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A Dull Enigma: Historians' Analysis of Gilbert and Sullivan's Impact on the Development of the American Musical Theatre

by Andrew Vorder Bruegge

The scholars David Walsh and Len Platt consciously disconnect musical theatre from operetta in their historical analysis, *Musical Theater and American Culture*, because linking them “makes it impossible to understand . . . the musical as an artistic phenomenon of popular culture that is reflexively tied . . . to American society and its culture” (Walsh and Platt 6). If they are including Gilbert and Sullivan among their French, Turk, Prussian, or perhaps Italian colleagues who worked in the nineteenth-century operetta genre, then they want to exclude the two Englishmen from the history of the musical theatre genre. Walsh and Platt’s line of reasoning categorizes Gilbert and Sullivan and the operetta genre as highbrow Euro-culture that egregiously polluted the late nineteenth-century American scene. Richard Traubner argues, conversely, that operetta represents the heart and soul of the American musical theatre (Traubner 378). In any event, Walsh and Platt’s view opens the door to the reasons why scholars generally give short shrift to Gilbert, Sullivan, and D’Oyly Carte when narrating the historical development of the American musical theatre, and it’s worth investigating this phenomenon and its causes. By glossing over the Savoy triumvirate, scholars have overlooked their historical significance for American musical theatre. Gilbert and Sullivan developed a formula for producing successful musical theatre that American showmakers ultimately embraced during Broadway’s golden era in the mid-twentieth century. That formula included the

Dr. Vorder Bruegge delivered a shorter version of this paper in Gettysburg entitled “Gilbert and Sullivan and the Historiography of the American Musical.”

following components: a long-term, symbiotic collaboration between librettist and composer who crafted the book first and wrote music to complement it; a theatrical product that integrated story, music, character, and lyrics into a cohesive whole; the crafting of a product for middlebrow appeal; marketing practices now identified as “retail theatre”; and delegating specialized artistic tasks to an extensive, professionalized, artistic staff under firm directorial leadership.

Theatre-oriented scholars represent the hard-core Gilbert and Sullivan deniers, acknowledging only the most oblique and fleeting of historical importance. Consider a few examples among the standard texts. Joseph Swain’s 1990 *The Broadway Musical* makes only one reference to Gilbert as lyricist. Stanley Green’s well-known textbook, *The World of Musical Comedy*, that was used nationwide in musical theatre history courses in the 1980s and 1990s, makes no mention of Gilbert and Sullivan. Ethan Mordden in his respected 1983 *Broadway Babies* begins the history of musical theatre with Victor Herbert around 1900. Music-oriented historians, on the other hand, carefully document Gilbert and Sullivan’s importance. Philip Furia, for example, credits nineteenth-century operettas as the place where true integration of lyrics, story and characters arose, but he doesn’t make a direct historical connection across the decades to the mid-twentieth-century heyday of integrated musicals such as *Oklahoma!* or *Guys and Dolls* (Furia 31). Richard Traubner’s *Operetta: A Theatrical History* boldly asserts that American musical comedies are operettas by another name, and along the way makes specific references to Gilbert and Sullivan elements that anticipated American practices (Traubner 394, 402).

Unquestionably, Gilbert and Sullivan affected the late nineteenth-century American music world. Their first North American tour in 1879-80 hit 100 cities with 550 performances (Allen 2). In its first week at the Fifth Avenue Theatre in New York, *H.M.S. Pinafore* grossed more than \$6000 (Allen 2). After that first tour the Gilbert, Sullivan, and D’Oyly Carte triumvirate quickly had four companies working the American heartland, while a fifth company toured the west coast (Allen 9, 16-17). Five different companies of *The Mikado* were touring America in 1886 (Rollins and Witts). Gilbert and Sullivan’s rollicking success proved that operetta could generate big profits, and American theatricians copied them (Kislan 98). The American composer, Julius Eichberg, revised his 1862 operetta, *The Doctor of Alcantara*, and published a new version in 1879 with two new songs that closely imitated the Gilbert patter song and some distinctive Sullivan-esque musical elements (Kaufman xviii). It remained popular for several decades (Kaufman xx). Reginald de Koven’s first operetta

The Begum (1887) was a re-hash of *The Mikado* (Krasner xiv). He and librettist collaborator Harry B. Smith copied the Gilbert and Sullivan style that avoided low comedy, and that made *The Begum* generally successful with middlebrow audiences (Krasner xv). John Philip Sousa and Willard Spencer found success with their operettas by imitating Gilbert's mastery of plot and satiric content (Jones 9). You could not be unaware of Gilbert and Sullivan in 1880s America nor deny their impact on American musical entertainments.

