

THE

GILBERT & SULLIVAN

SOCIETY OF AUSTIN

JUNE 1998 NEWSLETTER

• You Are Invited •

• To Honor Pearl Amster •

Monday, June 1, 1998 at 7:30 pm
at Paula Tyler's • 4400 Balcones Dr. • 459-4639

On the corner of Shinoak and Balcones,
between 35th Street and Perry Lane (45th Street).

This will be our last Musicale until September.
Come join the fun, and please bring munchies.

Look Ahead • Save the date!
Monthly Musicale • September 14, 1998
The Second Monday (because of Labor Day)

THE MIKADO

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Buffet on Friday, June 12 • Tickets only \$30

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Children under 16 half price at all shows.

Thursday June 11, Saturday June 13,

Thursday June 18, Friday June 19, Saturday June 20
at 8 pm

Matinées Saturday and Sunday June 13, 14, and 20, 21
at 3 pm

**This will be a top notch show with our best cast ever
with Visiting Director Ralph MacPhail Jr. and Music
Director Jeffrey Jones Ragona.**

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THE MIKADO

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For \$25 get the CD to be made from a live
performance by our cast



Portrait of a Noteworthy Member Pearl Amster

by Libby Weed, President

When war was declared just a few months after their marriage, Pearl and Gustav Amster made a pact that became a hallmark of their marriage: to live each day as if it might be their last. Pearl had left her piano studio and her livelihood in New York City to go to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, where she and Gus were married by a Justice of the Peace in what she considered a disappointing 90-second ceremony. What followed, however, was anything but disappointing.

"I was a terrible war bride," Pearl recounts. "I cried buckets." Incensed that her pharmacist husband had been sent to a post manned almost entirely by engineers, she began a letter-writing campaign to have him transferred into the medical corps. A letter to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt bore fruit; Mrs. Roosevelt wrote back explaining exactly what steps should be taken, and almost immediately a transfer was effected.

For the next five years, the Amsters traveled for the Army in the United States, living on as little as a dollar a day and saving about fifteen cents by the end of the month to splurge on oranges or ice cream. The only time Pearl played the piano was at Saturday night dances at the USO. Gus was promoted to sergeant and then lieutenant, and life became a little easier; but he and his bride never forgot the importance of cherishing each day together.

Cont. p. 2

6/10

Cont. from p. 1 "He was smart -- a remarkable man," Pearl says of her husband. "He was crazy about me, and I adored him. He was a most unusual man in every way."

When they met, Pearl had a thriving piano studio and a strong reputation as an exceptional instructor, perhaps just as her mother had envisioned when she arranged for Pearl to begin taking piano lessons at age eight. Growing up in Brooklyn, Pearl with her family, had always enjoyed the old player piano her aunt had brought when she came to live with them. When the daughter of friends began taking piano lessons Pearl's mother decided that Shirley should have nothing that Pearl didn't have. In fact, if Shirley's piano teacher charged two dollars a lesson, Pearl would have lessons that cost the same amount, even though most teachers charged only fifty cents, and Pearl's mother could ill afford even that.

"I never asked to play, never wanted to play, never knew anybody who played" other than on the old player piano, Pearl recalls, "until we found out that Shirley played. That's when my mother decided that this would be a good profession for a girl." Pearl recalls with great fondness the sacrifices her mother made to enable her to continue lessons and move on to even better instructors as her talents developed. Her mother sat in the corner during every lesson, doing handwork, which she sold around the neighborhood to earn the money for the lessons.

"She was really very exceptional. She didn't know if I was any good, so she took me to play for hearings to find out if I was on the right track. She did this several times a year, at a cost of five dollars each time -- which was a fortune for us."

As Pearl became more and more accomplished, she began taking on "practice pupils," preparing them for their lessons by showing them how to practice. "I was always successful at my teaching. I don't know what it was but I always made it." She was one of very few instructors who stayed busy throughout the depression, although she was still a teenager.

Her daily regimen of practicing and teaching became so challenging that Pearl left school at age 14 and finished her high school degree in the next three years by taking night courses. "I loved night school," she remembers. "It was four hours a night of concentrated learning -- no auditorium, no study period, no frills." She graduated at 17, "the youngest kid in school," passing all the regents' exams, and began taking college courses at Brooklyn College.

The same year, Pearl was featured in a solo recital at Carnegie Recital Hall, an occasion for which she bought her first new dress. "The newspapers made much of it," she says, chuckling. "They sent a photographer to take a picture of me at my piano, and he was shocked when he saw that the only piano I had was that old player piano. You should have seen him angling to take my picture at the piano without showing what the piano was like! He stood on a chair."

By age 20, she bought her own Steinway, had her own studio, and was earning more as a piano teacher than her father or her fiancé earned at their professions.

After the war years, Pearl and Gus returned to New York and her career continued on its upward rise. She tackled a problem she had experienced her whole career -- a difficulty with memorizing pieces -- and developed into a strong memorizer with a remarkable system involving four avenues of learning. She continued with concerts at Carnegie Recital

Hall or Steinway Hall. She and Gus hired a maid to help with the housekeeping and the care of their two children. Her reputation soared, and life was good for the Amster family.

