

**A Most Ingenious Paradox:
The Art of Gilbert &
Sullivan**

Gayden Wren

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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DEDICATION

Many people have contributed to the creation of this book, and it could be argued that there are many others who have made this book what it is, from my family and friends to my theatrical collaborators and many others; without each of them, it would have been different and probably worse.

Nonetheless, this one's for Stephanie M. Muntone, without whose decade-plus of prodding, probing, questioning, and challenging it might well never have been finished at all.

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Preface

How to Use This Book

I hope this book will be useful to a wide variety of readers, from hardcore Gilbert & Sullivan aficionados to performers and directors looking for insights into a particular show—not to mention devotees of musical theater, more casual Gilbert & Sullivan fans, and anyone else.

Accordingly, I've attempted to organize the book in such a way that each of these constituencies will be able to find what they're looking for in it.

To begin with, the chapters themselves assume basic familiarity with the story and characters of the opera in question—plot information seemed to be cluttering up the chapters unnecessarily, and I decided it was fair to assume in most cases that a reader wouldn't be reading a chapter about an opera that he or she hadn't seen, heard, or at least read.

However, my first appendix consists of plot summaries of all 14 Gilbert & Sullivan operas; anyone reading a chapter on an unfamiliar opera should start with the appendix so as to have the basic information necessary to make sense of the chapter.

Similar considerations led me to provide a detailed examination of the post-opening revisions of *Ruddigore* in the second appendix, rather than in chapter 12, where it might otherwise belong. Again, it will help to read the appendix before tackling the chapter itself.

On numerous occasions, I discuss Gilbert's use of rhyme schemes in the overall context of his work. Several different formats are conventionally used for such material. I have chosen the A/B format, as being the clearest—if occasionally the most initially intimidating—of the lot.

In this scheme, the final sound in the last syllable of each line is awarded a letter—the first one A, the second B, and so forth. If, however, a line rhymes with a preceding one, the same letter is used.

Thus, the familiar “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” would be an AABB song, with “star” rhymes tagged A and “high” rhymes B:

“Twinkle, twinkle, little *star* (A)
how I wonder what you *are*, (A)
Up above the world so *high*, (B)
like a diamond in the *sky*. (B)

On the other hand, “A Wandering Minstrel I” is an ABBA song:

“A wandering minstrel *I*, (A)
a thing of shreds and *patches*, (B)
of ballads, songs and *snatches*, (B)
and dreamy lullaby (A)

I hope this won’t unduly confuse fans of the famous Swedish rock band Abba. . . .

I’ve put extra effort into making my index detailed and, I hope, helpful to the reader who’s primarily interested in a particular show, character, or subject. I hope it will let readers find what they want, whether they’re browsing it for useful tidbits or trying to find a passage they read previously.

By the same token, the bibliography includes brief critical appraisals of each work. I’ve always been annoyed to see a book listed in a bibliography and not know whether the author thinks I should read it—or if, perhaps, he or she found it ghastly and not at all helpful.

Last, in deference to readers who may not read the entire book, I’ve tried to make each chapter, if not a self-contained entity, at least a coherent unit in its own right. Inevitably, this involves occasionally repeating information, if not word for word at least in its general shape. I’ve tried to keep this to a minimum, though, and I hope the beginning-to-end reader won’t find it unduly annoying.

Garden City, New York
June 1999

G. W.

Acknowledgments

Before we get underway, a few words of thanks are appropriate. There could be hundreds, but in an effort to be concise, I'll group it into three categories:

My first encounters with Gilbert & Sullivan were as an audience member and as a performer, and I still think the operas are best appreciated in performance. As a Gilbert & Sullivan performer and director, my primary homes have been the Gilbert & Sullivan Light Opera Company of Long Island and the Gilbert & Sullivan Players of Oberlin College. My thanks to both groups, and especially to Sally Buckstone, Phil Gellis, Stephen O'Leary, and Raymond J. Osnato on Long Island, and to Christopher P. Ertelt, Suzanne Fatta, Alison Gent, Peter Gibeau, Sara Elizabeth Holliday, Jeffrey C. Mead, Kathy Anne Powell, and Bill Stevens in Oberlin.

The roots of this book lie in a course on Gilbert & Sullivan taught at Oberlin in 1982–83, and many of my ideas originated in comments, questions, or objections raised by my students there. My thanks, especially, to Monica Gfoeller, Vance Lehmkuhl, Paul V. Patanella, and Kara Sherwood.

And, finally, I owe a special note of thanks to those who have read the book's various chapters and protochapters since 1984, offering everything from heartening praise to savage criticism. There may be others I've forgotten, and if so I apologize; but my particular thanks to Sally Ann Denmead, Christopher P. Ertelt, Sara Elizabeth Holliday, Janette Kennedy, Daniel Kravetz, Vance Lehmkuhl, Ralph MacPhail Jr., the late Jerry March, Stephanie M. Muntone, and Raymond J. Osnato. At a late date, Steven Lichtenstein, Louis Silverstein, and Mike Storie provided useful attributional help.

Special thanks are also due to John Wright, a Gilbert & Sullivan fan and book industry professional who gave me a gratis tutorial on the workings of the book business; without his advice and counsel the book might never have seen print. Maribeth Anderson Payne, music editor at Oxford University Press, also deserves a round of applause for shepherding the project from manuscript through completion, as do Ellen Welch and Bob Milks.

The book is much the richer for the various people who helped me

acquire the illustrations and the rights to reprint them. Most of all, I am indebted to the staff of The Pierpont Morgan Library in New York: curators Frederic Woodbridge Wilson and Rigby Turner, the endlessly patient staff of the Reading Room and the Photography & Rights department, including Marilyn Palmeri, Despina Coutavas, and Joseph Vehavi.

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Four of today's finest musical-theater artists were kind enough to allow me to quote from their work without fee: I am very grateful to Jerry Bock, Sheldon Harnick, Stephen Schwartz (and Hope Taylor, from his office), and Stephen Sondheim (and David C. Olsen of Warner Bros. Publications).

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Introduction

The question is, why?

Any proper book should answer at least one question. This is true of novels and nonfiction in general, but it's especially true of books about other books. They should tell us something we didn't already know—otherwise, why read them? And the easiest way to do that is to answer a question.

In my case, the question is: “What is it with Gilbert & Sullivan?” Or, in longer form, “Why is it that, more than a century after their last collaboration, Gilbert & Sullivan remain a vital part of theatrical life wherever English is spoken?”

That this is so can hardly be denied. I personally know of at least 200 groups that perform exclusively or primarily the works of Gilbert & Sullivan, scattered throughout the United States, Canada, England, Australia, South Africa, even the Caribbean. This is remarkable; only one other body of theatrical works anywhere in the English-speaking world can claim such universal popularity, and that is the plays of Shakespeare.

