

Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival



*The
Pirates of
Penzance*

The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Cover photo: Laurie Birmingham (left) and Glenn Seven Allen in *The Pirates of Penzance*, 2001.

The Pirates of Penzance

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Synopsis: *The Pirates of Penzance*

On the coast of Cornwall, a gang of pirates play and party as Frederic (a pirate apprentice) reminds the pirate king that his obligation to the gang is soon over. He was apprenticed to the pirates only until his twenty-first birthday, which is that day, and he is leaving them. Ruth (Frederic's nursery maid when he was younger) explains that Frederic should never have been a pirate except for her mistake: She was told to apprentice Frederic to a pilot, but she misunderstood and placed him with a pirate instead.

Frederic tells the pirates that, after he leaves the gang, he intends to destroy them, not because he doesn't love them, but because he loathes what they do. He is a slave of duty and, when no longer a pirate, it will be his duty to destroy them. The pirates understand, and also complain that they cannot seem to make money. Because Frederic is a slave-of-duty to the pirates until noon, he tells them why: Because they are all orphans, the pirates will not rob another orphan; and since all their potential victims are aware of this, they all claim to be orphans!

Because Frederic has spent his entire life with the pirates, he has never seen another woman; thus he thinks he may want to take Ruth with him as his wife. He asks Ruth if she is beautiful, and she responds that she is. Frederic, a very trusting young man, says that he believes Ruth and he will not let her age come between them.

At this point, however, Frederic hears a chorus of girls in the vicinity. He sees a group of beautiful young women, realizes he was betrayed by Ruth, and rejects her. Frederic informs the girls that he is a pirate, but not for long. He asks if any of the girls will marry him, and the youngest, Mabel, agrees.

The pirates enter the scene, and each grabs a girl. Major-General Stanley enters and identifies himself as the girls' father, demanding to know what is taking place. When the pirates tell Major-General Stanley that they intend to marry his daughters, he objects, saying he has an aversion to having pirates for sons-in-law; the pirates respond that they are opposed to having major-generals as fathers-in-law, but that they will put aside the objection.

Knowing about the pirates' weakness, Major-General Stanley tells them he is an orphan and, thus, disarms the pirates and takes his daughters, along with Frederic, away to his family chapel and estate. The major-general, who actually is not an orphan, soon feels guilty about the lie he told the pirates. Frederic, however, has a plan to lead a squad of zany policemen against the his old gang.

Before he can act, however, the pirate king and Ruth arrive to tell him that he is still obligated to the pirates. Because Frederic was born on February 29 of a leap year, he has served only five birthdays, not the twenty-one required by his contract. A strong sense of duty forces Frederic to relent, and, because he is a member of the pirate band again, to reveal the truth that Major-General Stanley is not an orphan. The pirate king vows that he will have revenge on the major-general.

Mabel enters and begs Frederic not to go back to the pirates, but bound by duty, he leaves. The police ready their attack on the pirates, while the pirates creep in to take revenge on the major-general.

The pirates defeat the police. However, when Ruth divulges that the pirates are really noblemen and they swear their allegiance to the queen, the tables are turned--and the police take the pirates prisoner.

However, because the pirates have never really hurt anyone, they are soon forgiven. The ex-pirates win the girls, Frederic wins Mabel, and everyone lives happily ever after.

Characters: *The Pirates of Penzance*

Major-General Stanley: A one star-general in the British Army, Major-General Stanley is the protector of many young women, his wards.

The Pirate King: A largely unsuccessful commander, the pirate king, although a flamboyant braggart, is too tender-hearted to do what pirates are supposed to do.

Samuel: The pirate king's lieutenant

Frederic: A pirate trainee, Frederic was apprenticed to the pirates by mistake. He is a noble young man who falls in love with Mabel but puts his sense of duty above everything else, including love.

Sergeant of Police: The leader of a bumbling squad of policemen, the good-natured sergeant of police is committed to stopping the pirates.

Mabel: Major-General Stanley's youngest ward, quickly falls in love with Frederic.

Edith: Another of Major-General Stanley's daughters

Kate: Another of Major-General Stanley's daughters

Isabel: Another of Major-General Stanley's daughters

Ruth: A pirate maid-of-all-work and Frederic's nursery maid, Ruth mistakenly bound Frederic to a pirate instead of a pilot. She is in love with Frederic and feels betrayed when he falls in love with Mabel.

