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Michael Goron

Gilbert and Sullivan's 'Respectable Capers'

Class, Respectability and the Savoy Operas
1877–1909

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FOREWORD

It's hard to think of a more significant or substantial contribution to British theatre than that made by William Schwenk Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan. Over an intensive 20-year period, the pair created more than a dozen works, establishing a paradigm of popular yet respectable entertainment for the musical stage. The characters they created live on in popular memory, from the Pirate King to the Three Little Maids from School; and their songs continue to be sung by new generations, from 'Dear Little Buttercup' to 'Poor Wand'ring One'. Indeed, across the length and breadth of Britain, amateur societies continue to perform their shows as staples of the repertoire, enjoying in particular the delights of several classic major works: *HMS Pinafore* (1878), *The Pirates of Penzance* (1879), *The Mikado* (1885) and *The Gondoliers* (1889).

It is true that Gilbert and Sullivan have not been without their detractors, and their work in some circles has been much maligned. The Savoy operas are commonly perceived (especially by younger audiences) as old-fashioned, dated set pieces calcifying British traditions in song and satire. Yet in their day, these works were cutting-edge, contemporary satires of the political and social landscape, with characters keenly sketched from the wit of two masters of their craft. Individually, both Gilbert and Sullivan produced an impressive oeuvre, but together, and aided by the impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte, they lifted comic opera into a different realm. Here was work accessible enough to appeal to popular audiences, yet also refined enough to cater to the requirements of the middle class. In equal measure a fond reflection of contemporary society and a satirical jibe at the status quo, the collected work offered a precursor not only to the musical

theatre repertoire of later years, but also the satire of journalism, radio and TV. Indeed, some of the greatest characters of British comedy can undoubtedly be traced back to role models invented and established by Gilbert and Sullivan: from Leonard Rossiter's Mr Rigsby in *Rising Damp* to John Cleese's Basil Fawlty in *Fawlty Towers*, and from Nigel Hawthorne's Sir Humphrey Appleby in *Yes, Minister* to Patricia Routledge's Hyacinth Bucket in *Keeping Up Appearances*, British situation comedy and its consumption by the British public has, to a large degree, been enabled by the foundational work created by Gilbert and Sullivan.

Unsurprisingly, there has been plenty of scholarship on the Gilbert and Sullivan canon, and their place in history is undeniably assured; yet scholars continue to produce work focusing on this fascinating series of comic operas, and on the collaboration between Gilbert and Sullivan. So why the need for a further study?

As the title suggests, Michael Goron's *Gilbert and Sullivan's 'Respectable Capers': Class, Respectability and the Savoy Operas 1877–1909* interrogates issues of respectability and class, as well as considerations of ephemerality and entertainment. To Goron, the works remain important as an abiding snapshot of Victorian Britain, shining a light on the legacy that this period has left on British values of today. As we are guided metaphorically by Goron to accompany him to a night at the Savoy, we appreciate the social etiquette and behavioural customs expected at the time; and we relive an impression of the way the experiences of attending the theatre in the late nineteenth century might have impacted on our lives. In this, Goron elevates studies of Gilbert and Sullivan beyond the standard approach to considering the works as texts and really observes their impact as staged performances engaged with by real people.

Goron's description of the Gilbert and Sullivan works as 'respectable capers' characterises cleverly both the identity of the shows themselves and also the perspective with which his critical lens captures them. These are shows from a period in which respectability meant everything, both socially and culturally; a period which in many ways forged the complex amalgam of 'class' as a concept that has defined subsequent British identity. It is in trying to negotiate that complicated, contradictory notion that characters such as Fawlty, Rigsby, Appleby and Bucket fall down, to our great amusement. It's also through the prism of that amalgam that Gilbert and Sullivan present to us their peculiarly British characters. Only in Britain, perhaps, can the concept of class be used 'as both an economic

categorisation, and as a means of encapsulating a set of cultural values, a “middle-class” ideology’.

If this concern is the glue that binds the Savoy operas together (not to mention the sticky mess in which their characters become unstuck), it is an influence that has had just as much significance in the lives and careers of Gilbert and Sullivan themselves. Caught between their own pretensions of respectability and the trade-off they made in capering with commercial success, the artists themselves become characters who are at the same time frustrating and endearing, pompous and charming. In humanising their concerns and exploring their oeuvre from his particular perspective, Goron brings a very contemporary picture to life of a world of entertainment that still infects us today, and of a pair of collaborators whose brilliance came from their dynamic tensions as much as their creative talent.

So why another book on Gilbert and Sullivan? Adopting a cultural materialist perspective and exploring the Savoy operas from a viewpoint that takes in their reception and consumption as much as their value as compositions, Goron’s exploration provides an answer to that question, and serves as a fitting first publication for this new series in British Musical Theatre.

