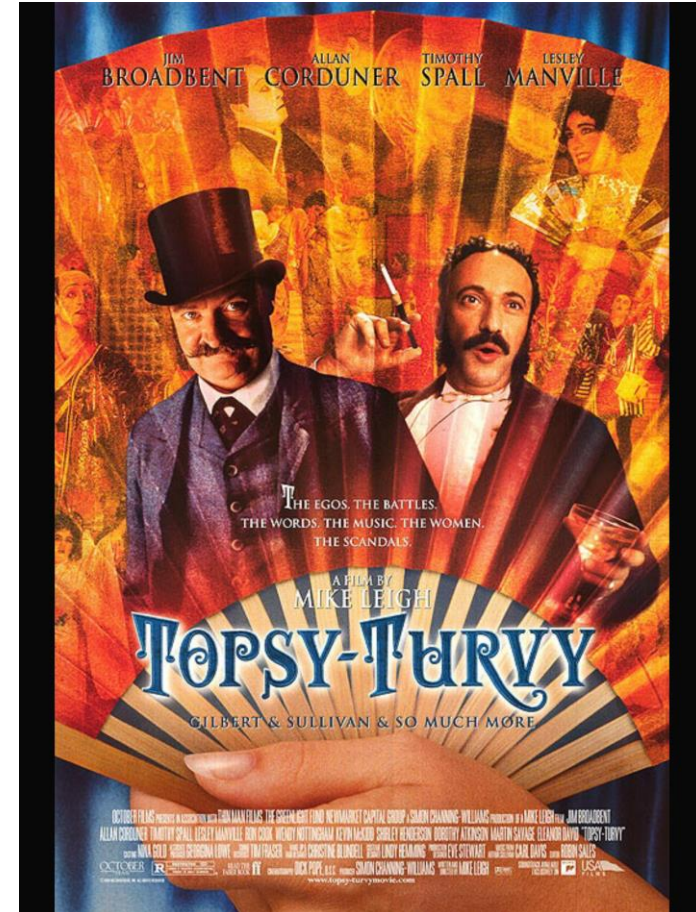
Limited availability



# Topsy-turvy (1999)

Story of the creation of The Mikado. Available on DVD.

Many excerpts available on YouTube



# Ruddigore, or The Witch's Curse

- January 21, 1887
- Savoy Theatre
- 288 performances
- Time: Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century
- Place: Cornwall
- Act I: The village of Rederring
- Act II: The portrait gallery of Ruddigore Castle



## Dramatis Personae

- Sir Ruthven Murgatroyd, Baronet, disguised as Robin Oakapple (Grossmith)
- Richard Dauntless, his foster brother, a sailor (Lely)
- Sir Despard Murgatroyd, Sir Ruthven's younger brother (Barrington)
- Old Adam Goodheart, Robin's trusty servant
- Sir Roderic Murgatroyd, a Ghost (Temple)

# Dramatis Personae

- Rose Maybud, a village maiden (Braham)
- Dame Hannah, Rose's aunt (Brandram)
- Mad Margaret, a madwoman (Bond)
- Zorah, a professional bridesmaid
- Ruth, another professional bridesmaid

# Sources:

Ages Ago, Gilbert (1869)

Il Trovatore, Verdi (1853)?



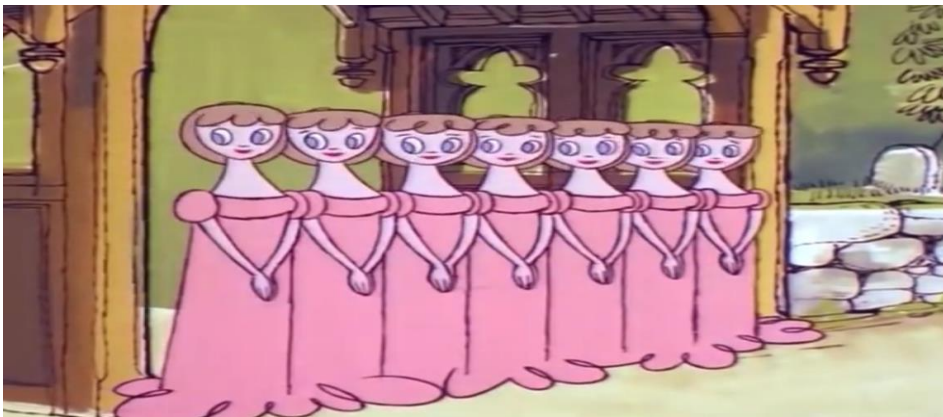
# When William Met Arthur: Ages Ago rehearsal

Gilbert had a question:

“Would the result be the same whether one chose to play upon the simple tetrachord of Mercury, that knows no diatonic interval, or the elaborate dis-diapason, which embraces in its perfect consonance all simple, double, and inverted chords?”

