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

Theatre scholars generally give short shrift to Gilbert, Sullivan, and D'Oyly Carte in narrating the historical development of the American musical theatre, and it's worth investigating this phenomenon and its causes. By glossing over D'Oyly Carte, Gilbert, and Sullivan scholars have overlooked the historical significance of the Savoy triumvirate for American musical theatre—they developed a formula for producing successful musical theatre productions that Broadway showmakers ultimately embraced in later decades. That formula included the 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.

Unquestionably, Gilbert and Sullivan proved that operetta could generate big profits, and American theatricians copied them (Kislan 98). Gilbert and Sullivan's rollicking trans-Atlantic success in 1879 motivated the American composer, Julius Eichberg, to revise his 1862 operetta, *The Doctor of Alcantara*, and publish a new version in 1879 with two new songs that closely imitated the Gilbert patter song and some distinctive Sullivanesque musical elements (Kaufman xviii). 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 soft-pedaled satiric content (Jones 9).

Scholars of cultural studies have documented the reasons for Gilbert and Sullivan's enduring impact on American culture. Post-Civil War Americans could appreciate how Gilbert and Sullivan's shows made them aware of how DIFFERENT they were from England, when in earlier epochs Americans reviled all things English because of the perceived commonalities they had with their colonial oppressors (Knapp 33). 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 middle-class Americans because of “its celebration of a plush and secure bourgeois world, a *belle époque* to which there now corresponded an American version” (Walsh and Platt 37). Also, Gilbert and Sullivan avoided vulgarity, buffoonery or decadence. Middle-class Americans righteously preferred their shows to racy continental fare or coarse, home-grown, blue-collar entertainment. To soften the sting of his satiric wit, Gilbert took care to mix a strong dose of sentimentality into his operettas (Rowell 93-94). *H.M.S. Pinafore* and all the Gilbert and Sullivan shows seemed to hit just the right blend of social satire and sentimentality, for they became models for American musicals to address social issues in a harmless way (Jones 9).

Having made such a powerful impression on the American scene, the fact that Gilbert and Sullivan's impact in America had sputtered out by 1900 can only be called a dull enigma. Scholars generally shrug and note a variety of broad trends. 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 and continuing right up to the present day. We

know that dance never held a significant position in Gilbert and Sullivan's canon. American hoofers were unlikely to find inspiration in Savoy-type shows, devoid as they were of pure dance.

Second, American shows were built around star performers. The shows could not be reproduced by other performers, because the original star's unique, signature schtick 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). Gilbert and Sullivan shows certainly are not star vehicles in this sense.

Third, the profile of the orchestra in America was not compatible with operetta on the scale of a Gilbert and Sullivan show. Around the World War I era, the American pit orchestras became brass-centered in order to provide better rhythmic 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* offers a good early example.

The fourth hypothesis: operetta died. By 1900 Gilbert and Sullivan were allegedly considered passé in America (Bargainnier 125). Americans like George M. Cohan worked hard to eradicate operetta of all sorts (Furia 31). Scholars also cite Germanophobia, jazz, ragtime, and the Great Depression as operetta killers (Kislan 109).

Fifth, musical composition styles were changing. Composers contracted the vocal range across the early 20C to make lyrics come out more clearly against the strong brass accompaniment (Grant 27). Also, the successful musical theatre teams in the early 20C did not use the Gilbert-Sullivan process for writing the show. The Jerome Kern-P. G. Wodehouse-Guy Bolton team and the Gershwins, for example, worked in the music first--lyrics to suit model (Furia 13, 39). Their working system generated better results in a ragtime-based musical idiom, for it allowed for more improvisational, whimsical, colloquial lyrics (Furia 40).

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. Perhaps, the apathy was coming from the other side of the Atlantic. 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*, *The Yeomen of the Guard* and *The Gondoliers* flopped (Ainger 284, 305). After that last fiasco in 1890 no D'Oyly Carte tours came to North America until 1927 (Rollins and Witt). Also, poor health afflicted the artistic team after 1890 (Ainger 317). Furthermore, 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). Finally, Gilbert, Sullivan and D'Oyly Carte had other artistic projects to pursue. 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 20C had little chance to observe, absorb and copy the Savoy system 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 till 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 it had been for the Savoy team.

Let us consider artistic practices. The book first--music to suit collaborative model returned to Broadway in the mid-20C when strong composers teamed up with even stronger writers (Rosenberg and Harburg 12). The teams of Rodgers and Hart, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and Lerner and Loewe come to mind. Rodgers and Hammerstein was the only artistic team in the 20C to match Gilbert and Sullivan's percentage of hits, and they used the book first—music to suit model (Stempel 447). It is the creative method that produced the MOST number of successes among all the musical theatre success in the 20C (Rosenberg and Harburg 131).

Innumerable composers, lyricists and librettists of the mid-20C have acknowledged that they turned to Gilbert and Sullivan for inspiration in writing lyrics and melodies. 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). Stephen Sondheim specifically mentions that he used Gilbert and Sullivan models for songs in *A Little Night Music* and *Pacific Overtures* (Bargainnier 128). Mark Grant effusively praises Jerome Kern for several musical innovations that Sullivan actually anticipated (Grant 32-33).

Gilbert and Sullivan also anticipated mid-20C musical theatre's middlebrow appeal. 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). 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, just as Gilbert and Sullivan had done.

D'Oyly Carte, Gilbert and especially Sullivan exploited any number of marketing ploys to generate revenue, practicing what Maurya Wickstrom calls "retail theatre." Retail theatre makes the show itself an advertisement for other products. D'Oyly Carte sold license rights to amateur groups and schools in globally (Kenrick 92-93). Sullivan, like any other composer of the period, published many of his songs in sheet music form (Kislan 98). He even rescored some of his tunes into stand-alone dance songs, such as the "Sorcerer Waltz" (University of Rochester). 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*, *Mikado* and *The Yeomen of the Guard* were recorded as early as 1907-08 (Rollins and Witts, X). 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. Gilbert did much to place the writer/director at the apex of the artistic hierarchy in the late 19C. In that dual role 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. In the 20C we saw several director/writers who followed his example with equal success: Josh Logan (*South Pacific*) and George S. Kaufman (*Animal Crackers*) stand as the best examples. Gilbert also managed a full, professional staff of artists to handle the myriad artistic responsibilities involved in producing musical theatre works, and all these subordinates contributed to the awesome impression that the Savoy shows made on audiences. George Abbot (director of *Damn Yankees*, *On the Town*, and *The Pajama Game*) used the same approach in mid-20C America, gathering around him talented lieutenants like 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. David Merrick made best use of the D'Oyly Carte vision in the 20C. He produced hits 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 20C, 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. Theatre scholars are reluctant to go 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. 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 a system of creating and producing operettas that were successful. They brought their work to America in the late 19C, where it was well received. Their Savoy system didn't take root in America. A generation after the triumvirate had pulled up stakes in America, 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. The Savoy triumvirate deserves the accolade of historical significance for creating a template for success in the musical theatre industry that transcends culture and time. 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 take a musical to Broadway tomorrow, we'd have the statistics on our side if we used this Savoy system. Somebody please go tell this to the executives in charge of *Spiderman*.

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