

# The GILBERT & SULLIVAN

MAY-JUNE 2014 NEWSLETTER

SOCIETY OF AUSTIN

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Libby Weed



Summertime! Are you ready for it? We have had such a remarkably cold winter and such an unusually cool spring that we may actually be ready for one of those baking hot Austin summers.

Hot, warm, or cold, we have prepared a wonderful treat to help you kick off your summer—our grand production of *H.M.S. Pinafore* June 12-22! Those who joined us at Gethsemane Lutheran Church on May 18 got a glimpse of what fun it is going to be. Hearing the beautiful melodies and laughing at the droll dialogue reminded us why we love this show so much. Seeing all the sailors (male choristers) in their blue garb, ready to dance a hornpipe, and the sisters, cousins, and aunts (female choristers) in their floral dresses, gaily tripping and lightly skipping, put us all in the mood for the theater.

If you saw Austin Lyric Opera's production of *The Elixir of Love* in early May, you heard a marvelous chorus backing up the principals. They were clearly having great fun, and their spirit was contagious. The audience loved the show, and the chorus was a big part of the magic.

A large contingent from that chorus—many of the best voices in central Texas—transitioned from one opera to another in the space of two days, moving into rehearsals for *H.M.S. Pinafore*. Yes, ALO and G&S share many of these great singers, and they are preparing right now to entertain us on those summer evenings and afternoons.

Ticket sales are going at a record pace, so don't miss out on getting the seats you want. Go to our website, [www.gilbertsullivan.org](http://www.gilbertsullivan.org), and get ready to join us at the Worley-Barton Theater to sail the ocean blue.

See you at the theater!

## September Musicale

After our grand production of *H.M.S. Pinafore* in June, the Society will take its traditional summer holiday, but will return with a Musicale in September (after Labor Day). Watch for information in our September newsletter, and on the website in August.

## *H.M.S. Pinafore* Sets Sail

Our Grand Production of *H.M.S. Pinafore* will have nine performances:

Thursday	June 12	7:30 pm	Opening Night
Friday	June 13	7:30 pm	Gala Performance—Free Buffet with Cast Follows Performance
Saturday	June 14	7:30 pm	
Sunday	June 15	2:00 pm	Children's Activities at 1 pm
Thursday	June 19	7:30 pm	
Friday	June 20	7:30 pm	
Saturday	June 21	2:00 pm	
Saturday	June 21	7:30 pm	
Sunday	June 22	2:00 pm	Closing Performance



## Wand'ring Minstrels

The Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Austin's Wand'ring Minstrels are now booking summer shows for the public. Their performance at The Heritage with Russell Gregory as guest was very well received. Scenes from the upcoming production of *H.M.S. Pinafore* were enthusiastically applauded by the crowd.

Have Gilbert and Sullivan tunes performed at your home, party, school, or activity. See our website ([www.gilbertsullivan.org](http://www.gilbertsullivan.org)) for further details.

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## A Preview of *H.M.S. Pinafore*

by Reba Gillman



It's nearly 3 PM on Sunday, May 18, and we're gathering at a new venue. **Janette Jones** has produced this show for us; **Ralph MacPhail, Jr.**, will serve as M.C. and give us the magic of his G&S knowledge and research. **Jeffrey Jones-Ragona** will conduct, and most of the cast will be here to perform. With **Jeanne Sasaki** at the piano, and experienced page turner (and excellent piano student) **Cody Ireland**, all will be delightful. Our cast for today is: **Russell Gregory** as Sir Joseph Porter; **Carol Brown**

as Josephine; **Arthur DiBianca** as Captain Corcoran; **Holton Johnson** as Ralph Rackstraw; **Janette Jones** as Little Buttercup; **David Fontenot** as Dick Deadeye; **Julius Young** as Bill Bobstay; **David Yakubik** as Bob Becket; and **Megan Sherrod** as Cousin Hebe. Chorus members appearing today are: **Bruno Barbosa**, **Kate Clark**, **Andy Fleming**, **Will Fox**, **Leann Fryer**, **Paul Halstead**, **Rosa Harris**, **Chris Karaguleff**, **Melissa Kreuger**, **Mark Long**, **Maurine McLean**, **Susan Meitz**, **John O'Brien**, **Annaliese Oliveira**, **Rachael Shaw**, **Tim Sheburne**, **Mario Silva**, **Ian Stilwell**, **Abigail Taylor**, **Hilary Taylor**, **Jamie Taylor**, **Brittany Trinité**, and **Jay Young**.