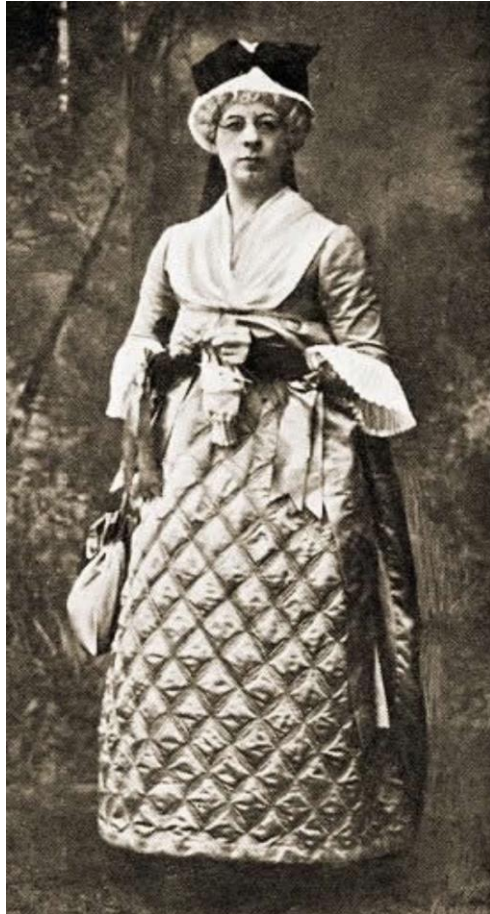
# Act 1 Opening chorus

- The corps of professional bridesmaids of Rederring





# Dame Hannah, Rose's aunt



Dame Hannah explains the curse:

“Each lord of Ruddigore, despite his best endeavour  
Shall do one crime, or more, once every day forever.  
This doom he can't defy, however he may try,  
    For should he stay  
    his hand, that day  
In torture he shall die.”

# Rose Maybud Village Sweetheart



# Robin Oakapple, Local Farmer



Robin and Rose: “I know a youth who loves a little maid”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Is9KwQ58RA>