Further, Gilbert & Sullivan attracts a particular sort of enthusiasm that borders on zealotry. More than 125 years after they first collaborated, the world is full of people who delight in arcane trivia about the men and their works. Besides the performing companies, there are groups of Savoyards who assemble to discuss the operas, publications galore about them, and more.

This is quite astonishing, if you think about it. Gilbert & Sullivan's prime period was in the 1880s, well over a century ago. No other English-language plays from that period are regularly performed, and little more than a handful of novels, songs, or other works are current for anyone but scholars. The 1930s, much closer to us, produced no significant English-language theater works that retain popularity.

Gilbert & Sullivan, on the other hand, are more popular now than they were at their creation. During the 1980s, *The Pirates of Penzance* was a Broadway smash all over again, running for longer than it had originally in London and New York combined, and reaching millions more people. Even works that were relative failures at the time, such as *Princess Ida* and

Ruddigore, are acknowledged classics. Movie and television adaptations of the operas have made them accessible to more people on a single night than viewed even *The Mikado* in its entire original run.

What has made these works so astonishingly durable and so lastingly popular? Some people attribute this longevity to Sullivan's music, which is certainly remarkable. Others praise the cleverness of Gilbert's lyrics. Still others cite the team's singular fusion of words and music.

Personally, I don't find any of these explanations persuasive. Listening to operas of the day and later, one can find many composers who shared Sullivan's gift for melody, from Offenbach through Rudolph Friml, many of whom excelled him in orchestration, harmonic ingenuity, and sheer musical originality.

As for Gilbert's lyrics, they are indeed clever. But the Victorians were a clever bunch, and many lyricists from his day and later can match Gilbert for tripping rhythms, intricate rhyming, and the like. And, let's face it, while Gilbert's humor is less dated than that of most of his contemporaries, it has lost some of its zip over the years. On many occasions I've heard an average Neil Simon play draw more laughs than *The Mikado*.

Even the remarkable artistic fusion that marks Gilbert & Sullivan's songs can't account for their success. The same creative symbiosis can be seen in the songs of George and Ira Gershwin or of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart; but despite their being closer to us in time, hence more accessible, the Gershwin and Rodgers & Hart shows have not survived. Their songs have, of course, in concert performances, recordings, and pastiche shows; and if it were merely the simpatico of composer and lyricist that made Gilbert & Sullivan unique, one would expect their works to survive primarily in these forms.

But this is not the case. Unlike most works of George M. Cohan, Irving Berlin, the Gershwins, Jerome Kern, Noel Coward, Ivor Novello, Rodgers & Hart, Cole Porter, and the like, Gilbert & Sullivan opera survives essentially in its original form—as musical theater.

The answer, I think, therefore lies in their works *as theater*. Beneath the surface charm of the Savoy operas, I believe, lies a powerful thematic core that makes their works effective to this day.

Despite the wit of the operas, their thematic substance is generally not comic. In fact, in nearly all of the operas, the most effective points are serious moments as often as funny ones. The operas are at bottom a series of powerful, very human stories whose themes are as universal as their parody and satire are dated, and it is this fact that I think accounts for the operas' longevity. In this book, I hope to explore those themes and present a coherent argument for my premise that these are, for the most part, serious works, not musical comedies but comedies in the Shakespearean sense.

My focus therefore is only incidentally on Gilbert as a lyricist or Sullivan as a composer. I explore these areas, but only to the extent that they reflect on the thematic considerations I regard as central; technical analysis is kept to a minimum.

To a considerable extent, I treat Gilbert & Sullivan as if they were a single playwright, because in certain key areas they are. To read Gilbert's works without Sullivan or to listen to Sullivan's works with other librettists is to see how much each brought to the other's work. Thus, throughout this book, I refer to "Gilbert & Sullivan" when treating them as a collective author and "Gilbert and Sullivan" when referring to them as individuals.

In particular, Sullivan was intimately involved in developing the stories and characterizations of the operas, before a word or a note was set onto a page. Since I hold the stories and characterizations to be the key aspects of the operas, I consider Sullivan to be in certain respects as much their creator as Gilbert. It is no coincidence that the partnership's peak period began when Sullivan became directly involved in shaping the stories or that it ended when he retreated from that field.

Three final notes, on side issues. First, on what one of my readers has called "the intentionality issue." My readings of the operas rely heavily on connections between imagery, characterization, and thematic content. I see the operas as strongly integrated works, with the various elements coming together in a remarkable synthesis.

The question then arises: "Are you saying that Gilbert & Sullivan *meant* to do this?" Noting flower imagery running throughout *Ruddigore*, and specifically relating on several occasions to gender-role questions and matters of morality, am I arguing that Gilbert consciously deploys flower imagery in a concerted effort to write a play about this subject?

Where Gilbert is concerned, my answer is no. His creative process has been meticulously documented, drawing in particular on his plot books, and it seems unlikely that so detail-oriented a man would have failed to sketch out these structures in advance if he had been fully aware of them.

In Sullivan's case, the answer is probably yes. A great admirer of Wagner's leitmotif technique, he clearly intended his mature operas to be more than mere collections of songs. With his exhaustive musical training, it is almost certain that when he reuses a musical theme or harmonic progression, he is doing so specifically to link the song with a previous number.

In a larger sense, however, my answer is: "It doesn't matter," any more than do similar questions about Shakespeare. In both cases, the facts are the same: What's there is there, and it affects audiences in ways that are the same whether the author consciously put it in or did so subconsciously or even if it got there entirely coincidentally. In any event, the richness of Shakespeare is what makes his works endure, and the same is true of Gilbert & Sullivan.

I will try to demonstrate what is there and how it functions, and leave to others the question of how it got there.

Second, I must note that I am a Gilbert & Sullivan director, and my understanding of the operas has arisen, in large part, through my experiences directing the shows.

I hope, however, that the subjective, interpretive art of directing has not crept into my attempt at objective, descriptive analysis. To me, the job of the analyst is to describe the building as we find it, from its foundations to its decorative trim; the job of the director is to furnish the building in order to make it habitable by a particular cast, audience, and so on.

If I have done my job, my directing will be informed by the analytic work that has gone into the book, but none of my elaboration in the directing process will have found its way back into the book.

If I haven't done my job, I'm sure there will be plenty of people to let me know!

Which leaves us with the book, which hopefully will provide an answer to the question raised earlier. Not *the* answer, of course—great works are notoriously hard to definitively explain—but an answer.

Ultimately, of course, the works themselves are the answer—which was my response to an early reader who said, in comment on a chapter, that I had “taken all the fun out of Gilbert & Sullivan.”