A Chorus of Pirates, Police, and General Stanley's Wards

W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan

By Rachelle Hughes

From *Insights*, 2006

So far reaching is the effect of the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas or comic operas of 130 years ago that contemporary entertainment media continues to belt out the songs in everything from an episode of *The Simpsons* to an episode of *The West Wing*. While the influence of the playwright/lyricist Sir W.S. Gilbert and composer Sir Arthur Sullivan can still be felt today, in Victorian England they defined a new kind of theatre with their fifteen timeless collaborations.

Sir W.S. Gilbert (1836–1911) was born in Strand, London on November 18, 1836. He spent much of his youth touring Europe with his father (a retired naval surgeon), mother, and three sisters until he was about thirteen years old. Little is known about his family except that his parents were inflexible and stern people and that his relationship with them was strained. He finished college at Kings College London and then went on to try a couple of different careers in government as a clerk and barrister.

Finally, at around the age of twenty-six, Gilbert found his true calling in the creative arts and started writing short illustrated poems in the magazine *Fun*. He used his childhood nickname “Bab,” and the poetry collection is now known as *The Bab Ballads*. Some of these first creative ventures became the base concepts for several of his liberatti, including *H.M.S. Pinafore* and *Trial by Jury*. Not long after his poetic beginnings Gilbert produced his first professional play, *Uncle Baby* in 1863. It ran for only seven weeks. He had no more dramatic successes until 1866. In 1867 he married Lucy Agnes Turner.

In 1871 Gilbert and Sullivan collaborated on their first comic opera, *Thespis*. Although it was moderately successful, the musical score was never published and most of the songs were lost to posterity, although some were recycled into later works. In addition to his initial collaboration with Sullivan, Gilbert premiered no fewer than seven plays in 1871. “He was writing farces, operetta libretti, extravaganzas, fairy comedies, adaptations from novels, translations from the French and even the occasional serious drama” (Andrew Crowther, *The Life of W.S. Gilbert*, *The Gilbert and Sullivan Archive* [http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/html/gilbert_1.html], 3).

Despite Gilbert’s sizeable repertoire, it was his work with Sullivan that would always be the most successful. Four years after *Thespis*, Richard D’Oyly Carte commissioned Gilbert and Sullivan to write the one-act play, *Trial by Jury*. It was their first major hit and the beginning of the trio’s highly successful but often tumultuous partnership that would last for twenty years and twelve more operettas, until their break-up over a quarrel about a new carpet for the Savoy Theatre. Gilbert’s stoic and much more thrifty nature finally got the best of him, and he ended the partnership. He did, however, team back up with Sullivan to launch two other productions *Utopia, Limited* and *The Grand Duke*.

After *The Grand Duke*, in 1896 Gilbert went into pretend retirement at his home in Grim’s Dyke, Harrow Weald. He went on to write four more plays, *The Hooligan* being produced just four months before his death. On May 29, 1911 he was giving swimming lessons to two young women when he tried to rescue one of the women and died from heart failure. He left behind a legacy of plays that were a mixture of cynicism and topsy-turvydom. Perhaps one of his greatest contributions to the world of theatre was his style of directing which helped create a more polished and dignified play. Gilbert flouted the trend of the day to write plays for a specific performer. He insisted that a performer interpret his work as he intended

and held auditions. After the success of *The Sorcerer* in 1877, “Gilbert would no longer hire stars, he would create them. He hired the performers subject to veto from Sullivan on purely musical grounds” (Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbert_and_Sullivan] 2).

Sir Arthur Seymour Sullivan (1842-1900) was born in Lambeth, London on May 13, 1842. Sullivan’s musical destiny was discovered early. His father was a military bandmaster, and, by the time he was eight years-old, Arthur could play all the instruments in the band. After four years of private school at Bayswater, Sullivan was admitted to the choir at Chapel Royal School where he was often one of the choir’s soloists. During his three-year stay he began to compose anthems and songs. At age fifteen one of those compositions became his first published piece. In 1856 he received the first Mendelssohn prize and was then accepted to the Royal Academy of Music.