Over 145 people have made it to the Gethsemane Lutheran Church, and after the usual friendly welcomes and introductions Rafe tells us how happy he is to be back in Austin, and what a wonderful show we will see in June. In preparation for our enjoyment he intends to let us in on some secrets about *Pinafore*, and let us hear some of the music most of us already love. A secret Rafe doesn't mention is that the British have different ways of pronouncing words. Everyone needs to know that in the U.K. the name Ralph is pronounced Rafe, and that the boatswain character played by Julius Young is pronounced boh-s'n. We affectionately call our speaker Ralph MacPhail, Rafe. He mentions some little known facts about *H.M.S. Pinafore* and moves on to talk about secrets concealed by characters in the show. The chorus of sailors seated in the front rows stand up to sing "We sail the ocean blue, And our saucy ship's a beauty; We're sober men and true, And attentive to our duty." As this song ends Janette enters to sing another famous song, "I'm called Little Buttercup, dear Little Buttercup, Though I could never tell why, But still I'm called Buttercup, poor Little Buttercup, Sweet Little Buttercup!" She sings on to list all the interesting things she carries with her to sell to the sailors when they come to port, looking for various gifts as they prepare to return home to their wives and sweethearts. Rafe tells us that Buttercup is also known as Mrs. Cripps, and is a bumboat woman. There follows a chat between the Boatswain Julius and Janette as she hints that Buttercup has secrets. The program jumps to Act II as Rafe follows these hints and Arthur appears as Captain Corcoran to sing a duet with Janette. Arthur is covering for **Zil Gilkha**, who was unable to be present today but will sing the Captain's role in the June performances. Janette sings, "Things are seldom what they seem, Skim milk masquerades as cream; Highlows pass as patent leathers; Jackdaws strut in peacock's feathers." Arthur (puzzled) sings "Very true, So they do." The duet continues with Buttercup quoting well known proverbs and the Captain failing to understand her meaning. Buttercup is trying to warn the Captain that change is in store for him, and that his present higher rank in society will no longer keep him from pairing off with Buttercup. Still mystified, the Captain says, "Time alone will tell!"

The singers return to Act I as Buttercup sings, "But who's the youth whose faltering feet With difficulty bear him on his course?" Boatswain Julius replies, "That is the smartest man in all the fleet, Ralph Rackstraw!" and Janette sings "Ralph! That name! Remorse! Remorse!" Holton then enters as Ralph, and with a chorus of sailors sings "The nightingale Sighed for the moon's bright ray, And told his tale In his own melodious way. ... I love—and love, alas, above my station!" Buttercup sings "He loves, and loves a lass above his station." The chorus sings "Yes, yes, the lass is much above his station." Rafe says this pun is a best kept secret, meaning that people often don't hear it. Ralph's love, which turns out to be for his Captain's

daughter, is his secret, which soon becomes very public and establishes the basic conflict of the opera.

Rafe tells us Gilbert loved the sea. The money he made from writing successful operettas enabled him to purchase and enjoy expensive yachts. He used the words for various ship parts as names for sailors in his shows. The rack in Ralph's family name came from the slang term for berth, which might be more comfortable used with straw: hence Ralph Rackstraw. Consider the more elevated characters. Enter Russell singing Sir Joseph with chorus; the audience is invited to sing along with the chorus. "When I was a lad I served a term As office boy to an attorney's firm. I cleaned the windows and I swept the floor, and I polished up the handle of the big front door." The song continues to describe how each step led to one higher until he was taken into a partnership. That junior partnership "Was the only ship that I ever had seen. ... But that kind of ship so suited me That now I am the ruler of the Queen's Navee. ... Now landsmen all, whoever you may be, If you want to rise to the top of the tree, ... Be careful to be guided by this golden rule—Stick close to your desks and never go to sea, And you all may be rulers of the Queen's Navee." Joke number one for Gilbert. Another joke is that a first sea lord would no more wear his ceremonial finery when boarding a ship than he would have an admiring crowd of sisters, cousins, and aunts attending him.