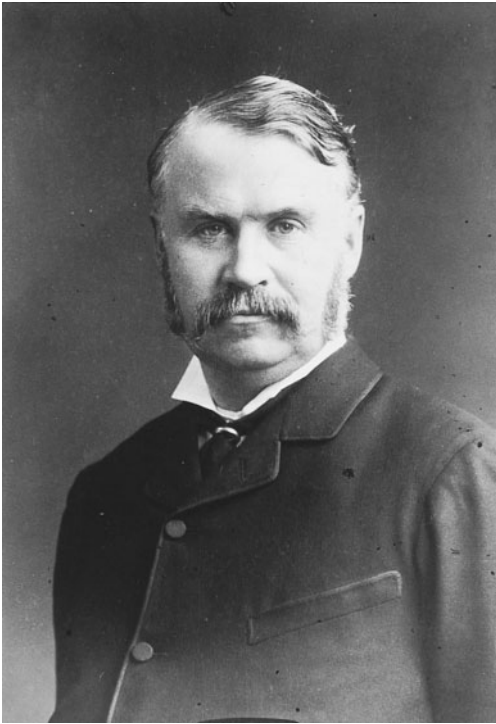
Nonsense, I said. These would be pretty pallid works if one critic—right, wrong, or otherwise—could knock the fun out of them. The operas are as much fun now as they ever were, and no matter how many people write books about them, they'll stay that way.

My greatest hope, naturally, is that my book will offer people a new way of seeing the operas, both those they know and those they don't—and that they'll take that new way and go to see the operas!

Facing page: FIGURE 1.1. W. S. Gilbert at around 40. Gilbert was a tall man whose scowling brows, massive forehead and commanding demeanor helped enforce the rigorous discipline he demanded as a pioneering stage director. *Source:* *The Pierpont Morgan Library, Gilbert and Sullivan Collection.*

1

Gilbert before Sullivan





When Gilbert and Sullivan collaborated for the first time in 1871, it was by no means apparent that Gilbert's destiny lay in opera, or in collaboration with Sullivan. There were, however, important signs pointing in that direction.

At 35, Gilbert was widely respected, but he was only one of a number of prominent dramatists of his day. He was, in fact, as well known for his skills as a director—or, as the British called it, a producer or stage manager—as for his writing. And as a writer, though he had scored several substantial hits on the stage, he was still at least as well known as the author of *The Bab Ballads*.

It is thus no surprise that *Thespis* and, most often, the pair's first five collaborations usually were billed as the work of "Sullivan & Gilbert." While Gilbert's temperament and working methods ensured that he would be the dominant personality from the start, in the eyes of the public Sullivan was the bigger name—as indeed the composer customarily was in any operatic collaboration.

William Schwenck Gilbert was born in London on November 18, 1836. His father, William Gilbert, was a former naval surgeon who, after retiring upon receiving a large inheritance, was subsequently to embark on a career as a novelist and essayist.

The future dramatist's early life was marked by a series of tentative career moves—government service, law, journalism. Only at journalism did he achieve any success, most notably in his work for *Fun*, which today is most notable for the *Bab Ballads* but included a stream of short stories, reviews, essays, and incidental pieces. By the late 1860s, however, the *Bab Ballads* had emerged from the (frequently anonymous) mix of *Fun* staples to make Gilbert's name, and had he desired he might easily have continued as a comic journalist for the rest of his life.

He did not so desire, however. By the time *Bab* made his presence felt, Gilbert was already drawn to the theater. Indeed, a famous anecdote from his youth has him running away from school at age 15 and attempting to gain admission to the company of the famous actor Charles Kean,¹ though it should be noted that most of Gilbert's anecdotes have a smack of the apocryphal about them.

Nevertheless, he was a regular London theatergoer by the early 1860s, both as a reviewer and out of personal interest. He also traveled frequently to France, where he made it his business to hear the operettas of Offenbach, who remained a lifelong favorite.

Gilbert's reviews from this period reveal the already emerging ideas that were to drive his own theatrical career: an emphasis on professionalism in presentation, a dislike of incoherent plots, and a firm conviction that most of the librettists of the day were inept.

In 1867, for example, he reviewed *Cox and Box*, the first operatic work by the young Arthur Sullivan. Writing in *Fun*, he was generally compli-

mentary toward the composer, but took a dimmer view of librettist F. C. Burnand:

“Mr. Sullivan’s music is, in many places, of too high a class for the grotesquely absurd plot to which it is wedded,” he wrote. “It is very funny, here and there, and grand or graceful when it is not funny; but the grand and the graceful have, we think, too large a share of the honors to themselves.”²

Gilbert’s illustrations for *Fun* and especially those for the *Bab Ballads* also foreshadowed his future path. While the *Ballads* themselves are often cited as forerunners of the Savoy operas, and indeed engendered a number of Savoy plots, the illustrations are more evocative of his theatrical style to come: Painstakingly detailed, with meticulous attention to physical attitude and to details of costume and props—every button just so, hats, gloves, belts, and footwear intricately rendered—they are at once wildly implausible in content and excruciatingly realistic in form, as Gilbert’s plays would be in years to come.

From the day he began working at *Fun* in 1861, Gilbert was on the fringes of the theatrical world. In those days, comic journalism had at least one foot on the stage, in the loosely knit comic genre known as burlesque. The most successful comic journalists also wrote burlesques, while the most successful burlesque playwrights also wrote for the comic papers.

Burlesque was not to be confused with legitimate theater. Its extravagant plots, generally parodies of popular operas or plays, were joined with a pathological love of punning to produce an art form that was half performer showcase, half joke collection. Indeed, its sensibility was so close to that of the comic journals that Gilbert occasionally took a rejected burlesque and published it in a comic paper.

The “*Fun Gang*” included many active burlesque writers—the paper’s first editor, H. J. Byron, among them—and chances are that some of Gilbert’s jokes found their way, uncredited, into burlesques as early as 1861 or 1862. His first play, the short “comediotta” *Uncle Baby*, scored only a modest success in 1863, and it was not until 1866 that his stage career really got underway, with his first staged burlesque, *Dulcamara*. (He had been writing burlesques without success at least since 1860.)

Like such successors as *La Vivandiere* (1868), *The Merry Zingara* (1868), and *Robert the Devil* (1868), *Dulcamara* doesn’t seem especially Gilbertian today. All they really show is that Gilbert could parody opera and melodrama as well as his peers and that he could wring out a pun with the best of them.

However questionable their intrinsic merit, though, these plays are important for having established Gilbert’s name in theatrical circles and for having intrigued him with the financial rewards of writing for the stage. After 1866, Gilbert would average four or more plays annually for the

next five years, culminating in 1871, when *Thespis* would be the last of seven works he would premiere.

