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XL ARTS

'Pirates' plunders laugh after laugh from another era

By Randy Harriman
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Steven Sondheim is widely regarded as the foremost living creator of works for the American musical theater, with some 22 major shows to his credit. In most of those he was both composer and lyricist, but in some notable exceptions such as "West Side Story," "Gypsy" and "Do I Hear a Waltz?" he wrote only the lyrics.

Sondheim is admired for the cleverness of his word-plays. Thus in the satirical revue "Forbidden Broadway," a parody of his musical "Into the Woods," is called "Into the Words." That's not surprising, given lyrics like this: "He said, 'All right,'/But it wasn't, quite,/Cause I caught him in the autumn/In my garden one night!/He was robbing me,/Raping me,/Rooting through my rutabaga,/Raiding my arugula and/Ripping up the rampion/(My champion! My favorite!)"

So what does all this have to do with "The Pirates of Penzance" opening this weekend in a production by the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Austin?

Well, about 90 years before there was Stephen Sondheim (born in 1930), there was William Schwenk Gilbert (1836-1911), the "words" half of the words-and-music team that created "Pirates" and 13 other comic operas. (The "music" half was Arthur Sullivan, 1842-1900.)

Gilbert, the 19th-century Sondheim, was, like his successor, no slouch at clever words, as in this passage from the famous "modern Major General" song in "Pirates": "I'm very well acquainted too with matters mathematical,/I understand equations, both the simple and quadratical,/About binomial theorem I'm teeming with a lot o'news —/With many cheerful facts about the square of the hypotenuse."

Unlike Sondheim, Gilbert was never a composer. His words, however, drove the music

Sullivan composed.

"The words always came first," says Ralph MacPhail Jr., artistic director for the Austin production. "Sullivan's mode of writing accompaniments to Gilbert's words was to start with rhythm. After the rhythm was established, he would then turn to melody, and once the number was set onstage and in context, he would work on orchestration."

Gilbert didn't just write lyrics for the songs set by Sullivan; he also wrote the dialogue that connects the musical numbers. Portions of that dialogue, though there is less of it in "The Pirates of Penzance" than in other G&S operas, can best be described as inspired lunacy — in a genteel Victorian sort of way.

A who's-on-first example occurs in "Pirates" when Major General Stanley discovers that the villainous buccaneers led by the Pirate King always spare the lives of orphans. The scene is built on the understanding that "orphan," when pronounced with a certain British accent, sounds exactly like "often", i.e., "awfun":

General: Have you ever known what it is to be an orphan?

King: Often!

General: Yes, orphan. Have you ever known what it is to be one?

King: I say, often!

And so on, for several more lines — to the delight of those who love "groaners" and the genial dismay of those who don't.

Because of the absence of international copyright law at that time, the works produced by the G&S team suffered, ironically, from piracy. Contemporary reports say that in the late 1870s there were at least 10 companies presenting unauthorized performances in New York City alone.

In an attempt to get around the problem, Richard D'Oyly Carte, the impresario who produced the G&S collaborations, decided to give "Pirates" a New York premiere and simultaneously stage a production in England, hoping thereby to gain protection on both sides of the Atlantic. The scheme didn't work, though, and soon after the show opened in 1879 there were flourishing pirated productions of it in both America and Europe.

The many illegitimate productions and the hundreds of their legitimate brethren bear witness to the enduring popularity of these late-19th century pieces. That popularity is due neither just to Gilbert's clever words nor solely to Sullivan's astute settings, but, as MacPhail puts it, to that "important conjunction that united them: Gilbert and Sullivan."

strong>'The Pirates of Penzance'

When: 8 p.m. Thursday, Friday, Saturday and June 26-28; and 3 p.m. Saturday, Sunday and June 28-29

Where:Forrest Kline Performing Arts Center, Crockett High School, 5601 Manchaca Road

Cost:\$5-\$25

Info: (800) 494-TIXS, www.gilbertsullivan.org

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