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NOTE

The business syndicate, headed by Richard D'Oyly Carte, which presented *The Sorcerer* in 1877 and *HMS Pinafore* in 1879 was called 'The Comedy-Opera Company'. After Carte's legal separation from the syndicate in 1879, the name was changed to 'Mr. D'Oyly Carte's Opera Company'. The name 'The D'Oyly Carte Opera Company' was not professionally used before 1889. Touring companies prior to 1889 had various naming systems, involving letter or number prefixes/suffixes. For the purpose of this study, except when specific touring companies are mentioned, the term 'The D'Oyly Carte Company' is used to cover all Carte's theatrical activities related to the Gilbert and Sullivan/Savoy operas. For convenience, the Gilbert and Sullivan operas produced under the D'Oyly Carte management will be referred to as the 'Savoy operas'. This follows conventional practice and disregards the fact that the first four operas under Carte's management were premiered at the Opera Comique, rather than at the Savoy Theatre, which opened in 1881.

Following a late-nineteenth-century usage (deriving from press coverage of the D'Oyly Carte operation) which is retained in contemporary Gilbert and Sullivan studies, Gilbert, Sullivan and Carte are referred to collectively as the 'Triumvirate'. In annotations, William Schwenck Gilbert, Arthur Seymour Sullivan and Richard D'Oyly Carte are referred to as WSG, AS and RDC, respectively.

Pre-decimal British currency is conventionally expressed in pounds, shillings (s) and pence (d). Two shillings and sixpence would therefore be written as 2s 6d.

West End productions of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas under the management of Richard D'Oyly Carte and Helen Carte, 1875–1909. (The list does not include non-G&S ‘curtain raisers’)

<i>Title (original productions in bold type)</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Number of performances</i>	<i>Theatre</i>
<i>Trial By Jury</i>	25 March–18 December 1875	131	Royalty
<i>The Sorcerer</i>	17 November 1877–24 May 1878	178	Opera Comique
<i>Trial By Jury</i>	23 March–24 May 1878	56	Opera Comique
<i>HMS Pinafore</i>	25 May 1878–20 February 1880	571	Opera Comique
<i>HMS Pinafore (Child cast)</i>	16 December 1879–20 March 1880 (Matinees)	78	Opera Comique
<i>The Pirates of Penzance</i>	3 April 1880–2 April 1881	363	Opera Comique
<i>HMS Pinafore (Child cast)</i>	2 December 1880–28 January 1881 (Matinees)	28	Opera Comique
<i>Patience</i> transferred	23 April–8 October 1881	170	Opera
	10 October 1881–22 November 1882	408	Comique Savoy
<i>Iolanthe</i>	25 November 1882–1 January 1884	398	Savoy
<i>Princess Ida</i>	5 January 1884–9 October 1884	246	Savoy
<i>The Sorcerer, Trial By Jury (Double bill)</i>	11 October 1884–12 March 1885	150	Savoy
<i>The Pirates of Penzance (Child cast)</i>	26 December 1884–14 February 1885	?	Savoy
<i>The Mikado</i>	14 March 1885–19 January 1887	672	Savoy
<i>Ruddigore</i>	22 January–5 November 1887	288	Savoy
<i>HMS Pinafore</i>	12 November 1887–10 March 1888	120	Savoy
<i>The Pirates of Penzance</i>	17 March–6 June 1888	80	Savoy
<i>The Mikado</i>	7 June–29 September 1888	116	Savoy
<i>The Yeomen of the Guard</i>	3 October 1888–30 November 1889	423	Savoy

<i>Title (original productions in bold type)</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Number of performances</i>	<i>Theatre</i>
<i>The Gondoliers</i>	7 December 1889–20 June 1891	554	Savoy
Non-G&S full-length works presented by the D'Oyly Carte Company between June 1891 and October 1896 were <i>The Nautch Girl</i> , <i>The Vicar of Bray</i> , <i>Haddon Hall</i> and <i>Jane Annie</i> .			
<i>Utopia, Limited</i>	7 October 1893–9 June 1894	245	Savoy
Non-G&S works presented by the D'Oyly Carte Company between July 1894 and March 1895 were <i>Mirette</i> , <i>The Chieftain</i> and <i>Cox and Box</i> .			
<i>The Mikado</i>	6 November 1895–4 March 1896	127	Savoy
<i>The Grand Duke</i>	7 March 1896–10 July 1896	123	Savoy

Non-G&S works presented by the D'Oyly Carte Company between February 1897 and May 1903 were *His Majesty*, *The Grand Duchess*, *The Beauty Stone*, *The Lucky Star*, *The Rose of Persia*, *The Emerald Isle*, *Ib and Little Christina*, *Willow Pattern*, *Merric England* and *A Princess of Kensington*. These were interspersed with further revivals of *The Mikado*, *The Yeomen of the Guard*, *The Gondoliers*, *The Sorcerer*, *Trial By Jury*, *HMS Pinafore*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *Patience* and *Iolanthe*.

Repertory seasons at the Savoy Theatre 1906–1909—Produced under the supervision of W.S. Gilbert:

8 December 1906–24 August 1907: *Patience*, *Iolanthe*, *The Yeomen of the Guard*, *The Gondoliers*.

28 April 1908–27 March 1909: *HMS Pinafore*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *Iolanthe*, *The Mikado*, *The Yeomen of the Guard*, *The Gondoliers*.

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SavoyNet, run by Marc Shepherd, is the electronic mailing list where 'G&S' and related matters are discussed online. As a long-time 'lurker' and very occasional contributor, I have often been inspired by comments

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