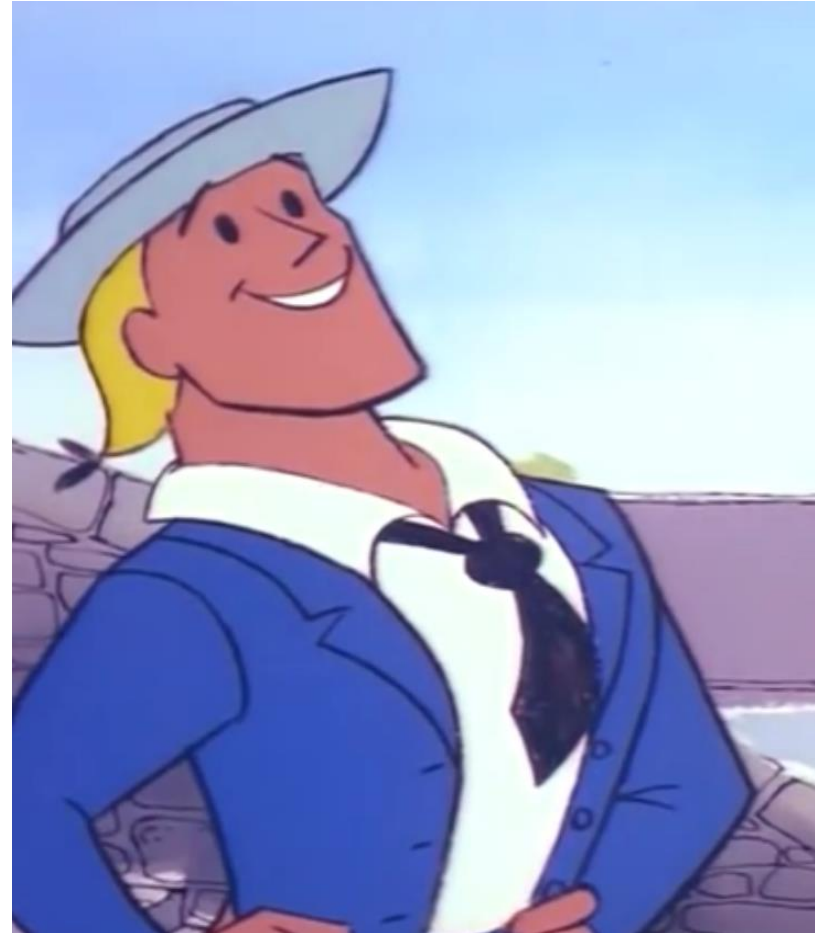


Old Adam reveals the terrible truth:

- Robin Oakapple is, in reality . . . .
- Sir Ruthven Murgatroyd, the rightful Baronet of Ruddigore



# Richard Dauntless returns from the war



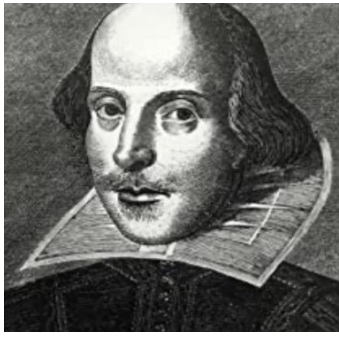
## Robin and Richard reunite

- Robin explains that he is too shy to declare his love to Rose
- Richard, who always does what his heart tells him to do, offers to help by speaking to Rose on Robin's behalf
- But when he sees her, he falls in love with her and proposes
- She accepts





Mad Margaret:  
“an obvious caricature of theatrical madness”



# Bard Moment

A young woman, driven mad by the rejection of the man she loves, wanders distractedly, singing about flowers

Remind you of anyone?



# Sir Despard arrives on the scene



Having learned Robin's identity from Richard,  
Sir Despard interrupts the wedding

“His rightful title I  
have long enjoyed,  
I claim him as Sir  
Ruthven  
Murgatroyd.”



Rose urges Robin to deny Despard's claim.  
However . . .

“As pure and blameless peasant, I cannot, I regret  
Deny a truth unpleasant, I am that Baronet

But when completely rated, bad Baronet am I  
That I am what he stated, I'll recklessly deny.”

The Virtual Lozenge at work

Despard to Margaret:

“I once disliked you.

Now that I’ve reformed, how I adore  
you.”

# Act I Finale

The False Resolution: Robin and Rose marry, and everything else proceeds as before. The family curse goes on indefinitely.

The News Flash: Despard interrupts the wedding and reveals Robin's true identity, forcing him to take the title.

# Act I Finale





# Act II: The Picture Gallery, one week later



## Act II: Robin is a changed man

- Old Adam loyally suggests sufficiently heinous crimes, but
- Sir Ruthven is too squeamish to take the advice



# The Ghost Scene

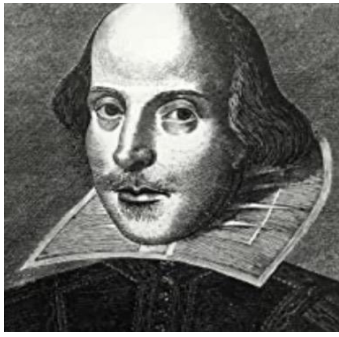
- Houston G&S Society 2007:
  - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZ\\_kff3cXDk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZ_kff3cXDk)
- Oundle G&S Players 2016:
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDxVqt9MX10>
- For more versions enter either “Ruddigore Ghost Scene” or “Ruddigore Painted Emblems” in the YouTube search engine

# Ghost Scene, Houseton G&S Society



# Ghost Scene Fun Facts

- The blackout for the transformation was possible because of the electrification of the Savoy Theatre
- The drum roll during the transformation of the portraits was included to cover any mechanical sounds
- During the blackout, Sullivan conducted with a glass tube containing an illuminated wire.