Sir Joseph sounds like an American success story. But in Great Britain there is more to consider, and Rafe tells us that this iconic character is one of the most misunderstood of all Gilbert's creations, "at least by us Yanks." He is First Lord of the Admiralty, which leads to being a member of Parliament and the Prime Minister's cabinet. He is not an Admiral—not a member of H.R.H.'s Royal Navy. This song tells us that Sir Joseph has roots perhaps as low as Ralph Rackstraw's. His name is Joseph Porter, and that must be one of Gilbert's jokes. A porter is a doorkeeper, a luggage carrier, a cheap beer. Gilbert's joke is that Sir Joseph is Captain Corcoran's superior professionally but very much his inferior socially. Consider the evidence as Carol sings Josephine's second act aria, "The hours creep on apace." As in grand opera, it begins with recitative, a long section of words declaimed to music. Reflecting on what marrying her beloved simple sailor will cost her, she tells us of the higher class luxuries she has as Captain Corcoran's daughter. "On the one hand, papa's luxurious home, Hung with ancestral armour and old brasses, Carved oak and tapestry from distant Rome.... And, on the other, a dark and dingy room In some back street with stuffy children crying, ... And dinner served up in a pudding-basin!" She goes on to sing "A simple sailor, lowly born, unlettered and unknown, ... No golden rank can he impart, No wealth of house or land, No fortune, save his trusty heart, And honest brown right hand, ... Oh, god of love, and god of reason, say, Which of you twain shall my poor heart obey!"

But this love story is not the secret Gilbert is pursuing. The real secrets are in the Sir Joseph Porter-Captain Corcoran relationship. Captain Corcoran is related to a peer, and is the owner of this luxurious home and its contents, even though his duties on board the *Pinafore* must keep him away for long periods. He can overlook the fact that Sir Joseph is his social inferior because he is thrilled to have his daughter marry a Cabinet Minister. But then Buttercup tells her secret, with topsy-turvy results. Many years ago, when she was young and charming, she mixed these babies up. Suddenly lowly seaman Ralph becomes the captain of their ship, and the former captain becomes a lowly seaman, and can marry Buttercup. Sir Joseph says to the just-fallen Captain Corcoran, "I need not tell you that after this change of your condition, a marriage with your daughter will be out of the question." Corcoran replies, quoting Sir Joseph's earlier assertion, "Don't say that, your honour—love levels all ranks."

"It does to a considerable extent, but it does not level them as much as that," replies Sir Joseph. His first cousin Hebe quickly steps forward and offers herself as his bride.

Nothing could possibly be more satisfactory, for their class distinctions are maintained, as they are for Corcoran and Buttercup. The result for Ralph (now Captain) and Josephine (soon to be the Captain's wife instead of the

*(continued on next page)*

## “The Secrets of *H.M.S. Pinafore*”: A Preview

photos courtesy Steve Schwartzman and David Little

see more at [gilbertsullivanaustrin.smugmug.com](http://gilbertsullivanaustrin.smugmug.com)



“But who’s the youth?”

Julius Young & Janette Jones



“I love, alas, above my station”

Holton Johnson



“The hours creep on apace”

Carol Brown



divulger of *The Secrets of Pinafore*

Ralph MacPhail, Jr.



“When I was a lad”

Russell Gregory



“Things are seldom what they seem”

Arthur DiBianca & Janette Jones



“A cute American”

Dr. Jeffrey Jones-Ragona

more photos from *The Secrets of H.M.S. Pinafore* on page 5

(continued from previous page)

Captain’s daughter) is also romantically satisfactory. At this moment the cast sings through the entire Finale to Act II, although there is still music to come in the program, as Rafe is presenting Pinafore music following an order related to the secrets he wishes to reveal, and not the way the story unfolds.

After some discussion of the British representative who inspired the character of Sir Joseph, Rafe introduces Arthur to sing the original Captain Corcoran song with chorus and audience, “My gallant crew, Good Morning!” Corcoran presents a very polite version of life at sea, “I am the Captain of the *Pinafore*.” His men reply, “And a right good captain, too!” “You’re very, very good, And be it understood, I command a right good crew.” He continues to compliment his crew, and to list what makes him a good captain, “You’re exceedingly polite ... Though related to a peer, I can hand, reef, and steer, Or ship a selvagee; I am never known to quail At the fury of a gale. And I’m never, never sick at sea!” Chorus sings, “What, never?” “No, never!” “What, never?” “Well, Hardly ever!” In the second verse he sings, “...Though ‘bother it’ I may Occasionally say, I never, never use a big, big D.” “What never?” “No never!” “What, never?” “Well, Hardly ever!” And we laugh, for salts old and young traditionally use the saltiest of language. And then in Act II, polite Captain Corcoran is pushed too far and shouts that “big, big D” three times. Sir Joseph is appalled: “That word of evil sense, is wholly indefensible.” He orders the Captain to his cabin in disgrace.