Scholars of cultural studies have documented the reasons for Gilbert and Sullivan's popularity in late nineteenth-century America and their enormous, enduring impact on the national culture thereafter. Let us examine first the reasons why American audiences responded so warmly to Gilbert and Sullivan. Post-Civil War Americans felt stirrings of Anglophilia after decades of Anglophobia fostered by the American rebellion. When viewing Gilbert and Sullivan's shows Americans could appreciate how they were now *different* from England, when in earlier epochs Americans reviled all things English because of the perceived commonalities they had with their colonial oppressors (Knapp 33). This feeling of cultural autonomy allowed Americans to laugh *at* England but with affection (Knapp 45). Furthermore, Gilbert and Sullivan were tapping in to middlebrow tastes that were emerging in America as the nation was transforming from a culture of work to a culture of consumption (Walsh and Platt 53). Operetta resonated with the gilded era middle-class Americans because "its celebration of a plush and secure bourgeois world, a *belle époque* to which there now corresponded an American version" (Walsh and Platt 37). The middle-class audiences had a place to go where they would be somebody. Additionally, Gilbert and Sullivan operettas impressed American critics and audiences as higher class and better quality entertainment than their native extravaganzas, burlesques, minstrel shows, Tom shows, and variety reviews. One reason that their shows seemed of better quality was that, like all operetta, Gilbert and Sullivan shows required professional specialists to create the music and book and to sing the songs (Stempel 104). Moreover, operettas did not depend on the unique and sometimes bizarre talents of a star performer who typically carried the lower-class entertainments (Stempel 105). Both these elements elevated operetta above popular/lowbrow culture. Also, Gilbert and Sullivan avoided vulgarity, buffoonery or decadence. They never stooped to "red noses, huge wigs, comic or music hall songs, cellar flap breakdowns, short skirts, transvestism, and low necklines" (Eden 123-24). Middle-class Americans righteously preferred their shows to racy continental fare or coarse, home-grown,

blue-collar entertainment. This was a clever way for Americans to repress their inferiority complex about European culture (Knapp 33-34). To soften the sting of his satiric wit, Gilbert took care to mix a strong dose of sentimentality into his operettas (Rowell 93-94). Indeed, middle-class Americans were suckers for sentimentality—as evidenced by the popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in that same epoch. Interestingly, Americans embraced *H.M.S. Pinafore* because it was not only a great show with hummable tunes, but their sentimentalism also caused them to miss Gilbert's satire altogether. Americans saw it as a paean to democratic principles that they conflated with their home-grown Horatio Alger narratives (Jones 8-9). Whether the satire was appreciated or not, *H.M.S. Pinafore* and all the Gilbert and Sullivan shows became models for American musicals to address social issues in a harmless way (Jones 9). Finally, D'Oyly Carte later began selling license rights to amateur groups and schools in America (Kenrick 92-93). This didactic application of Gilbert and Sullivan's works came as divine emollient to the earnest middle-class, ever ambitious for further education to facilitate advancement up the ladder towards the Elysium of the American dream. Yet a Gilbert and Sullivan show never presumed to appear in an opera house—that anti-democratic temple of highbrowdom where the middle class would be nobody (Stempel 109).

Having made such a powerful impression on the American musical theatre scene, the fact that Gilbert and Sullivan's impact sputtered in America can only be called a dull enigma. Scholars generally shrug and note a variety of broad trends, taking us back to the Walsh and Platt vision of that distinctly American culture that not only had a well-entrenched artistic and commercial tradition but also actively resisted Euro-pollution. Let us examine the various hypotheses. First, American musical theatre had always included a strong component of dance, beginning with *The Black Crook* in the 1860s. Dance has remained a vital element in American musical theatre, right up to the present day. P. G. Wodehouse's autobiographical book about his experience in the musical theatre world is entitled *Bring on the Girls!*, because he saw the dancing chorus as the default feature of the genre. We know that dance never held a significant position in Gilbert and Sullivan's canon. "Dance a Cachucha" in *The Gondoliers* and the "Country Dance" in *The Sorcerer* stand out as singular, lonely but nevertheless exuberant examples. American hoofers were unlikely to find inspiration in the Savoy model, devoid as it was of pure dance.