# Bard Moment

“Alas, poor ghost”

--Hamlet, Act I

Prince Hamlet,  
addressing the ghost  
of his father.

“Alas, poor ghost”

--Ruddigore, Act II

Sir Ruthven  
Murgatroyd,  
addressing the ghost  
of his uncle.

The Ghost's High Noon: Who knew being dead was so much fun?



The Ghosts are unsatisfied with Ruthven's crimes his first week on the job. For instance:

RUTHVEN: On Tuesday I made a false income-tax return.

ALL: Ha! ha!

1ST GHOST: That's nothing.

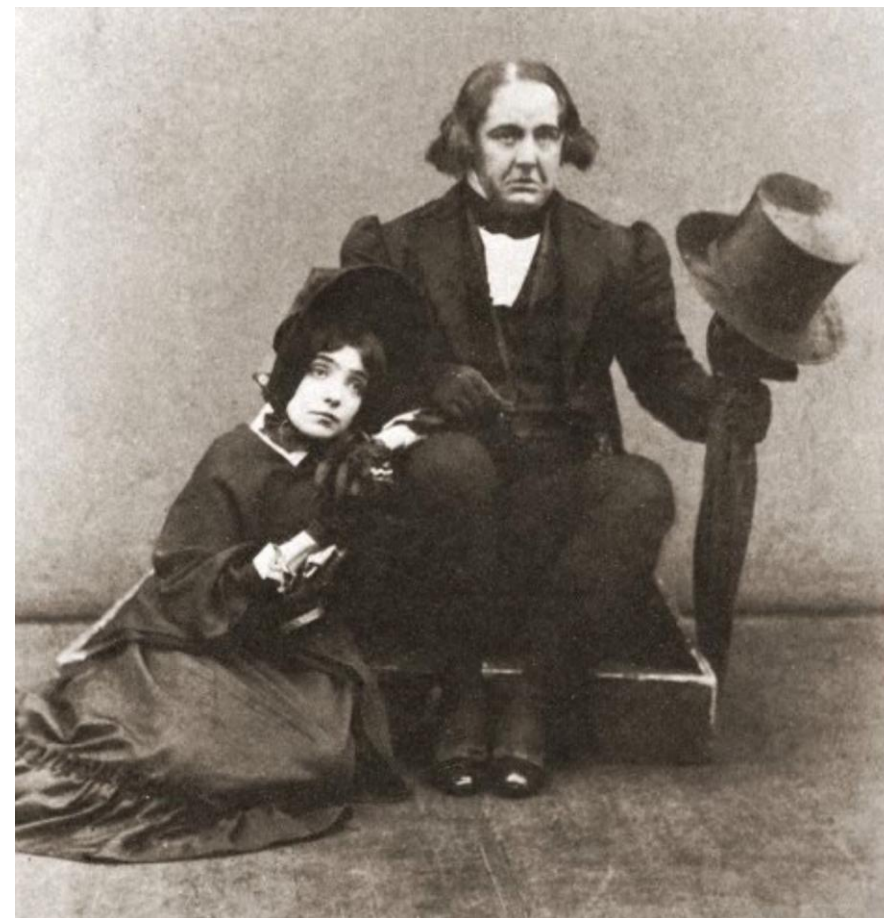
2ND GHOST: Nothing at all.

3RD GHOST: Everybody does that.

4TH GHOST: It's expected of you



# Despard and Margaret: Newlyweds



# Patter trio: 1967 Animated version



Patter trio 1982 BBC/PBS



# The Patter Trio as cultural artifact:

Pirates of Penzance  
(NYSF, Central Park 1980)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qa7evoSWgIY>

Thoroughly Modern Millie  
(Broadway 2002)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xMqbAomg>

# Patter trio: NYSF Pirates 1980



# Robin's Bright Idea

ROBIN: A Baronet of Ruddigore can only die through refusing to commit his daily crime.

Therefore, to refuse to commit a daily crime is tantamount to suicide!

But suicide is, itself, a crime – and so, by your own showing, you ought never to have died at all!

RODERICK: I see – I understand! Then I'm practically alive!

ROBIN: Undoubtedly!