More relevant to Gilbert's future were the six musical works he wrote for Thomas German Reed's Royal Gallery of Illustration—*No Cards* (1869), *Ages Ago* (1869), *Our Island Home* (1870), *A Sensation Novel* (1871), *Happy Arcadia* (1873), and *Eyes and No Eyes* (1875). Operettas in miniature (Reed's tiny stage allowed for casts of four or five at most), their relatively sophisticated lyrics show Gilbert beginning to emerge as a lyricist. He had written numerous song lyrics previously, but almost always to preexisting tunes lifted from operatic or other sources; the Reed pieces were the first he had written in his own rhythms and on his own subject matter.

This was to be a key to his future career, because while Gilbert was a master of rhyme and often displayed felicity at lyrical expression, his greatest gift as a lyricist was his rhythmic flair. A boon to every composer who worked with him, it was particularly appreciated by Sullivan.

"Have you noticed what an extraordinary polish there is to his versification?" the composer said in an 1885 interview. "There is never a weak syllable or a halting foot. It is marvelous. He has a wonderful gift, too, of making rhythms, and it bothers me to death sometimes to make corresponding rhythms in music."³

In addition to establishing him in a more respectable area of theater—*Ages Ago*, with music by Frederic Clay, was his greatest success to date—the Reed shows also offered Gilbert the chance to write for skilled performers and to see and hear his work performed in close to optimal conditions.

Burlesque performers varied widely in talent—some of its best-loved stars were women whose appeal lay mainly in their lovely legs—and were allowed to mangle the author's work in practically any way they liked, in search of laughs or simply more attention to themselves. Reed's shows were authorially based, however, in the sense that they were performed according to the original script and score and utilized performers (Reed, his wife, and later their son among them) who had the talent and the rehearsal time to do justice to their work.

Finally, as Jane W. Stedman has observed,⁴ the Reed shows lacked the elaborate scenery and special effects that were so much a part of burlesque—their narrow stage could accommodate no aquatic ballets, no descents into hellfire, no shipwrecks crashing onto rocks. The play was paramount, if only by default, and the writing was not only allowed but required to be the center of attention.

The Princess (1870) represented an outgrowth of that experience. While musically its setting of new lyrics to old tunes represented a step back,⁵ its book was Gilbert's most ambitious to date, a cross between burlesque and more serious drama. Combining groaner puns with more self-consciously poetic speeches, it clearly shows Gilbert stretching himself as a playwright.

(Years later, it would be the source material for Gilbert & Sullivan's *Princess Ida*.)

Stedman, author of the definitive Gilbert biography, dates Gilbert's involvement in directing from the late 1860s, though often other men received credit for his work. Certainly, by the end of 1870 Gilbert's directorial style was well established, and in his authorial contracts he would demand full control of the stage management of nearly all of his future plays.

Gilbert was not a director in the sense the term is used today—an artist whose role is to interpret various authors' work and, with each play, shape the efforts of the various actors, designers, and others into a coherent whole.

Indeed, he doesn't seem to have perceived himself as filling two functions (except when it came time to be paid). To him, directing was a logical extension of authorship, a means of ensuring that recalcitrant producers, actors, or designers didn't ruin his ideas in execution. Once he had sufficient prestige to do so, he never allowed anyone else to direct his plays; but neither did he ever direct anyone else's. There would have been little point in doing so for a director whose entire approach was based on having written the play in question.

As a director, Gilbert's central concerns reflected his authorship. He was famously demanding of his actors when it came to diction—every syllable of his work had to be clearly audible from every seat in the house. He exercised rigorous control over the actors' stage business, rejecting nearly every interpolated "gag" or bit of business that was likely to draw attention to the actor over the material. There was no question that in a Gilbert play, everyone involved was subordinate to the play itself.

As late as *The Gondoliers* (1888), Gilbert still felt that this point needed to be made. In a letter to producer Richard D'Oyly Carte,⁶ he complained strongly about Rutland Barrington's introducing "gags" into his role:

The piece is, I think, quite good enough without the extraneous embellishments suggested by Mr. Barrington's brief fancy. Anyway it must be played *exactly as I wrote it*. I won't have an outside word introduced by anybody. If once a license in this direction is accorded it opens the door to any amount of tomfoolery. . . . I am determined to stamp out the nuisance. It is not enough that the departures are unimportant—there should—and shall—be no departures of any kind whatever.

Gilbert also controlled the production designs of his shows, frequently drawing on his artistic background to create at least the initial sketches for sets and costumes.

Even in his most fanciful plays, realism was the watchword. Gilbert was a disciple of the director/playwright T. W. Robertson (1829–71), whose moral dramas had been distinguished by meticulously realistic presentations, especially in terms of set design and stage business. Whereas previous designers, for example, would put as many chairs into a dining-room scene as there were actors who needed to sit down, Robertson would insist on as many chairs as would realistically be in that dining room, even if some were never actually used.

Gilbert freely acknowledged his debt to Robertson:

Why, he practically invented stage management. It was an unknown art before his time. Formerly, in a conversation scene for instance, you simply brought down two or three chairs from the flat and placed them in a row in the middle of the stage, and the people sat down and talked, and when the conversation was ended the chairs were replaced.

Robertson showed how to give life and variety and nature to the scene, by breaking it up with all sorts of little incidents and delicate by-play. I have been at many of his rehearsals, and learned a great deal from them.⁷

Gilbert's penchant for realism outpaced even Robertson's, if only because Robertson generally wrote "cup-and-saucer plays" utilizing prosaic modern, domestic settings—usually interiors, whereas Gilbert preferred exterior scenes—in which realism was unobtrusive for its very familiarity.

Gilbert, on the other hand, tended to set plays in fantastic settings, historical or otherwise, involving elaborate costumes, fanciful scenery, and an array of unusual weapons, furnishings, accessories, and decorative elements—all of which he insisted be as picture-perfect as his *Bab Ballads* illustrations.

This meticulousness extended to physical movement and the rendering of dialogue. With a strong rhythmic sense of his lines, Gilbert wanted them spoken a certain way, and while he might allow alternative readings if he liked them, he was determined to stamp out any errors of stress or pronunciation. He drilled his actors relentlessly in extended rehearsal periods and outside of rehearsals, coaching them again and again on how a given line should be uttered or how a particular walk or gesture should be performed.

For this reason he increasingly favored young actors, even novices. In his early days he allied himself with certain established actors—Madge and William H. Kendal and Marie Litton among them—whose styles he found compatible with his approach, but in later years he preferred to shape young performers. He said that this was because they had less bad practice to unlearn, but it may also have been because younger, less established performers were more willing to accept his domineering style.