Second, American shows were built around star performers. The shows existed only because of the performers in them. The shows could not be reproduced by other performers, because the original star's

unique, signature shtick was what the audiences came to see (Stempel 105). Throughout the 1890s star performers paid composers to create signature songs for them to use in their shows, and publishers promoted new songs by paying stars to insert them into their shows. Such songs existed only for audience appeal and had nothing to do with any larger story in a show (Tawa 58). Some of the Broadway movers-and-shakers in the first decades of the twentieth century were also generally self-promoters like George M. Cohan and Tin Pan Alley songsmiths like Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern (Stempel 136). Cohan, in fact, purposefully worked to squash Euro-music and did it by using ragtime syncopation and vernacular idiom (Furia 30). He also looked to the musical ethno-farce tradition of Harrigan and Hart for inspiration about storyline and text (McCabe 50). These showmakers had their own American agenda as far as the musical sound they wanted to create. The American star system, moreover, was an organizational system that could not exploit the advantages of the ensemble nature of the Savoy company. Gilbert and Sullivan wrote for the strengths of a long-serving, carefully groomed ensemble that included members like George Grossmith, Rutland Barrington, and Jessie Bond (Traubner 156-57). America wasn't operating on a repertory company model, so few in America utilized this ingredient for sustained success the way the triumvirate did. We know that the star system was anathema to Gilbert, for his experience taught him to avoid any situation where a performer could alter his scripts (Stedman, *Classic Victorian* 217). Star shtick was also taboo to Gilbert, who cringed when a star would insert "ad libs, gags, and idiosyncratic routines" into a show (Stedman, "Blocks of Wood" 196). Hence, the Gilbert and Sullivan shows were not constructed around a star personality or talent. What American star performer would want that kind of material?

The third hypothesis asserts that business practices changed. The Theatre Syndicate killed the touring circuit between 1890 and 1910, shutting down about 5000 theatres nationwide (Lamont and Fournier 28). Film also cut into theatre audiences. By 1925 there were fewer than 600 venues anywhere in the country for live musical theatre, down from 6500 in the late nineteenth-century (Lamont and Fournier 28). It's unlikely that the Savoy triumvirate would have been willing to submit their artistic integrity or profits to the control of the likes of the Theatre Syndicate, the Shubert Brothers or the Keith-Albee-Orpheum Corporation. The diminished prospects of this shrinking and monopolized American market might have also been exacerbated by tougher competition. George Edwardes' Gaiety Theatre became the top producer of musical shows in the United Kingdom at the turn of the

century, and he quickly developed global audiences—including a strong following in North America (Stempel 134-35). His shows offered the same entertainment as Savoy productions, they were equally respectable, and they were cheaper. That sounds like a formula for success in any corner of the American market.

Fourth, the profile of the orchestra in America was not compatible for operetta on the scale of a Gilbert and Sullivan show. Typical instrumental availability in post Civil War America would include a piano for starters. Depending on the size of the town, that keyboard would be accompanied by a drummer, violin or cornet, clarinet, trombone, and string bass. Any touring impresario could expect these local musicians to sight read, and they knew vast repertoires (Tawa 74). Sullivan's scores needed way more in the way of talent and numbers than this, and touring with extra musicians always cut into profits. Also, around the World War I era American pit orchestras shifted from the sweet sound of string domination to the hot sound of brass domination. This brass-centered orchestra had a continuous rhythm section playing the beat. Such an orchestra, then, had lots of *ostinato*—repetition of a phrase and giving equal emphasis to all notes—and so provided better accompaniment for dance (Grant 144). Sullivan's scores called for few instruments to mark a strong dance beat. Audiences hear musical phrases in Sullivan's music, not a beat (Grant 120-21). Also, American orchestras incorporated new, native instruments like the banjo into the mix. The score to Kern's *Leave It to Jane* (1917) offers a good early example.