After leaving the Royal Academy of Music, Sullivan furthered his education in a German conservatory. The time in Germany helped mature his music sensibilities and talents. In 1862 he was back in London and ready to win her over. His orchestral suite concert to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* garnered the attention and praise of Charles Dickens. The next several years his work continued to grow in popularity. Between 1863 and 1870 his work included the *Irish Symphony*, in *Memoriam* (inspired by the death of his father), *The Prodigal Son*, and the popular hymn, *Onward, Christian Soldiers*. Sullivan also wrote religious music which was highly popular during his time.

But it was not his serious music that would give his name immortality. “In the lighter vein of song, Sullivan proved himself to be incomparable,” said David Ewan (Arthur Sullivan, Gilbert and Sullivan Archive [<http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/html/sullivan2.html>], 3). Thus, the success of his collaborations with Gilbert; somehow their minds met perfectly in the productions of their comic operas that continued to grow in popularity, each more successful than the last. After the success of *HMS Pinafore*, they traveled to America to quell the copyright infringement of that work. While there they produced *The Pirates of Penzance*. New York loved them.

Sullivan’s style of music in the Savoy Operas has been well-praised by critics. Cecil Forsythy points out that Sullivan’s “recognition of the fact that it was not only necessary to set his text to music which was pleasing in itself, but to invent melodies in such close alliance with the words that the two things become indistinguishable. . . In this respect. Sullivan did more for the English stage than any musician of his time” (David Ewan on Arthur Sullivan, Gilbert and Sullivan Archive [<http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/html/sullivan2.html>], 4).

Sullivan and Gilbert were a phenomenal team, each of them contributing the best of their talents. Both of them received knighthoods from Queen Victoria and both of them were successful both together and apart. It is unfortunate that such distinct personalities had to split up eventually. But Gilbert was a stoic and Sullivan was a lover of indulgence. Sullivan died after a boisterous life and a long struggle with health from pneumonia in London on November 22, 1900.

Preserving the Truly Good Things in Drama

By Senator Bob Bennett

From *Insights*, 2001

I grew up on Gilbert and Sullivan.

One of my earliest memories is of my mother singing, “Willow, tit willow, tit willow,” to me at bed time. I heard my father often call out to Mother, as he went to work, “Farewell, my own, light of my life, farewell!” sometimes in song. (Once in a while he would add, “For crimes unknown, I go to my dungeon cell!”)

In the family library we had a big book, which may have been the complete works of Gilbert and Sullivan, in which I was able to look up the words and understand what they were—on the records my brothers and sisters would play, the words went by so fast that I couldn’t catch them all.

My brothers and sisters would talk of making “the punishment fit the crime,” and say that “things are seldom what they seem, skim milk masquerades as cream,” among other Gilbert and Sullivan truisms. There were even references in the popular press. I remember seeing a caption in *Life* magazine, under the picture of the Russian ambassador looking glum, that read, “A. Gromyko’s lot is not a happy one.” (For those too young to know, Andrei Gromyko was his name.) Gilbert and Sullivan lyrics were everywhere, as much a part of the culture as comments from Shakespeare or the Bible.

And then they weren’t. I suppose it was gradual, and I certainly never noticed as it was happening, but by the time I got to high school, there were no more routine performances of the main works—*HMS Pinafore*, *The Mikado*, or *The Pirates of Penzance*. Maybe it was the introduction of the American musical in the mid-forties, when *Oklahoma* became such a huge hit, that pushed Gilbert and Sullivan aside, but whatever it was, that’s the way it was. High school operettas—we did one every other year at our school—stopped being Gilbert and Sullivan festivals. Local adult performing groups found other things to do.

Of course, the works did not disappear altogether. They are too good for that to happen. D’Oily Carte Theatre in London, which was founded solely for the purpose of presenting the Gilbert and Sullivan repertoire, did the entire canon and kept the comic operas alive in England, where a combination of tourism and nostalgia brought in enough people to keep the flame burning. There were also performances of the three main works here and there in America from time to time, but that was about it until a pop singer named Linda Ronstadt decided to do a summer revival of *The Pirates of Penzance* in the theatre in Central Park in New York, about twenty years ago.

There was much clucking and harumphing in the press about this at the time, as I recall. Her pop music fans thought she was out of her mind; they had never heard of *The Pirates of Penzance*. Gilbert and Sullivan purists were offended that someone with her background would enter their turf. But she went through with it and was a big enough draw that people came.