This perfectionism also accounted for Gilbert's mixed reputation in the theatrical trade, where he was viewed simultaneously as a talented innovator and as a martinet extremely difficult to work with. An anonymous reviewer in the 1870s spoke for many when he wrote that Gilbert was personally unpopular, due to "a little want of temper and a great want of tact."⁸

Nevertheless, his work—and the success of that work—helped to bring about a reordering of the theatrical world, with authors and directors gaining power at the expense of producers and, especially, actors. With some justice, Hesketh Pearson could write in 1957: "His influence on stagecraft was so great that he may be called the father of modern play-production."⁹

1870 and 1871 saw Gilbert make the final leap that was to define his stage career. *The Palace of Truth* (1870), the first of his "fairy comedies," established him as a straight dramatist—it has substantial comic elements, of course, but it plays as drama in its own right, as opposed to the knock-about comedies he had previously written. Barely a year later *Pygmalion and Galatea* (1871) scored his greatest hit outside of his collaboration with Sullivan.

Together, these plays—and successors such as *The Wicked World* (1873) and *Sweethearts* (1874)—did for Gilbert on the dramatic stage what the Reed shows had done for him on the musical stage: established that his capabilities extended far beyond the crass commercialism of burlesque, winning him both respectability and artistic credentials.

Though highly dated, many of these plays still have appeal today. They are of a different class entirely from his previous work, and they were essential to the Savoy operas in at least two ways. First, they gave Gilbert confidence in his dramatic skills—allowed him to dare to not be funny, in short. They established him in his eyes, the eyes of the profession, and the eyes of the public as a writer of wide range, one as comfortable with human drama as with farcical humor.

Second, these plays, especially *Pygmalion and Galatea*, gave him a prestige that he had not previously enjoyed, and that would be crucial to an ongoing collaboration with so respected a musician as Sullivan. He might not be nearly as eminent in his profession as the composer was in his, but he had demonstrated that he could produce work on a comparable level.

The collaboration with Sullivan would allow him to combine the three strands of his authorial career—clever lyrics, humorous dialogue, and serious drama—with his state-of-the-art stagecraft to create a new context that would ultimately define both men for posterity.

Facing page: FIGURE 2.1. Arthur Sullivan at around 35. Sullivan was a warm, likable man whose mild, cheerful personality charmed virtually everyone who knew him. *Source: The Pierpont Morgan Library, Gilbert and Sullivan Collection.*

Sullivan before Gilbert





When Gilbert and Sullivan collaborated for the first time in 1871, it was by no means apparent that Sullivan's destiny lay in opera, or in collaboration with Gilbert. There were, however, important signs pointing in that direction.

At 29, Sullivan was one of England's most prominent musicians, a respected conductor who was generally considered the nation's best composer as well. But his most popular compositions had been orchestral or choral works. He'd made three attempts at opera, and his only success had been the small-scale *Cox and Box* (1866), a hastily composed, hour-long, three-man work originally meant as a party entertainment.

Thus, while the musical public awaited *Thespis* with interest, there was no sense that Sullivan had found his musical niche or that Gilbert was to be any more important in the composer's career than any of his previous collaborators on songs, oratorios, or operas.

Arthur Sullivan was born in London on May 13, 1842, the son of a lower-middle-class instrumentalist and bandmaster. His musical talent was apparent early; he first earned admission to the prestigious Chapel Royal and then won the first Mendelssohn Scholarship at the Royal Academy of Music, which led to three years of study at the Leipzig Conservatory in Germany.

Sullivan came to Leipzig as a pianist and left it as a conductor. He was never to relinquish this new passion: Throughout his career with Gilbert he would sustain a second career as a conductor, associated most prominently with the Leeds Festival. He was a champion both of new music and of neglected older works during his seven terms as music director of that triennial festival from 1880 to 1898.

It was as a composer, however, that Sullivan first appeared before the English musical public. His incidental music for Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, composed as a student at Leipzig, was performed at London's Crystal Palace in 1862. It was a major success and made the 20-year-old composer famous. He would remain an eminent figure on the English musical scene for the next 38 years.

Sullivan spent the remainder of the 1860s primarily composing orchestral music, while he scrambled to make a living as a conductor, organist, teacher, and choirmaster.

Of his orchestral works, only the "Overtura di Ballo" (1870) is heard today with any frequency. Other major works included his First Symphony (1866) and the overtures "In Memoriam" (1866) and "Marmion" (1867).

From the early 1870s, he largely deserted orchestral works in favor of choral music, which was the easiest route to success for a classical musician. Seven years after his early cantata *Kenilworth* (1864), he presented his first oratorio, *The Prodigal Son* (1871). Its success led to *The Light of the World* (1873), *The Martyr of Antioch* (1880), and *The Golden Legend* (1886).

Sullivan's attraction to the theater had been evident early, however. It was his incidental music for *The Tempest* that won him his fame, and his lifelong attraction to Shakespeare (which had reportedly led him, at 15, to compose an overture for *Timon of Athens* in 1857)¹ would later lead to incidental music for *The Merchant of Venice* (1871), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1874), *Henry VIII* (1877), and *Macbeth* (1888). He scored a ballet, *L'Île Enchantée*, in 1864, and even made a first attempt at writing an opera with *The Sapphire Necklace*, an unfinished opera of 1863–64.

Nor was Sullivan's love of the stage purely musical. By the early 1860s, he was already taking a professional perspective on how musical theater was and should be crafted, aided by a meeting with the great composer Gioachino Rossini, whom he met in 1862. In an 1895 interview with *The Strand* magazine, he said:

I think that Rossini first inspired me with a love for the stage and things operatic, and this led to my undertaking the duties of organist at the Royal Italian Opera (London) under the conductorship of my friend Sir (then Signior) Michael Costa. At his request I wrote a ballet entitled *L'Île Enchantée*, and my necessary interviews with the stage employees, dancers and others gave me much insight into the blending of music and stage management, which became very valuable to me as time progressed.²

From then on, Sullivan would be increasingly involved in nearly every aspect of the operas he set. While many composers focused simply on the quality of the lyrics and on technical musical questions, Sullivan was a true collaborator. His degree of interest can be judged from an 1887 diary entry, recounting Gilbert's presentation of a proposed new opera (the so-called lozenge plot, which was never set by Sullivan):

At night Gilbert read me a scenario for proposed new piece. Clear, but I think very weak dramatically; there seems no "go" in it. The 1st Act promises to lead to something, but that something doesn't appear in the 2nd Act, which is the old story over again of whimsical fancies and subtle argument, but it is a "puppet-show," and not human. It is impossible to feel any sympathy with a single person. I don't see my way to setting it in its present form.³

Clearly, Sullivan's early interest in the nonmusical aspects of musical theater only grew in ensuing years.

The hour-long *Cox and Box*, with lyrics by the future *Punch* editor F. C. Burnand, was the first practical application of Sullivan's emerging theatrical gift.