The fifth hypothesis: operetta died. Yes, but not easily or quickly. Gilbert and Sullivan had serious competition from other English-language operetta companies presenting English and translated continental fare, catering to middlebrow American audiences with this newfangled “opera for the people” (Preston 22). Dozens of these companies criss-crossed America from 1870 to 1900 (Preston 23). While the Savoy shows and rival continental imports inspired Americans to do and see more operettas, they did not necessarily motivate showmakers to adapt operetta elements into the well-established American musical theatre forms like burlesque, minstrelsy, or reviews (Stempel 111). Certainly, operetta made a strong showing on early twentieth-century Broadway, but Americans like George M. Cohan worked hard to eradicate it (Furia 31). By 1900 Gilbert and Sullivan were allegedly considered *passé* in America, and it was not until the 1930s and 1940s that Americans rediscovered and respected Gilbert and Sullivan (Bargainnier 125). The D'Oyly Carte company did not tour in America between 1890 and 1927 (Rollins and Witts).

Moreover, World War I stirred up rabid Germanophobia in America, so artistic compositions penned by people with names like Strauss, Friml, Romberg, or Herbert fell out of fashion (Jones 48). Gilbert and Sullivan's shows went down with them, guilty by association as operettas. Scholars also cite jazz, ragtime, and the Great Depression as operetta killers (Kislan 109).

Sixth, musical composition styles were changing. Around the time of World War I songs flipped from long verse/short chorus to short verse/long chorus form (Grant 26). Also, early twentieth century composers contracted the vocal range in their songs. This meant that the singers would not be called upon to use their weak high and low registers, and so they lyrics would come out more clearly against the strong brass accompaniment. As a result, formal vocal training was fading in importance as a necessary job skill with popular music (Grant 27). American songwriters were coming out of Tin Pan Alley, and they were interested in songs that would become hits within shows because a star performer chose to sing them. The songwriters then could expect such songs to sell well as stand-alone songs in the sheet music market (Furia 37). They weren't interested in writing songs that were tightly integrated into the show. The dominant, successful musical theatre teams in the early twentieth century collaborated in their own way, and that was very different from the Gilbert-Sullivan system. The Jerome Kern-P. G. Wodehouse-Guy Bolton team worked in the music first-lyrics to suit model (Furia 39). Theirs became the model that would be copied in America, because this system generated better results in a ragtime-based musical idiom. It allowed for more improvisational, whimsical, colloquial lyrics (Furia 40). The Gershwins created their songs and shows in the music first-lyrics to suit system as well (Furia 13). When George S. Kaufman and the Gershwins created *Strike Up the Band* in 1927, they worked the way Gilbert and Sullivan did, composing story and lyrics first and then a variety of song types to suit. It flopped, and they never tried that approach again (Furia 139).

These theories have some merit, but the reasoning in some cases and the timeline in others is tenuous. Scholars use these indirect causes to construct a historical narrative that suggests America lost interest in the operetta genre, including Gilbert and Sullivan. A plausible case can be made for apathy in the opposite direction. Evidence suggests that the Savoy triumvirate actually lost interest in the American market after their initial spectacular successes. First, not every Gilbert and Sullivan show was a hit in America. We know that *Ruddigore* flopped in 1887, and *The Yeomen of the Guard* flopped in 1888 because no one managed it closely (Ainger 284). *The Gondoliers* was criticized in 1890 by the

American press as shoddy (Ainger 305). After that last fiasco, no D'Oyly Carte tours came to North America until 1927 (Rollins and Witts).

Second, the triumvirate—ever conscious of the quality of their productions—found it extremely challenging to keep good casts together for multiple productions on two continents. Third, poor health afflicted the artistic team after 1890. Gilbert suffered from gout, and Sullivan's kidney ailment was flaring up (Ainger 317). Fourth, no international copyright regulations protected music performance till 1891, so the triumvirate was getting cut out of American revenue because they were foreigners (Rosen 1176-78). Fifth, all three of them had other artistic projects to pursue. Gilbert, for example, was still in demand as a dramatist (Ainger 400). Sullivan pursued his dream of grand opera, and D'Oyly Carte was investing in real estate and managing lucrative provincial tours of the shows around the United Kingdom. Gilbert also travelled globally for pleasure, and Sullivan was conducting everywhere. The American market also may not have been as rich a source of revenue as originally imagined. The infamous carpet controversy generated useful data about Gilbert's income that gives us insight into the relative profitability of the American market. In one eleven-year period, he earned £70,000 from the London performances of the Savoy shows and £20,000 from performances in the provinces and North America (Ainger 315). The mathematics reveal that the further away from home they took their shows, the Savoy triumvirate earned less and less for their trouble. It's easy to imagine that they all reached the conclusion that the American market just was not worth lying awake with a dismal headache about.