# The Yeomen of the Guard, or The Merryman and His Maid

- October 3, 1888
- Savoy Theatre
- 423 performances
- Setting: The Tower of London, 16<sup>th</sup> Century



# Dramatis Personae

Sir Richard Cholmondeley, Lieutenant of the Tower

Colonel Fairfax (under sentence of death) [Tenor]

Sergeant Meryll [Temple]

Leonard Meryll, his son

Phoebe Meryll, his daughter [Bond]

Jack Point, a strolling jester [Grossmith]

Wilford Shadbolt, Head Jailer and Assistant Tormentor [Heavy Baritone]



# Dramatis Personae

Elsie Maynard, a strolling singer [Soprano]

Dame Carruthers, Housekeeper of the Tower [Brandram]

Kate, her niece

First Yeoman

Second Yeoman

First Citizen

Second Citizen

Chorus of Yeomen and Citizens

# Act I backstory

Colonel Fairfax has been framed by his cousin, Sir Clarence Poltwhistle on a charge of witchcraft. Fairfax's estate will go to Sir Clarence if Fairfax dies unmarried.

On the day he is to be beheaded, he asks his friend Sir Richard Cholmondeley to find him a wife to thwart his evil cousin. He offers a gift of a hundred crowns for a brief, anonymous marriage.

Jack Point and Elsie Maynard arrive at the Tower. They need money to buy medicine for Elsie's mother. A hundred crowns might save her life.

At the beginning of the opera:

Shadbolt  Phoebe

Phoebe  Fairfax

Point  Elsie

Dame Carruthers  Sergeant Meryll

# The Tower and its Yeomen Warders



# Fairfax's aria

Is life a boon?

If so, it must befall

That death whene'er he call

Must call too soon.

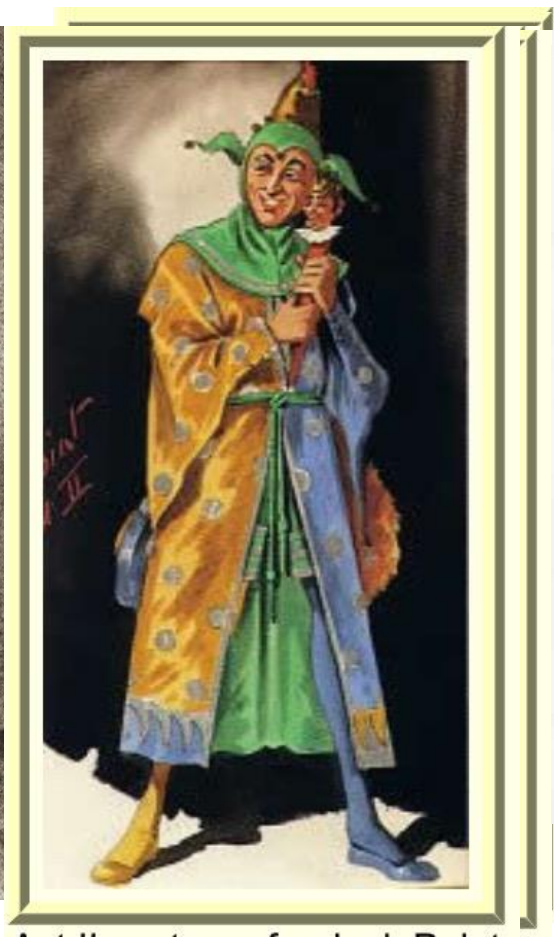
Sullivan Monument, London



Is life a boon? 1982 BBC/PBS production



# Jack Point, the sad clown



“Laugh, though your heart is breaking”

- Rigoletto, Verdi
- The Yeomen of the Guard, Gilbert and Sullivan
- Pagliacci, Leoncavallo



“I have a song to sing, O” by Gilbert and . . .

Gilbert?



# Verse 1

Point:

It's a song of a merryman, moping mum

Whose soul was sad and whose glance was glum

Who sipped no sup and who craved no crumb

As he sighed for the love of a lady

## Verse 2

Elsie:

It's the song of a merrymaid, peerly proud

Who loved a lord and who laughed aloud

At the moan of the merryman, moping mum

Whose soul was sad and whose glance was glum

Who sipped no sup and who craved no crumb

As he sighed for the love of a lady

I have a song 1982 BBC/PBS production



# Act I Finale

The False Resolution: Fairfax is beheaded, Point and Elsie depart from the Tower.