And they loved it; the public response was terrific. The show sold out all summer. Ronstadt got herself several new albums, a few years added to her career, the respect of some critics who had dismissed her talents before and a starring role in a *The Pirates of Penzance* movie. And Americans (admittedly, in smaller numbers than before) rediscovered Gilbert and Sullivan.

The music is good, we decided. It is a respectable challenge for the singers who aspire to present it. (That would delight Sullivan, who considered himself a serious composer and always felt that his collaboration with Gilbert somehow lowered his stature. However, aside from his music for the hymn “The Lost Chord,” almost none of his other works has survived—it has been his collaboration with Gilbert that has preserved his memory.)

And the lyrics are genuinely funny, very clever and—dare we say it?—Even topical. Gilbert was the leading satirist of his day, and political satire, properly done, never goes out of style. Some examples:

—HMS Pinafore tells us about the intellectual state of English parliamentary politics:
“I always voted at my party’s call, / and I never thought of thinking for my self at all. / I thought so little they rewarded me, by making me the ruler of the Queen’s Navee.”

—As well as British class distinctions. The Mikado is not about Japan at all, but commentary on the idiocy of bureaucratic rule making, with perfectly placed barbs at self-important public officials: “Defer-r! Defer-r! To the Lord High Executioner!”

—And The Pirates of Penzance takes on the question of excessive devotion to “Duty.”

The plots are ridiculous—and that’s the point. Satirists always attack society’s excesses with ridicule. In The Pirates of Penzance, Gilbert gives us a hero who is bound to a life of crime just because his nurse maid was so hard of hearing that she confused the word “pilot” with “pirate.” He stays there because it is his “duty” to honor this absurd deal. As soon as he is free of his contract, of course, it will be his “duty” to pursue, arrest, and perhaps even seek to kill all the men who have become his dearest friends. This day of transformation is avoided, however, because of a bizarre legal interpretation (that he is also duty bound to honor) that extends his allegiance to the pirate band for another sixty-three years.

Naturally, there is a love interest, bringing new concepts of “Duty.” The modern major general appears, with his own problems about how he has discharged his duty. The arrival of the policemen, doing their duty, adds to the hilarity, but everything is resolved without any bloodshed in the end when everyone automatically does his duty to the queen.

All of this delightful but insightful nonsense comes wrapped in truly wonderful, hummable music, with meticulously crafted lyrics that are filled with elegant internal rhyme schemes, marvelous stage business that recalls the best of broad farce (“with cat-like tread”—CLOMP) and some of the most difficult tongue twisters ever performed. Modern rappers should try discussing “matters animal and vegetable and mineral” at full speed to see if their skills are as good as they think they are.

I think it is fully appropriate that the Utah Shakespeare Festival has chosen to perform The Pirates of Penzance this season, because the Gilbert and Sullivan canon, while certainly not as extensive or insightful as the Shakespeare canon, is worth perpetuating and preserving. Isn’t perpetuating and preserving the truly good things in drama what the Festival is for?

Delighting Audiences for More Than a Century

By Angel Pilkington

From *Midsummer Magazine*, 2001

W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's operas are loaded with wit, sarcasm, and humor and have been delighting audiences for more than a century. Their comic opera *The Pirates of Penzance* has been especially successful in America. As a matter of fact, in the early 1980s Linda Ronstadt and Kevin Kline starred in 772 performances on Broadway.

The vagaries of English and American copyright laws combined to allow American audiences to view the first performances of *The Pirates of Penzance*. Gilbert and Sullivan were determined to protect the copyright of their play, and they believed that by holding the world premiere in America the thieving that occurred with H.M.S. Pinafore could be delayed. Gilbert found one example of this robbery of his theatrical works in 1879. "While Gilbert was still in New York, he was astonished to find Augustin Daly advertising a revival of *Charity*. He wrote Daly, asking by what right he proposed to play it. Then he wrote to at least two local papers disclaiming any responsibility for the play 'in its forthcoming debased condition.' Daly had constructed his own version, and no copyright law protected Gilbert. In fact, his presence in New York very likely increased Daly's box office. In a moment of irritation Gilbert told a reporter that he and Sullivan would live in New York nine months of the year in order to benefit from American copyright" (Jane W. Stedman, *W.S. Gilbert: A Classic Victorian and His Theatre* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1996], 177).