Rafe reminds us of the many ways shows in the U.S have copied G&S classics and tells a story alleged to have taken place during the “*Pinafore* mania” of

1878-79. A patriotic American impresario suggested to Gilbert that he write an American version. Conductor Jeffrey Jones-Ragona puts aside his baton and walks to the stage to sing. Pianist Jeanne Sasaki gives him the note, and Jeffrey sings a cappella “He is American. Tho’ he himself has said it, ’Tis not much to his credit That he is American—For he might have been a Dutchman, An Irish, Scotch or such man, Or perhaps an Englishman.” In spite of hanky-panky, He remains a true-born Yankee, A cute American.” It is reported that Gilbert was quoted as saying that, after two minutes’ careful consideration, he didn’t think it would do at all. And judging from the expression on Jeffrey’s face, I think he agrees with Gilbert.

And what is it that keeps the Gilbert and Sullivan operas flying on both sides of the Atlantic? Rafe observes that Gilbert expressed the intention never to bring “the blush of shame to the cheek of modesty.” He also notes that Gilbert was writing for popular success, and knew very well that his full houses of respectable family audiences would disappear if he offended.

To finish the program off, the entire cast sings “He is an Englishman!” the Boatwain’s solo, and the chorus.

David Fontenot steps forward to sing the Pirate King’s lead-in and all sing “Hail, Poetry” from *The Pirates of Penzance*, and “Now to the banquet we press” from *The Sorcerer*. The crowd breaks loose with applause, with many standing and some shouting approval. The sanctuary overflows with enthusiasm and joy, as people go out to the lobby for refreshment and conversation. There’s no doubt: *H.M.S. Pinafore* is still a big hit, and this is going to be a wonderful show.

## “That Ole *Pinafore* Magic”

by Ralph MacPhail, Jr.



My title is in quotation marks because that’s what my valued colleague and collaborator Jeffrey Jones-Ragona calls it: that mysterious something that comes over a bunch of people working on this most tuneful and merry of Victorian musicals—and then what happens when it is presented before an audience.

That magic has been much on my mind of late while sitting here in the Gilbert & Sullivan room in Bridgewater and hearing wonderful things from Jeffrey about the incredible sound our cast is making in music rehearsals, about the early record-setting box office advance sales from David Wieckowski, and responding to emails from Bill Hatcher as he attends to countless details while working toward our show in June.

As I write, there are still four days before I fly to Austin (on Sir Arthur Sullivan’s birthday, in fact) to start staging rehearsals. I’m looking forward to seeing so many Austinite friends (and I anticipate making new ones) and jumping into the staging of *H.M.S. Pinafore*.

Now I think this will be my sixth—the third in Austin—and I’ve been asking myself why I’m so excited about another *H.M.S. Pinafore*. Well, working on *any* show in Austin is fun and gratifying. But this one is special.

### **What makes *H.M.S. Pinafore* so special—and magical?**

***It’s brilliantly constructed.*** W. S. Gilbert was a master at plot construction, and the show proceeds as easily as a ship might glide through calm waters. A male chorus? Sailors, of course! But what a wonderful inspiration to make the female chorus “an admiring crowd of sisters, cousins, and aunts”! Gilbert unfolds his tale clearly, with musical numbers carrying the plot forward. Note that the motivations for exits and entrances are never forced, and surprises and plot-twists and turns are effectively distributed throughout the two acts.

***It’s so tuneful.*** Arthur Sullivan was at his most ebullient in writing the score for this show in 1878—even though (as he told an interviewer much later) he was laboring under excruciating pain during its composition. And he did something in *H.M.S. Pinafore* that he did nowhere else that I can think of: he used multiple reprises—*lots* of them—of catchy musical numbers. I can’t imagine *anyone* leaving a performance without “I am the monarch of the sea,” “What, never? Well, hardly ever” or “He is an Englishman!” ringing in ears for days after. (*H.M.S. Pinafore* also contains the only entr’acte in all of Gilbert & Sullivan—“I’m called Little Buttercup,” another all-time catchy tune.)

***It’s so colorful.*** Gilbert often uses color subtly in his operas; *H.M.S. Pinafore* opens with the male chorus—all white and blue, spit and polish. Captain Corcoran arrives, resplendent in his uniform, but color doesn’t arrive until the ladies do, and they’re a feast of pattern and hue in their Victorian bustled smocks. Dazzling!

***It’s so clever.*** Those lyrics! The situations! The catchphrases! The climax and the dénouement! Even the title of the ship on which the

action takes place!

***It’s compact.*** *H.M.S. Pinafore* is one of the earlier Gilbert & Sullivan works, and thus it’s one of the shorter ones. And while we can regret that there’s not more of it, we can also admire its “trim” nature. (That word is always a compliment when used in seafaring lingo.)