The News Flash: Fairfax has escaped!

Act II: Fairfax is free, but worried:

“Free, but for the cursed haste with which I hurried headlong into the bonds of matrimony with –Heaven knows whom.”

Fairfax learns who his unknown bride was

“So my mysterious bride is no other than this winsome Elsie! . . .I might have fared worse with my eyes open!

But she comes. Now to test her principles. ‘Tis not every husband who has a chance of wooing his own wife!”

He may be a fugitive under sentence of death, but at least the total stranger he married is pretty.

# Trio: Fairfax, Elsie, and Phoebe

A man who would woo a fair maid  
Should 'prentice himself to the trade  
    And study all day  
    In methodical way  
How to flatter, cajole, and persuade



# Finale, reprise

Point:

It's a song of a merryman, moping mum

Whose soul was sad and whose glance was glum

Who sipped no sup and who craved no crumb

As he sighed for the love of a lady

# Finale, reprise

Elsie:

It's the song of a merrymaid, nestling near  
Who loved her lord, but who dropped a tear  
At the moan of the merryman, moping mum  
Whose soul was sad and whose glance was glum  
Who sipped no sup and who craved no crumb  
As he sighed for the love of a lady

# Yeomen finale



Stage direction:

“Fairfax embraces Elsie as Point falls insensible at their feet.”

Does that mean he dies?

# Plot Holes in Yeomen

1. “Bonds of matrimony” Seriously?
2. How is a secret, anonymous wedding supposed to prevent Sir Clarence Poltwhistle from inheriting the estate?
3. A dowry of a hundred crowns?
4. How does the marital blackmail of the Merylls work, when everyone sees that “Leonard” is really Fairfax?

# Peter, Paul, and Mary, 1969 I Have a Song to Sing, O

<https://youtu.be/ojpWsSdTPB0>



*Peter, Paul and Mommy*



# Overture: The Yeomen of the Guard





# The Gondoliers, or The King of Barataria

- December 7, 1889
- Savoy Theatre
- 544 performances
- Time: 1750
- Place:
  - Act I: Venice
  - Act II: Barataria



# Dramatis Personae: Gondoliers

Marco Palmieri [Tenor]

Giuseppe Palmieri [Barrington]

Antonio

Francesco

Giorgio

Annibale

# Dramatis Personae: Contadine

Gianetta [Soprano]

Tessa [Bond]

Fiametta

Vittoria

Giulia

## Dramatis Personae: Others

The Duke of Plaza-Toro [Patter Baritone]

The Duchess of Plaza-Toro [Brandram]

Casilda, their daughter

Luiz, their servant

Don Alhambra del Bolero, the Grand Inquisitor (Bass)

Inez, the King's foster mother

# Act 1: Venice, 1750

- Scene 1: Gondoliers and Contadine
- Scene 2: The Ducal Party, plus Don Alhambra
- Scene 3: Gondoliers and Contadine, plus Don Alhambra