But all that travel during the war, as well as later, had made an impression on both Pearl and Gus; they had seen better ways of living. During the early 1960s, they decided to move to a warmer climate. They had visited Austin a few times (Gus had a brother living there) and liked it; so they began announcing to family, friends, and pupils that in five years they were going to move to Austin, Texas.

In 1967, the Amsters sold their fine New York house and moved south. Gus took the opportunity to do something he had always wanted to do: he returned to school and prepared to be an English teacher. Pearl soon began attracting pupils and building another studio in her home. Within a year, both of their now-grown daughters married, and soon they and their husbands moved to Austin, followed in a few years by Gus's sister and brother-in-law.

When a dealership for Yamaha pianos became available, Gus and Pearl took a walk looking for possible locations. A locked store at 17th and Lavaca looked intriguing, and soon it was the location of Amster's Music and Art. They sold not only pianos but also art, much of it created by nieces Susan and Stephanie Amster. The gallery was a lovely setting for recitals and shows. Pearl, already established as a premier piano instructor in Austin, learned how to recondition pianos, and opened Pearl Amster's Piano Barn in a picturesque old site on nearby San Antonio Street. "I would redo the keyboards, and the whole inside mechanism, creating a totally new piano -- terrific, guaranteed for life. I had a reputation -- you have no idea!" For fifteen years, Pearl and Gus continued their piano business while Pearl also taught in her studio and Gus taught English at McCallum High School. They loved Austin, and Austin loved them.

"So how did you first become interested in Gilbert and Sullivan?" I wanted to know.

"It was my mother. She and I were great pals -- she dragged me everywhere!" Pearl's eyes crinkle as she recalls the operas and concerts they attended.

After her marriage, when Pearl and Gus returned to New York, they "got crazy about it" and went to every G&S show they could find. "We even saw *The Mikado* put on by a Japanese company in Japanese -- it was terrible!"

"And when did you become involved in G&S in Austin?" was my next question.

"I became a member the first time I went to one of the shows here, and I've been enjoying it ever since."

Gus died 11 years ago at age 71, suffering a heart attack while he and Pearl were standing in line at the theater after an enjoyable day of shopping. Pearl recalls his passing with deep sadness ("I died that day, too," she says, "I'm only a shell now"), but she is consoled by her memories.

"Since those early days, we were serious about 'everyday' stuff," she says. "Every single day, when he returned home at 7 pm, you'd have thought he was coming home from Vietnam, the way I greeted him. For 45 years we never argued, never raised our voices. You wouldn't argue if it was your last day, would you?"

Still active and greatly esteemed as a piano instructor, Pearl is now one of our greatest jewels in the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Austin. On Monday night, June 1, we will honor a noteworthy member who regularly honors us by opening her home to us. Thank you, Pearl -- we love you, too.

Last Musicale Reba Gillman • Secretary

On Monday May 4, 1998 we gathered 41 person-strong at Pearl Amster's to meet some of the cast members of our coming production of *The Mikado*, and hear them sing. Present were members Pearl Amster, Byron Arnason, Marilyn Babcock, Chris Buggé, Doug & Yvonne DeLay, Ko-Ko (Frank Delvy), Harold Gilbert, Reba Gillman, Loel Graber, John & Carolyn Gregory, Enid Hallock with grandson Andrew, Bill Hatcher, Katisha (Janette Jones), Richard & Pat Lane, John Mast, Nancy McQueen, Robert Mellin, Maurie Ommerman, Joan Pearsall, Bee Polomé & Chuck Kraus, Larry Shepley, Executive Director Dan Smith, Leland L. Smith, Bob Spiegel, His Royal Pianoship Bob "The Man" Wall, Libby Weed, Benné Willerman, and Theresa Wilson. Guests were Jean Grace, Matthew and Pamela Grace, Debra Mandel, Judi Carr Morningstar, Roy Roberts, Peep-Bo (Corey Rooney) and Yum-Yum (Amy Stinson).

President Libby Weed announced that our next Musicale would honor our gracious hostess and long-time member Pearl Amster. It will be held on Monday June 1st at the home of Paula Tyler, where we met in April. Musical rehearsals for *The Mikado* are going very well, and stage director Rafe MacPhail will arrive next Monday night for a month of intensive rehearsing before the show opens on June 11. Rafe will be free daytimes in Austin, and would be happy to have lunch with members. Anyone interested speak to Robert Mellin to arrange a date. Libby was pleased to announce that we have received a contribution of \$1,000 for our production from the Scenic Land Development Co. On a sadder note she said we wanted to remember three of the Society's good friends who died within a few days of each other in April: John Bustin, "Deacon" Crain, and our Lord High Physician Blair Protzman. She asked that we take a moment of silent thought and prayer to remember the gifts they shared with this community.