Though its immediate successor, the full-length Sullivan/Burnand opera *The Contrabandista* (1867), was a failure, *Cox and Box* was easily Sullivan's most profitable musical venture to date, and he couldn't help but keep an eye open for similar opportunities in the future. The success of *Cox and Box* unquestionably influenced Sullivan's decision to agree to write *Thespis*.

In fact, the two men nearly collaborated the preceding year.⁴ Thomas German Reed, whose Royal Gallery of Illustration had been the home of both *Cox and Box* and several early Gilbert operettas (including *Ages Ago* [1869], on whose set Gilbert and Sullivan were reportedly first introduced by composer Frederic Clay), tried to hire Sullivan to set Gilbert's operetta *Our Island Home* (1870). However, the composer's required fee was too high for the thrifty Reed, who ended up setting the piece himself.

From a modern viewpoint *Cox and Box* has many flaws in words and music alike, testifying to the efforts of theatrical novices in both departments. But it remains an engaging work of musical theater and is justly the earliest of Sullivan's works to remain in frequent performance today.

The composer's contributions by far excel the librettist's. The play's generally strong dialogue and amusing theatrical situation (two lodgers unknowingly sharing the same room, misled by a duplicitous landlord) are both taken almost intact from the source play, John Maddison Morton's *Box and Cox* (1847). (In light of Sullivan's later crusade for authorship rights, it is worth noting that, despite his complaints, Morton apparently never received a penny of the proceeds from *Cox and Box*, though he lived until 1891.)

Burnand's lyrics range from the clever to the inane, with a propensity for the strained rhymes common in English burlesque: A typical instance rhymes "Rosherville" with "squash I feel" and "Macintosh I will." Burnand later fancied himself Gilbert's rival as a lyricist, but *Cox and Box* offers little to support such pretensions.

But Sullivan's music displays many of the traits that would characterize his early works with Gilbert. He has a natural talent for melody, producing a beautiful tune even for a lullaby sung to a piece of bacon. Paired with this gift is a willingness to employ rhythmic and harmonic intricacies on a level considerably beyond contemporary theatrical practice, bringing the full range of his extensive training as a composer to bear on ensemble numbers in particular.

Just as important, Sullivan has an innate flair for the dramatic, as well as a musical sense of humor. The best moments of *Cox and Box* pair the two, as in Box's recounting of his own feigned suicide, which builds to a frenzied, melodramatic pitch in splendid mock-operatic fashion, only to cut into bouncy patter at the moment of near-death.

Most noticeably absent from *Cox and Box*, in light of Sullivan's later career, is any genuine emotion. As befits characters in a farce, Cox, Box,

and their retired-officer landlord are essentially puppets, farcical characters who veer from one tack to another without any consistency whatever. In less than a minute, the two lodgers go from preparing for a duel to embracing each other as long-lost brothers (based on the fact that neither has a distinguishing birthmark!).

Still, it can justly be said that the Sullivan of 1871 was closer to the Sullivan of 1886 (for example) than the Gilbert of 1871 was to his later level. In both form and content, *Cox and Box* shows that as early as 1866 Sullivan had the makings of a fine operatic composer.

All he needed was time, motivation, and the right collaborator.

Facing page: FIGURE 3.1. A newspaper illustration of a scene from *Thespis*. Nellie Farren, at right, played Mercury in the short skirts and tights that had helped make her one of the greatest stars of the burlesque stage. Sullivan's brother Fred appears at left as Apollo. *Source:* "Illustrated London News," January 6, 1872. *By permission of The British Library.*

3

Thespis





No Gilbert & Sullivan opera is less familiar than *Thespis*, and for good reason. It was their first collaboration, its 80 performances made it their shortest-running work, and, from what we know of it, it is the least effective. To top it off, it comes down to us seriously incomplete.

Gilbert's words have apparently survived intact. (Terence Rees has argued¹ that the libretto as we know it represents a rough draft, but his case is not entirely persuasive, especially given Gilbert's general care to ensure that his work was printed accurately.)¹

Sullivan's music has been lost, however, except for two numbers: "Little Maid of Arcady," a ballad popular enough to have been issued as sheet music, and the chorus "Climbing Over Rocky Mountain," later transplanted into *The Pirates of Penzance*. (Some of its ballet music has supposedly also been recovered, though I find the attribution a bit questionable.)

Because of this, any commentary on *Thespis* can be only provisional. Even assuming that Gilbert is accurately represented, the lack of the music is a crippling blow. It means that we can never see the "real" *Thespis* staged, which would be essential to fully appreciate what was very much a theatrical work. There have been numerous reconstructed/recomposed versions of *Thespis*, but they can be little more than speculative.

Accordingly, readers should insert "As far as we can tell" every paragraph or so in this chapter. I believe that enough of *Thespis* survives to yield some meaningful insights, but we can't be entirely sure.

Considering *Thespis* in the context of Gilbert & Sullivan opera, the most important point is that it isn't a Gilbert & Sullivan opera.

It is by W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, of course, but they approached it much differently from the Savoy operas, and the results were therefore considerably different.

To begin with, *Thespis* wasn't produced by Richard D'Oyly Carte, as all of the subsequent operas would be, nor was it written for a standing company of performers trained in the "Gilbert & Sullivan style." One looks in vain for the "funny little man" role for George Grossmith, the "pompous ass" role for Rutland Barrington, and so on.

Instead, *Thespis* was written for John Hollingshead's Gaiety Theatre, a noted burlesque house that lacked the spit-and-polish professionalism and theatrical integrity that were to be Savoy trademarks. Instead of selecting their own performers, Gilbert & Sullivan were forced to tailor their work to the members of Hollingshead's existing company, which was particularly hard on Sullivan, given that (except for his brother Fred, in the small role of Apollo) these were comedians, not singers.

As Hollingshead himself remarked of the two stars of *Thespis*, "Neither Mr. J. L. Toole nor Miss Nelly Farren could be called 'singers' even in the most elastic English."²

As by now he always did, Gilbert directed his own play. But, according to Hollingshead, his demands for precision met considerable opposition from the less-disciplined Gaiety performers. Ultimately, reviewers reported, many of the actors were unprepared on opening night—not surprising, perhaps, given that the authors had only five weeks to write and rehearse the opera, a sharp contrast to the meticulous pace of the Savoy, where six months might easily be spent on the writing alone.

So there is a much different “feel” to *Thespis*, reflecting its unique context. Created under these conditions, even *The Mikado* would have been in many ways unlike Gilbert & Sullivan as we know it.

But *Thespis* is not *The Mikado*. It is the first Gilbert & Sullivan collaboration, and naturally finds them at their least assured. Even more than *The Sorcerer* or *H. M. S. Pinafore*, *Thespis* is a convention-bound show: The Gilbert and Sullivan who would reshape comic opera are still a decade away. Instead, *Thespis* shows the hands of two young men (35 and 29), still comparative novices to the operatic stage, who regularly fall back on conventional devices at the expense of theatrical imagination.