## Act 2: Barataria, later

- Scene 1: Gondoliers and Contadine, plus Don Alhambra
- Scene 2: Entire cast

We're called gondolieri



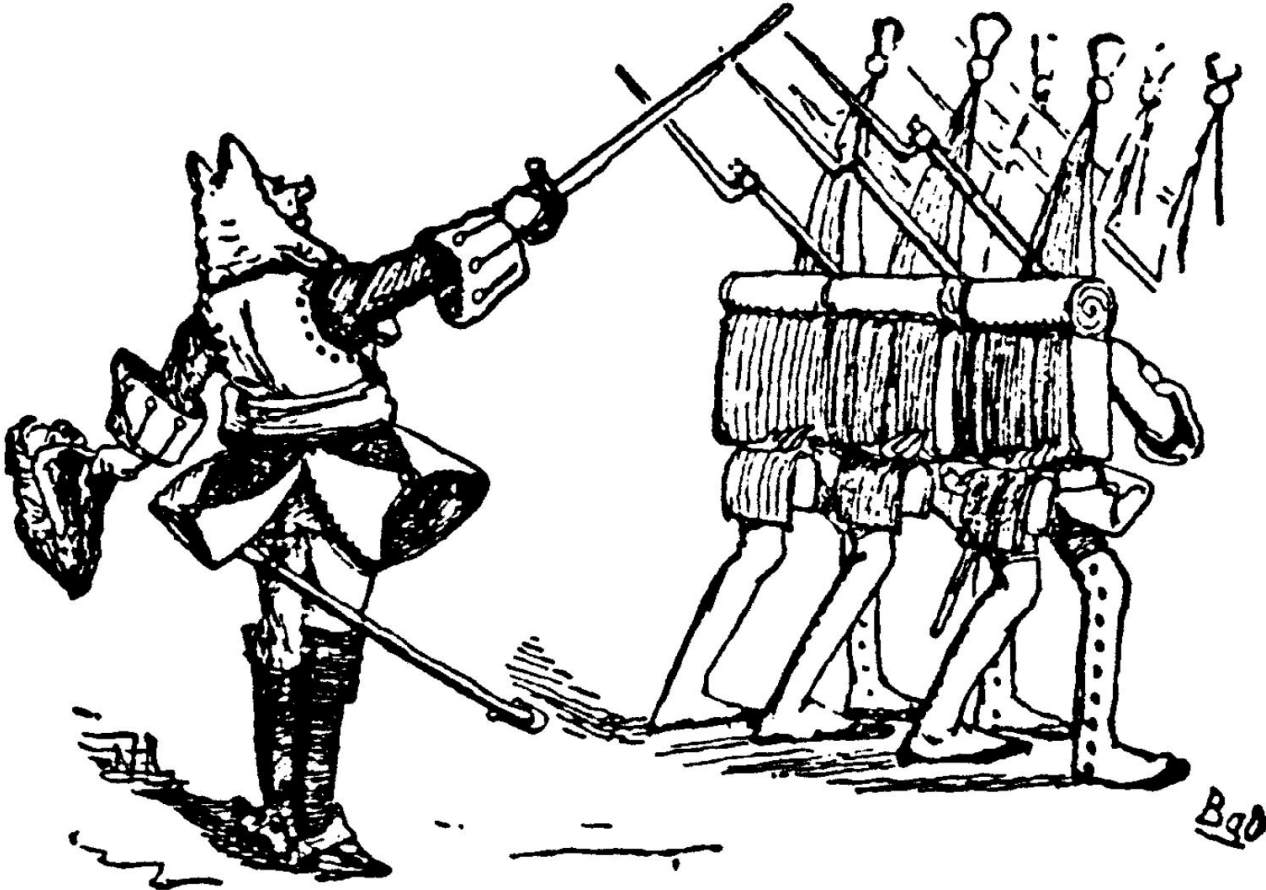
# The Plaza-Toro family arrives in Venice





# The Duke of Plaza-Toro

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# Act I Finale

The False Resolution: The newlywed gondoliers and their brides go on with their lives, without a thought for foreign political intrigue.

The News Flash: Don Alhambra reveals that one of them is the King of Barataria.

# Utopia, Limited, or The Flowers of Progress

- October 7, 1893
- Savoy Theatre
- 245 performances
- Time: Contemporary
- Place: The Kingdom of Utopia



# Dramatis Personae

King Paramount the First [Barrington]

Scaphio and Phantis, the Wise Men

Tarara, Public Exploder

Calynx, Vice-Chamberlain

Princesses Zara [Soprano], Nekaya, and Kalyba

Lady Sophy, an English Governess [Brandram]

Utopian Maidens:

Salata

Melene

Phylla

# Dramatis Personae

## Imported Flowers of Progress:

Lord Dramaleigh, a British Lord Chamberlain

Captain Fitzbattleaxe, First Life Guards [Tenor]

Captain Sir Edward Corcoran, K.C.B., Royal Navy

Mr. Goldbury, a Company Promoter

Sir Bailey Barre, Q.C. M.P.

Mr. Blushington, County Councillor

Chorus of Utopians and First Life Guards

# The Utopian system of government: “Despotism tempered by dynamite”

- The King is an absolute autocrat, but . . .
- If the two Wise Men both denounce him . . .
- To the Public Exploder, that official will blow the King up and . . .
- Become the new King.

# Act I Finale

Princess Zara, having returned from school in England, introduces the six Flowers of Progress including . . .