Leland Smith held up a weighty tome published by the Oxford University Press: *The Complete Annotated Gilbert & Sullivan*, containing all the words of all the G&S operas, introduced and annotated by Ian Bradley. Leland had ordered it from Scholars Book Shelf in New Jersey, but Frank Delvy held up a copy he had bought here in Austin at Book People. A valuable reference work!

Libby told us that our member Lucy Shoe Meritt had been honored the day before by a workshop planned by the Austin Society of The Archaeological Institute of America. Reba reported that she had attended the workshop, in which Lucy made an extended presentation in her usual clear, knowledgeable, and sometimes gently humorous style. Only later did Reba learn that Lucy had just spent ten days in Seton Hospital, some of them in intensive care, and that a pace-maker had been installed. She said Lucy sent her greetings, but thought she had better stay home tonight.

Libby then turned the program over to Dan Smith, who had planned it. Dan told us "We are going to have a wonderful production. It's so good we are going to produce a CD from the performances." We will charge \$25 for a set of 2 CD's containing the complete show, music and dialog. Amy Stinson's husband John, will be in charge of the sound. Please send your check and order now to the Society office. "These are excellent voices. You'll be able to say you knew them when."

The music began, show-casing our *Mikado* cast. Frank Delvy (our Ko-ko) sang Private Willis' song "When all night long" from Act II of *Iolanthe*. Jean Grace followed singing "I could have danced all night" from *My Fair Lady* by Lerner & Lowe. Jean is in the chorus and serves as cover for the part of Yum-Yum, which she will sing in matinee performances on Sunday June 14, and Saturday June 20. Harold Gilbert (chorus, and cover for the Mikado) sang "A more humane Mikado." Corey Rooney, who plays Peep-Bo, then sang "That'll show him" from *A Funny Thing Happened on the way to the Forum* by Sondheim. Matthew Grace, our Pish-Tush, drove down from Killeen, where he has recently arrived from Michigan. He had been very active with the Michigan Gilbert & Sullivan group, performing in many of the operas, and storing up the G&S lore. He told us about a little known song from *Iolanthe*, sung by Strephon, "My bill has now been read a second time." He sang it for us and we agreed that it was dark and dreary and probably had deserved to be cut, despite or because of its political relevance (which, unfortunately, is lost on the present day audience). Debra Mandel, cover for Katisha, which she will perform on the Sunday June 14, and Saturday June 20 matinees, sang two of her favorites: "My Ship" from *Lady in the Dark* by Kurt Weill, and "So in love with you am I" from *Kiss Me Kate* by Cole Porter.

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New or renewal membership form

We encourage you to join our society. If you are a member, please check your membership renewal date on the top right corner 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 at:

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Our Yum-Yum, Amy Stinson, then sang "The sun whose rays" from *The Mikado*. Frank told us he had studied the Complete Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan and would pass on a few gems. During a brief period Great Britain decided to ban *The Mikado*, because it might displease Japan. Gilbert said "in a few years we shall probably be at war with Japan about India, and they'll offer me a high price to play *The Mikado*." Frank then sang "Willow, tit-willow" as we know it, and as cleverly parodied during the ban. Another of Frank's discoveries was a version of Katisha's "Alone, and yet alive" with a second verse that is never performed, which Janette Jones, our Katisha, asked Debra to sing with her. Frank then joined Janette in singing "There is beauty in the bellow of the blast" to finish off *The Mikado*. Janette told us she had just returned from a European trip. She had seen gondoliers in Venice, and taken tea at the Savoy Hotel in London. She saw the grave of Sir Arthur Sullivan, and wept because he had given her so much joy. To wind up the music, Harold sang the Pirate King's introduction and we all stood to sing a rousing "Hail Poetry" (*Pirates*), went right on into "Now to the banquet we press" (*Sorcerer*), and trooped off to the dining room to enjoy refreshments and sociability.

News of our Society

Our Visiting Eminence, Stage Director "Rafe" MacPhail, has arrived in Austin and rehearsals are proceeding full steam ahead. Robert Mellin reports that every performer is receiving detailed blocking, with lots of action. He says it is a joy to watch this thoroughly knowledgeable man at work.

On Monday, May 11, several of us attended the ACOT memorial gathering at the State Theater in honor of our friends John Bustin and Deacon Crain. This was a relaxed and loving tribute with three musical contributions. The last was ours: Amy Stinson led off as Yum-Yum, the ever reliable Frank Delvy assisted filling in for the absent Nanki-Poo, and the chorus sang enthusiastically the finale to Act II of *The Mikado*. Lord High Pianist Bob Wall not only accompanied our group, but singer Linda Nenno as well!

On Thursday, April 16 many of our members helped celebrate the life of our Lord High Physician Blair Protzman, a truly remarkable man. Among those who sang were Jess Walters, Leonard Johnson, and Frank Delvy. Bob Wall accompanied Frank. Love pervaded the atmosphere, and children wove in and out of the proceedings.

The Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Austin

SINCE 1976, WE HAVE BEEN DEDICATED
TO SPREADING THE JOYS OF GILBERT & SULLIVAN
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