In order to gain British copyright protection, a traveling H.M.S. Pinafore company performed a slapdash show of *The Pirates of Penzance* on December 29, 1879, at the Bijou Theatre in Paignton, England. The American copyright was more complicated, so "Gilbert sold his performing rights to Sullivan's American friend Sugdam Grant for a nominal \$100, since only an American could have an enforceable copyright" (Stedman, 175). With the copyright as safe as it could be, on December 31, 1879, *The Pirates of Penzance* premiered in New York at the Fifth Avenue Theatre.

Not only did the play premiere in America it was almost entirely written there. Arthur Sullivan forgot to bring the first act with him to New York; he had to rewrite Act I and finish Act II. A sign hangs in the vicinity of the hotel where Sullivan stayed that says, "On this site Sir Arthur composed *The Pirates of Penzance* during 1879." On December 29, 1879, the day before dress rehearsal, Sullivan finished the musical score for *The Pirates of Penzance*, but he had another problem to cope with—the orchestra.

The American orchestra threatened to quit unless Sullivan raised their salaries to compensate for the added work of such late rehearsals. Sullivan bluffed, and told the Americans that he would bring over another orchestra from Britain who would gladly do the opera. "In the face of this display of British sang-froid the American musicians backed down, much to the relief of Sullivan who later admitted: 'The idea of getting the Covent Garden band over was hardly less absurd than the ludicrous idea of using the pianoforte and harmonium in a big theatre'" (Ian Bradley, *The Complete Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1996], 189-190).

Whereas Gilbert had no compunctions about deceiving the orchestra, the theme of *The Pirates of Penzance* or *The Slave of Duty* is based on Victorian values that emphasize duty, unselfishness, and honesty. "To most Victorians the choice between 'worldly interest' and 'sense of duty' was the central dilemma of life. In the character of Frederic, Gilbert mocks the intellectual and emotional sterility of this choice. Frederic is completely governed by his sense of duty, so that his behaviour in any situation is automatic and does not permit feeling or logic" (Charles Hayter, *Modern Dramatists: Gilbert and Sullivan* [London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1987], 104). While

Victorians were often torn between their obligations to others and human nature, Frederic does not suffer from this quandary. Frederic consistently chooses his sense of duty above everything else, even though his sense of duty is to the pirates who obtained him inadvertently.

Because Frederic feels obligated to the pirates, he betrays the woman he loves, her father, and the police officers. “One of the interesting and unconventional aspects of *The Pirates* is that the hero and heroine are forced apart by the hero’s personality. As the subtitle of the opera indicates, Frederic is the ‘slave of duty’, and his actions are directed by his conscience” (Hayter, 101).

Reminiscent of the great Greek comic playwright Aristophanes, Gilbert mocks the society in which he lives. “The two fooled in the same way; they looked at life with the same eyes. In Gilbert’s pages Victorian England lives in miniature. . . . Gilbert was one of the cleverest caricaturists, but the freedom Aristophanes enjoyed was not his, and his deft, clear-cut pictures of dishonesty and sham and ignorance in high places are very discreet and always nameless” (Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way* [New York: Random House, 1930], 139).

Gilbert’s satire is superb, but when synchronized with Sullivan’s music, the lyrics convey emotion, the sarcasm becomes more evident, and the meaning is transformed. “Sullivan’s music plays an important role in demolishing Mabel’s pretensions. On paper, the song ‘Poor wandering one’ reads like a hymn: it is full of ‘thees’ and ‘thous’ and its central image is that of a lost sheep who has wandered from the flock” (Hayter, 107). It’s a perfect setup for a hymn, and Sullivan did indeed write hymns including “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Instead, though, he wrote a waltz passionate, romantic, and the exact opposite of what the words seemed to be saying. As Eric A. Plaut writes, “Sullivan was the master of parody of opera. Mabel’s song, “Poor wand’ring one,” In *The Pirates of Penzance*, is a wonderful parody of French sentimental opera” (Eric A. Plaut, *Grand Opera: Mirror of the Western Mind* [Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993], 152).

“Crucial to an understanding of the metamorphosis from opera to musical theatre via comic opera is the Gilbert notion that the words—and thus the drama came first. It was Sullivan’s great talent to write inspiring music that supported the words clearly. Rhythms matched the sentences, vowels and consonants fell in the correct place” (Denny Martin Flinn, *Musical A Grand Tour* [New York: Schirmer Books, 1997], 76). Gilbert and Sullivan were a remarkable team, and their brilliance has made their comic operas everlasting.