Nor are the conventions those used in the later operas. Being a Gaiety show, *Thespis* is grounded as much in the thoroughly English traditions of burlesque, extravaganza, and pantomime as in the conventions of European comic opera. The fusion of English burlesque and Offenbachian operetta produces a show whose governing aesthetic isn’t what we expect from “Gilbert & Sullivan.”

Unlike American burlesque, the black-sheep brother of vaudeville, English burlesque was often suggestive but seldom raunchy—at least where the lines themselves were concerned, though a leering delivery could speak volumes. And instead of the variety-show format used in America, English burlesque generally employed a loose narrative framework.

But it resembled its American cousin in being a showcase for performers, not writers. Actors and actresses drew the audiences, with authors, composers and directors occupying a subordinate role. Scripts and songs were routinely altered by and for performers, with outside material interpolated whenever an actor saw fit.

In the case of *Thespis*, Hollingshead already had under contract several popular comedians, and Gilbert & Sullivan were obliged to tailor their work to these performers. This was particularly true of Sullivan: One critic remarked approvingly that the composer had “not marred the effect by ambitious music”—a remark not heard at the Savoy in later years.³

The title role, for example, went to Toole, who according to Sullivan had a musical range of only two notes. We cannot tell what his showpiece song, “I Once Knew a Man Who Discharged a Function,” sounded like—but Sullivan presumably denied himself the musical freedom he later took with more accomplished singers. (Toole also appeared in a three-act drama that opened an evening that totaled a bit over five hours long—

clearly, Victorian theatergoers had stronger constitutions than their modern-day descendants!)

Co-star Farren likewise never would have appeared at the Savoy. She apparently compensated for her lack of musical ability with deft comic timing—and with a very attractive pair of legs, which she was accustomed to display in the tights she wore when playing boy's roles. As Mercury, she presumably cut a comely figure but hardly a plausible one.

This is probably even more true of Mlle. Clary, who appeared in the “leading man” role of Sparkeion. The Sparkeion-Nicemis duet, “Here, Far Away from All the World,” may seem reminiscent of future tenor-soprano duets such as “Were You Not to Ko-Ko Plighted” or “None Shall Part Us from Each Other,” but it unquestionably sounded much different as a duet for two women.

These extraneous considerations affect nearly every aspect of *Thespis*, tainting whatever in it may reflect Gilbert & Sullivan's actual inspirations. For example, the prominence given to the drunkard Tipseion, whose plot importance is extremely minor, is hard to understand until one learns that Tipseion was played by Robert Soutar, who happened to be married to the star, Nelly Farren.

English pantomime is a tradition that continues to the present day. Drawing on Italian *commedia del'arte*, it is highly stylized, generally beginning with a fairly conventional play in which, at a magical moment, the characters are transformed into the prototypical pantomime characters Harlequin, Columbine, Pantaloon, and so forth. For the remainder of the show, these stock characters interact in the “harlequinade,” a loose format allowing for ample improvisatory clowning by the performers.

Thespis is not itself a pantomime—the closest Gilbert & Sullivan came to writing one was *Trial by Jury*, which for many years the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company ended with a segue into a harlequinade. But pantomime is particularly associated with the Christmas season, and *Thespis*, premiering on December 26, reflects its influence.

This is most obvious in the play's use of improvisatory physical comedy. For example, the roles of Preposteros and Stupidas are all but incoherent on the page. One stage direction reads: “STUPIDAS endeavors, in pantomime, to reconcile him. Throughout the scene, PREPOSTEROS shows symptoms of breaking out into a furious passion, and STUPIDAS does all he can to pacify and restrain him.”

While hardly helpful in staging the show, this direction reflects the show's theatrical context. Preposteros and Stupidas were played by the Payne brothers, popular comedians who presumably brought to this scene a great deal of “stage business” of their own, more or less extraneous to the story.

Such insertions of elaborate comic byplay were not unusual—Gilbert's short story “Maxwell and I” mentions, in passing, the difficulties two writ-

ers have with a comedian who insists on interpolating his trademark “bit,” a climb over a wall studded with broken glass.

All of which is to say that *Thespis* was surely not on the stage what it is on the page—not because Gilbert made unrecorded revisions but because traditional practice encouraged ad-libbing and improvisation by the actors (which, of course, Gilbert detested). The occasional references in reviews to lines that don’t appear in the published script, especially lines from Toole as Thespis, probably reflect ad-libbing rather than authorial revision.

Pantomime also often featured elaborate theatrical effects of the kind also seen in the theatrical form called extravaganza. Gilbert alludes to this in *Thespis*, when Jupiter hurls a lightning bolt and is answered with a cavalier “Ah, yes, it’s very pretty, but we don’t want any at present. When we do our Christmas piece, I’ll let you know.”

Thespis, of course, was a Christmas piece, and is far more theatrically extravagant than any of the later operas, even *The Sorcerer*. The opening chorus of stars is surely intended primarily for picturesque theatrical effect, while the liberal use of the fog machine evokes 1990s Broadway. The “Ballet Divertissement” that closes the opera was presumably on a grand scale, despite having no real dramatic purpose. Throughout, the script’s detailing of tableaux and processions reveals a greater interest in stage effect than in theatrical consistency or dramatic power.

Overall, then, *Thespis* offers only the faintest opportunity to see the emerging Gilbert & Sullivan. Even if the music still existed, we would be seeing not their earliest ideas of comic opera but a version of those ideas heavily distorted by the expectations of the Gaiety audience.

In their later careers, Gilbert and Sullivan were both what modern slang would call “control freaks.” They took their artistic work seriously and demanded control of every aspect of the production process. Many of their disagreements with each other centered on this need for control.

Their partnership with D’Oyly Carte gave them an unprecedentedly free hand to express their creative ideas. From *The Sorcerer* through *The Grand Duke*, it is fair to treat the operas, for better or worse, as faithful representations of Gilbert & Sullivan’s ideas. Other than in compromises with the other, neither man was ever forced to yield his artistic intent because of financial considerations, censorship, opinions of the public, the producer or the performers, or any other reason. As a result, their works represent a purer manifestation of artistic purpose than practically any opera or play before or since.

This was not the case with *Thespis*. In fact, *Thespis* was a worst-case scenario, doubtless a strong incentive for their subsequent insistence on iron control. Thus we must be cautious in looking at *Thespis* for signs of their “state of the art” in 1871. Much of the show probably reflects necessity rather than choice, and much of what seems to be missing might have been there had they enjoyed greater control over the production.

Even so, *Thespis* deserves attention. However distorted, it is our first view of Gilbert & Sullivan, and if it shows little of where they were to go, it at least provides a starting point.