So, the Savoy triumvirate withdrew from the American market after 1890. Their positive impact on operetta's popularity was evident, but American theatre practitioners in the early twentieth-century had little chance to observe, absorb and copy Gilbert and Sullivan's process for creating a polished, professional production of an integrated musical package (Jones 10). Indeed, before 1920 "There was no tradition; ways of doing things evolved without a guiding intelligence; shows were thrown together in slapdash fashion" (Grant 53). No one in the American musical theatre world would reassemble all the pieces of the Savoy model of creating integrated shows until the 1940s (Bargainnier 123). Those who did so found that such a system proved to be as successful in the "golden era" of American musical theatre as they had been for the Savoy team.

Among the artistic practices, let us discuss the book first-music to suit collaborative model first. This practice returned to Broadway in

the mid-twentieth-century when strong composers teamed up with strong writers to put together solid shows based on a story, not a bagatelle of songs (Rosenberg and Harburg 12). It is the creative method that produced the *most* number of successes among all the musical theatre success in the twentieth century (Rosenberg and Harburg 131). Rodgers and Hammerstein represented the only artistic team in the twentieth century to match Gilbert and Sullivan's percentage of hits, using the book first-music to suit model (Stempel 447). Also, several of these twentieth-century writer-composer teams worked together for extended periods of time—as did Gilbert and Sullivan—and so they learned to build on each other's strengths symbiotically because of close, enduring collaboration. The teams of Rodgers and Hart, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and Lerner and Loewe come to mind. The great mid-twentieth-century creative teams also consciously worked to create integrated shows that transcended the need for specific star performers to give them life on stage, singing whatever songs they damned-well wanted to sing without regard to their connection to anything else in the show. Larry Stempel goes so far as to credit Rodgers and Hammerstein as the team that transformed American musical theatre from a star medium to a writer's medium (Stempel 334). The Savoy triumvirate (and the entire operetta culture) had shown decades earlier, though, how to make the star performer irrelevant. Moreover, this transformation was probably developing earlier in twentieth-century America anyway, as suggested by the examples of *Leave It to Jane* (1917) and *Showboat* (1927) with their numerous revivals over the ensuing decades. We can at least agree that after Rodgers and Hammerstein, the star-centered musical found far less traction on Broadway than it had in earlier epochs. The mediocre successes of *Coco* and *Applause* remind us of that.

The scholar John Bush Jones credits Gilbert and Sullivan for giving the boy-meets-girl-boy-loses-girl-boy-gets-girl-back plotline to the American musical theatre (Jones 5). Indeed, most of the story musicals of the twentieth-century feature this plotline, but I wonder if Plautus or Molière might be turning in their graves. Mark Grant effusively praises Jerome Kern for several musical innovations that Sullivan anticipated (Grant 32-33). These include the use of the Verdi model of overture composition where a medley of the score's tunes is woven together to preview the characters, story and mood for the audience. We know that Sullivan made this a standard practice with his operettas and for all Anglo-based comic opera. Grant also distinguishes Kern as an innovator in the use of song reprises (and also censures him for overusing it). Sullivan reprised songs decades earlier—with judicious restraint—

in shows such as *The Mikado* and *The Gondoliers*. Grant credits Kern for his imaginative reworking of melodies in his scores. Sullivan did it often, often, often. “Miya Sama” from *The Mikado* and “Climbing over rocky mountain” from *The Pirates of Penzance* stand as good examples. Finally, Grant remarks on Kern’s trademark recycling of musical threads and self-plagiarism. Sullivan parodied Mozart, Beethoven and even Verdi for comic purposes, and the famous instance of his self-plagiarism of a song from *Thespis* for the women’s chorus entrance in *The Pirates of Penzance* is well-known.

Innumerable composers, lyricists and librettists of the mid-twentieth-century have acknowledged that they turned to Gilbert and Sullivan for artistic inspiration in writing lyrics and melodies. Cole Porter’s lyrics evoke Gilbert’s wit (Furia 156-60). Leonard Bernstein, Jule Styne and Richard Rodgers all praised Sullivan’s music as excellent examples of the genre (Bargainnier 128-29). Lorenz Hart worshipped Gilbert as a lyricist (Traubner 399). Harold Rome said he learned from Gilbert and Sullivan how to blend satire and humor (Bargainnier 129). While out of one side of his mouth, Stephen Sondheim dismisses Gilbert and Sullivan as a negligible force in American musical theatre, out of the other side of his mouth he specifically mentions that he used Gilbert and Sullivan models for songs in *A Little Night Music* and *Pacific Overtures* (Bargainnier 128).