***It’s a classic.*** In 1981, when musical-theatre historian Gerald Bordman published a history called *American Operetta*, his subtitle was “From *H.M.S. Pinafore* to *Sweeney Todd*.” Pick up *any* history of *American* musical theatre and there’s invariably a satisfying amount of paper and ink devoted to the veddy British Gilbert & Sullivan and *especially* to *H.M.S. Pinafore*; its original production in London and then in New York in 1878 set a new standard for good music, wholesome fun, and cleverness in thought, word, and deed. And like the other Gilbert & Sullivan works, *H.M.S. Pinafore* is as fresh and delightful as it was when presented over a century ago. The secret is to present it as its creators wished, and without updates “for modern tastes,” changes for “contemporary sensibilities,” or new and “clever” musical arrangements.

Sometimes I think of *H.M.S. Pinafore* rather like a favorite sweater: it’s comfortable, familiar, and easy to take for granted. We Savoyards know it so well that many of us can probably recite it from “We sail the ocean blue” to that final grand “Hurray!”

Last summer after leaving Austin, Alice and I visited Wooster and the Ohio Light Opera. I’d purchased tickets well in advance for their final show of the season, *The Gondoliers*, but didn’t bother to book the afternoon matinee of Gilbert & Sullivan’s not-so-new “nautical comic opera,” even though we had planned to arrive in Wooster the day before. The antique shops had more of a draw, I thought, than another *H.M.S. Pinafore*.

Until lunch on the day. I know it was weakness—but the weakness was so strong! The website told me that the matinee was sold out. So I called the box office: “Come to the lobby and get on a list for returns,” I was told, and so I did. Five minutes before the show was to begin, I paid for my seat. It was in the very back row, and I think it was a house seat because the Artistic Director Steven Diagle sat next to me for part of Act I.

Then just last month, I saw another production, this one at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Each time—in Ohio and in Virginia—I watched as this venerable ship magically sailed the ocean blue one more time into the hearts of the theatre-goers of all ages who packed the houses. And I feel certain the same phenomenon is about to take place again here in Austin next month.

So call your sisters, cousins, and aunts (and also your brothers, parents, children and grandchildren—and wives and husbands, too!) and make your reservations while there are still tickets to be had. Next month the Worley-Barton Theatre at Brentwood Christian School will be a place of enchantment, filled to the rafters with that ole *Pinafore* magic!

### **Send Us Your News!**

The next newsletter should arrive in early September; the deadline for submissions will be in mid-August. Please send your news to [news@gilbertsullivan.org](mailto:news@gilbertsullivan.org). Thanks!

## MEMBERSHIP FORM

We encourage you to join our Society. If you are a member, please check your membership renewal on the top of the mailing label. If expired or near expiration, your membership needs to be updated! To correct your address, renew your membership, or become a member, complete this form, and mail it to us with your check, payable to "GSSA," or call to join (512) 472-4772 (GSSA).

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We are proud to list our members in our programs, but if you would prefer NOT to be listed in our programs, please check here:



### Dr. Libby Weed Honored

At a May 3 retirement reception honoring **Dr. Libby Weed** for her thirty years as principal at Brentwood Christian School, a portrait was revealed that will hang in the lobby of the Worley Barton Theater near the choir hall named in her honor. The school board and administration made presentations honoring Libby for her support of the fine arts during her long tenure at the school. She will continue to assist the school in a consulting role as Academic Dean.



*(left) Jay Burcham, chairman of the school's Board of Trustees, addresses the gathering*

*(above) Marquita Moss, school President, honors Libby as the new portrait is displayed*



### NEWS of our MEMBERS

GSSA Music Director **Dr. Jeffrey Jones-Ragona** has been nominated for Best Music Direction of 2013-2014 by the Austin Critics Table Awards for last year's *Princess Ida*. Congratulations, Jeffrey! The winners will be announced on June 2.

**Spencer Reichman**, who appeared as Scynthius in last year's *Princess Ida*, has been selected Outstanding Senior Vocalist 2014 at Texas State. Congratulations, Spencer!



We are saddened to learn that **Donald Bayne**, who appeared as Major Murgatroyd in our 2012 production of *Patience*, has died. His memorial has been tentatively scheduled for June 7 in San Antonio.

*What would H.M.S. Pinafore be without sailors, sisters, cousins, and aunts?*

*Below, the beautiful setting for our Preview Musicales:  
 Gethsemane Lutheran Church.*



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MAY-JUNE 2014

**H.M.S. PINAFORE**

**SUMMER GRAND PRODUCTION**

**June 12-22**  
 9 Performances

Our venue this year is again the Worley Barton Theater at Brentwood Christian School. *All seats reserved.*



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Visit Austin at [NowPlayingAustin.com](http://NowPlayingAustin.com)



The Society holds nonprofit status under 501(c)(3) of the IRS code.

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