On Sullivan's contributions we can unfortunately say little. One of the surviving numbers, "Little Maid of Arcady," exists only in the 1872 simplified piano-vocal version, whose piano part is so simplistic that it is almost certain that Sullivan did not do the arrangement. What it sounded like in orchestrated form—and sung by a woman playing a man—we can only guess. From what we have, it seems to be an appealing little ballad of no great pretensions.

"Climbing Over Rocky Mountain" is the best sample we have, surviving more or less in Sullivan's own version—in fact, the original manuscript score of *The Pirates of Penzance* (now in the Morgan Library in New York) reveals that the composer literally pasted in the original *Thespis* pages for the early part of the number. The only mystery is the vocal range of the "four voices" who sang the solo verses. At least one was probably male, since the first half of the second verse, allotted to Kate in *Pirates*, lies awkwardly low for a woman.

"Rocky Mountain" is a good example of the early Sullivan's flair for elaborating on a fairly unimaginative lyric, in straight rhymed couplets (except for the introduction, which is in the marginally more inventive AABBCDDEEC). Through a sprightly orchestration, deft harmonies, and melodic liberality—a lesser composer would have set both solo verses to the same tune—Sullivan takes a merely functional lyric and infuses it with lively energy.

Given these two elements, it is intriguing—and eternally frustrating!—to speculate on what the full score sounded like.

Gilbert's contributions are, of course, easier to evaluate. The librettos for both *Thespis* and *Trial by Jury* were created without significant input from Sullivan. Subsequently, the composer would enjoy hands-on involvement not only in lyrics but also in story, characters, and even dialogue. But in the first two operas he essentially set Gilbert's existing words, so the Gilbert of *Thespis* is in some ways "purer" than the later Gilbert.

Thespis is the only Gilbert & Sullivan opera prior to *The Mikado* that is not based, at least in part, on some previous work by Gilbert. Instead, as most young authors do, Gilbert copied the older authors he most admired.

Gilbert had translated some works by Offenbach's librettists, Meilhac and Halevy, and he had also written parody lyrics to Offenbach tunes for *The Princess* (1870) and similar plays. He frequently reviewed the French composer's works for *Fun* and various other journals. (And in reviewing English operettas, he often compared them disparagingly to Offenbach.) He admired Offenbach's shows for their musical inventiveness, humorous situations, and effective theatrical presentation.

What Gilbert didn't like about the Offenbach operettas was their suggestive humor. *Thespis* resembles *La Belle Helene* and *Orpheus in the Underworld* (Gilbert's favorite), in which classical or supernatural figures are used to bring out the fallible ways of mortals. But Offenbach threw his gods into the racy settings of contemporary Paris; Gilbert prefers to focus on the more decorous goings-on up above. Instead of "The Gods Grown Old," *Thespis* might have been subtitled "Meanwhile, Back on Olympus."

Nevertheless, *Thespis* is the most overtly suggestive of Gilbert's libretti. Drawing on both Offenbachian roots and the bawdy tradition of the Gaiety, Gilbert allows the gods some not-too-veiled insinuations as to why they want to visit Earth. Apollo sets out:

to earth away to join in mortal acts,
 and gather fresh materials to write on,
 investigate more closely several facts
 that I for centuries have thrown some light on!

Diana, the moon, is even more explicit:

I, as the modest moon with crescent bow,
 have always shown a light to nightly scandal.
 I must say I should like to go below
 and find out if the game is worth the candle!

Meanwhile, back in Olympus, Daphne urges Thespis to consult *Lempriere's Classical Dictionary*, providing an occasion for a little wink-wink-nudge-nudge, as he reads of the many "marriages" of Apollo:

Thespis. Ha! I didn't know he was *married* to them.
Daphne. (Severely) Sir! This is the Family Edition!
Thespis. Quite so.

These and similar passages might seem tame on modern television, but in the context of Gilbert & Sullivan, in which sexuality is always decorously couched and never a source of humor, they border on being "a joke that's too French."

The plot of *Thespis* is distinctly Offenbachian, which is to say not very Gilbertian. The cosmic scale of events does not suit Gilbert's penchant for human-scale stories examining human-scale questions. In the later operas, even on the rare occasions when supernatural characters are introduced, they exercise their powers to market a love potion, nestle in a nutshell, or compel income-tax fraud, not to bring about the abolition of war, for example, as in *Thespis*.

More characteristically Gilbertian is the material that fills out the Offenbachian frame. Unlike Offenbach's Parisian boulevardiers, Gilbert's primary characters are performers (as in *The Yeomen of the Guard* and *The Grand Duke*). He is much more comfortable with the theatrical scenes than with the cosmic scenes—the early Olympian scenes feel strained, and the final “judgment” scene falls a bit flat (admittedly in large part because of the inappropriately prominent role given Tipseion).

But the theatrical scenes have some pop. Jupiter is funnier getting lessons from Thespis in how to play the role of Jupiter than he is in his own scenes, and the early act 2 scenes in which the actors try to sort out the romantic entanglements of their new roles are the opera's funniest.

The early-second-act scenes also are the ones that most resemble the mature Gilbert & Sullivan. As Pretteia wrestles with a role that requires love scenes with her father and grandfather, or Nicemis (cast as the moon) defends her insistence on spending the night with her husband (cast as the sun), we see some of the “person versus role” conflicts that generate humor in *The Pirates of Penzance* or *Iolanthe*. The stage manager Sillimon, with his meticulous insistence that “The exact connubial relation of the different gods and goddesses is a point on which we must be extremely particular,” is a very Gilbertian figure.

Overall the narrative framework of *Thespis*, derived from Offenbach and augmented by the showy excess of extravaganza, works against Gilbert. In the later operas, loose plot structures allow ample room for both thematic development and comic elaboration. The rigid, “high concept” plot structure of *Thespis* doesn't allow for either. In so plot-driven a story, there is little room for even a romantic story line, let alone the multiple stories that provide the thematic power of the Savoy operas.

Thus Gilbert's humor can be found only piecemeal, alternating with other sequences designed to show off the performers, to gratify the burlesque delight in puns (which, admittedly, Gilbert shared), to provide for stage spectacle, and so forth. There is no opportunity for serious character drama, which was to be the linchpin of the mature Gilbert & Sullivan operas.

From a technical point of view, *Thespis* clearly betrays its author's newness to the genre. Its comedy, lyrics, and stagecraft are wildly inconsistent in both quality and style, producing a show that, barring superlative performances, seems as if it would proceed with a great many stops and starts.

The lyrics are particularly inconsistent. Gilbert is already coming up with tripping lines and clever rhymes—“Here's a pretty tale for future Iliads and Odysseys,/mortals are about to personate the gods and goddesses.” On the other hand, he slips frequently, often putting accents on the wrong syllable or forcing rhymes—the first verse of the same song rhymes “below” and “clothes.”