Gilbert and Sullivan also anticipated mid-twentieth-century musical theatre’s middlebrow appeal. Gilbert never deluded himself about this aspect of the operettas he and Sullivan created. He acknowledged that he used his libretti to serve up “rump steak and onions . . . a palatable concoction of satisfying and seasoning ingredients which is good enough to please the man of refinement . . . and not too refined for the butcher boy” (Eden 122). The scholar John Bush Jones put it most succinctly when he asserted that Gilbert and Sullivan showed America that it was possible to combine three elements successfully—integrated script, score and production elements; soft-pedaled social satire; and crowd-pleasing entertainment (Jones 10-11). This is about as good a definition as you can hope to find for middlebrow culture as it relates to American musical theatre. Satire and integrated story elements come from the highbrow world of opera, while bourgeois morality and rousing song-and-dance come from lowbrow extravaganzas, burlesques, reviews, and minstrels. In the mid-twentieth century Rodgers and Hammerstein consciously strove to create a theatre form that was middlebrow, though they primarily were motivated by the desire to elevate musical theatre from its commercial roots (Stempel 332). They created shows that mixed musical story-telling with serious social

topics—racism in *South Pacific*, slavery in *The King and I*, political freedom in *The Sound of Music* (Traubner 405). Elite critics dismissed them and all musical theatre as lowbrow hokum, but social critics countered that musical theatre was not popular culture because it did not arise spontaneously from the masses (Stempel 331-32). The creative team for *West Side Story* (Laurents, Bernstein and Robbins) was working the same angle as Rodgers and Hammerstein—cleverly navigating a path down the middle that drew upon elements of high and low culture. Its tapestry of Shakespeare, ethnic slums, jazz-inspired music, modern choreography, comic byplay and tragic destruction, conceived by a trio with unexceptionable high-culture credentials compares to Gilbert and Sullivan's shrewd cultural savvy.

D'Oyly Carte, Gilbert and especially Sullivan exploited any number of marketing ploys to generate revenue. Some of these practices were standard in the late nineteenth-century, and some of them were innovations. The Savoy triumvirate engaged in a practice that the scholar Maurya Wickstrom calls "retail theatre." Retail theatre makes the show itself an advertisement for other products. Starting in 1880 D'Oyly Carte sold license rights to amateur groups and schools in America (Kenrick 92-93). Sullivan, like any other composer of the period, published many of his songs in sheet music form (Kislan 98). This was a lucrative market in America, generating sales of 2 billion copies per year (Tawa 42). Professional or amateur productions featured these songs that audiences would eagerly purchase after seeing the show. We also know that he composed his operettas with a fairly narrow vocal range, because he was conscious not only of the market for his sheet music but also of amateur/educational theatres that would want to mount productions that D'Oyly Carte would happily license to them. Many of his tunes were rescored into stand-alone dance arrangements, such as the "Sorcerer Waltz" (University of Rochester) and the "Patience Polka" (Williams 234-35). Gilbert, like many other dramatic writers, enjoyed steady income from the publication of his libretti (Rosen 1172). During the national frenzy over *H.M.S. Pinafore* in 1879, the triumvirate sold souvenir items wherever it toured (Jones 7). *H.M.S. Pinafore*, *The Mikado* and *The Yeomen of the Guard* were recorded as early as 1907-08 (Rollins and Witts, X) and sold well for many decades afterwards. By the 1940s, the American musical theatre industry was using all these techniques as revenue streams.