Captain Sir Edward Corcoran, K.C.B., R.N.

“Though we’ve no longer hearts of oak  
Yet we can steer and we can stoke  
And thanks to coal and thanks to coke  
We never run a ship ashore.”



# Capt Corcoran's Solo



Things have gotten too efficient, but Princess Zara remembers:

I had forgotten the most important, the most vital, the most essential element of all!

Government by Party! Introduce that great and glorious element, at once the bulwark and foundation of England's greatness, and all will be well. No political measure will endure, because one Party will assuredly undo all that the other Party has done.

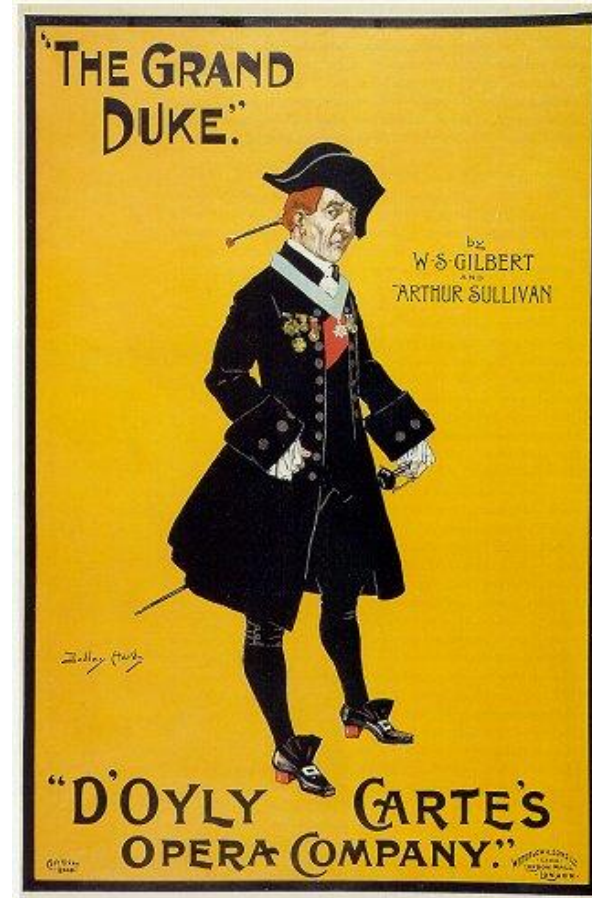
The King decrees:

“Henceforward Utopia will no longer be a Monarchy (Limited) but, what is a great deal better, a Limited Monarchy.”



# The Grand Duke, or The Statutory Duel

- March 7, 1896
- Savoy Theatre
- 123 performances
- Time: 1750
- Place: The fictional German state of Pfennig Halbpennig



# Dramatis Personae

- RUDOLPH (Grand Duke of Pfennig Halbpennig) [Patter Baritone]
- ERNEST DUMMKOPF (a Theatrical Manager) [Tenor]
- LUDWIG (his Leading Comedian) [Barrington]
- DR. TANNHÄUSER (a Notary)
- THE PRINCE OF MONTE CARLO [Bass]
- VISCOUNT MENTONE
- BEN HASHBAZ (a Costumier)
- HERALD

# Dramatis Personae

- THE PRINCESS OF MONTE CARLO (betrothed to RUDOLPH) [Mezzo]
- THE BARONESS VON KRAKENFELDT (betrothed to RUDOLPH) [Brandram]
- JULIA JELLICOE (an English Comédienne) [Soprano]
- LISA (a Soubrette)
- Members of Ernest Dummkopf's Company:
  - OLGA
  - GRETCHEN
  - BERTHA
  - ELSA
  - MARTHA

# Rules of Statutory Duelling

- No weapons
- Each combatant draws one card from a deck
- High card wins
- The loser, although physically unharmed, is legally dead
- The winner takes on all of the rights, responsibilities, possessions, obligations, and status of the loser

# Act II Roulette Song





# “Dance a Cachuca” Gondoliers Act II Scottish Opera virtual ensemble



Gilbert to Sullivan, after Gondoliers opening night:

“I must thank you again for the magnificent work you have put into this piece. It gives one a chance of shining right through the Twentieth Century with a reflected light.”

# THE END