The Savoy triumvirate used very strong management practices to maintain the high quality of their productions and to bring together all the necessary artistic experts needed for success. Gilbert did much to place the writer/director at the apex of the artistic hierarchy in the late

nineteenth century. He was the professional expert with years of experience under his belt who crafted the integrated show and directed it. In the twentieth century we saw several director/writers who followed his example with equal success: Joshua Logan (*South Pacific*) and George S. Kaufman (*Animal Crackers*) stand as the best examples. In his role as director Gilbert did more than protect the integrity of his own script. He personally maintained the high quality of the entire production. Gilbert's obsession about authenticity in the décor and his habit of directing the cast members in every detail of their performances are well known. D'Oyly Carte willingly supported Gilbert's autocratic methods, because the results positively impressed audiences. Gilbert also managed a full, professional staff of artists to handle the myriad artistic responsibilities involved in producing musical theatre works—designers, a choreographer, a rehearsal conductor and an accompanist, stage managers, and properties managers. All these subordinates contributed to the awesome impression that the Savoy shows made on audiences. George Abbott (director of *Damn Yankees*, *On the Town*, and *The Pajama Game*) used the same approach in mid-twentieth-century America, gathering around him talented lieutenants like Desi Arnaz, Betty Comden, Hal Prince, Leonard Bernstein, Bob Fosse, and Stephen Sondheim to handle the specialized artistic components—especially the ones he knew little about. Working similarly as the producer, Richard D'Oyly Carte gathered all the best people under his administration as a producer to sustain his impressive record of hits. Flo Ziegfeld achieved success by operating in the same way as a producer (collaborating with the likes of Berlin, Kern, Gershwin, Eddie Cantor, Fanny Brice, and Will Rogers). David Merrick, who earned the nickname “the abominable showman” for his Gilbert-like ruthlessness, made best use of the D'Oyly Carte vision in the twentieth century. He produced shows such as *Hello Dolly*, *Oliver!*, *Promises Promises*, and *42nd Street*, and his success can be at least partially attributed to the fact that he enlisted the talent of Broadway's best directors, choreographers and performers to create them. He achieved Broadway's most impressive record of success in the twentieth century, amassing a 60% hit rate, one of the few producers who came close to matching D'Oyly Carte's success ratio at the Savoy (Stempel 447).

The most historically significant artistic legacy that Gilbert and Sullivan might have offered to the American musical theatre was their creation of the fully integrated show. So many musical theatre historians credit *Oklahoma!* as the crowning glory of the integrated musical, because Rodgers and Hammerstein seamlessly integrated story, dialogue, character, music, lyrics, and dance. During the World

War I era the Kern-Bolton-Wodehouse team created their Princess Theatre musicals that integrated story, music, and lyrics (but not dance), and scholars acknowledge this as an important historical development. Theatre scholars are reluctant to go further back in the chronology and tie in Gilbert and Sullivan's accomplishments directly to the development of the American musical theatre. That reluctance should be challenged. We know that Jerome Kern, Richard Rodgers, P. G. Wodehouse and just about every American showmaker in the twentieth century drew upon the two Englishmen for inspiration, and we know that American operetta embraced many Gilbert and Sullivan artistic practices and so flourished. The most likely ways to trace Gilbert and Sullivan's direct contribution to the integrated musical in America would appear in the evidence we have traced along the cultural thread or the non-threatening social satire thread. Either one can be documented and convincingly argued, and this could be the way to bridge over that historiographical disconnect.

Gilbert, Sullivan and D'Oyly Carte developed their Savoy system of creating and producing operettas that were artistically and financially successful. They brought their work to America in the late nineteenth century, where it was well received. The Savoy system didn't take root in America. Almost a generation after the triumvirate had pulled up stakes in America around 1890, American showmakers slowly began to put into practice many Savoy system techniques, reinventing the wheel that had been developed decades earlier. Oh joy, oh rapture unforeseen, these artistic, organizational and marketing practices generated success again. We can make very few direct, continuous historical linkages between the triumvirate and Rodgers, Hammerstein, Kaufman, Lerner, Loewe, Abbott, Merrick, or Robbins, but the Savoy triumvirate does deserve the accolade of historical significance, however, for creating a template for success in the musical theatre industry that transcends culture and time. Specifically, that Savoy model includes the following steps: partner up a team of artists to create an integrated show; develop the book first and create music and lyrics to suit; appeal to middlebrow audiences with harmless social satire; employ the best talent and a full staff of professionals to create a highly polished product; manage that talent with firm administrative vision; implement retail theatre practices. It yielded a remarkable record of success for the triumvirate, and it brought success to American musical theatre half a century later. If any of us wanted to mount a successful musical on Broadway tomorrow, we'd have the statistics on our side if we used this Savoy system. The executives in

charge of the 2011 production of *Spiderman* might have profited from this little history lesson.

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