

The GILBERT & SULLIVAN

FEBRUARY-MARCH 2016 NEWSLETTER

SOCIETY OF AUSTIN

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Libby Weed

Quite a large and enthusiastic group met on Sunday, January 10, to elect the board of directors, hear brief reports on Society business, and enjoy a charming revue of *The Pirates of Penzance* (please see page 4).



Two days after that enjoyable afternoon, the newly elected board met for its first business meeting of the year. Happily, all twelve members of this industrious group agreed to serve again (see the list on the back of this newsletter), and all will be playing the roles they played so well last year. The board members are thankful to all who attended on Sunday, and they have this message for all of you: *Get ready for a marvelous 2016!*

We are all quite excited as preparations are well underway for the Austin première of *Very Truly Yours, Gilbert & Sullivan*, to be presented Sunday, February 21, at First Presbyterian Church. Read all about it in the following article.

Gayden Wren, the playwright, happens to be a good friend and an admirer of our Artistic Director **Ralph MacPhail, Jr.** (*who isn't an admirer?!*), and he told me that he had always wanted to see one of his plays directed by Rafe. We are thrilled that Mr. Wren is flying in from New York to be with us for this performance.

One of the most delightful aspects of our plans is that Mr. Wren has agreed to spend the hour prior to the performance of the play performing some "G&S-related oddities" from his personal repertoire with a smaller group, talking about the show, and answering questions or signing books.

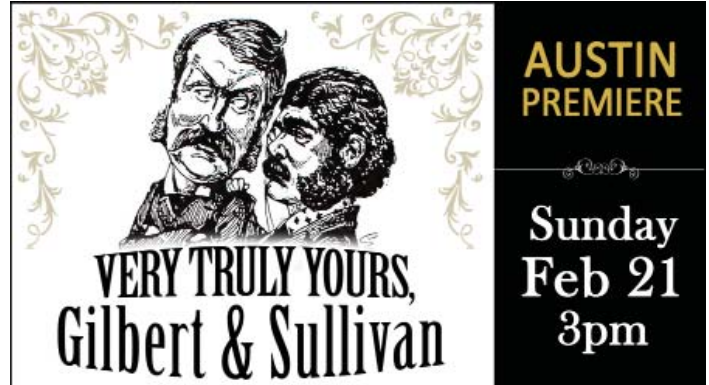
Bring some light refreshments to share, because following the show we will enjoy a social time with the cast, the directors, the playwright, and our friends.

I'll look for you in February!

The Gondoliers auditions — see page 2

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First Presbyterian Church
8001 Mesa Drive, Austin (see map, page 6)

Suggested Donation of \$10 at the door

Please bring munchies to share!

The Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Austin presents a very special performance of *Very Truly Yours, Gilbert & Sullivan*—an Austin premiere of this captivating new show. Artistic Director **Ralph MacPhail, Jr.** stage directs this melodic and comic delight, and **Jeffrey Jones-Ragona** provides musical direction. The performance will be followed by a social hour, and guests are invited to bring snacks and treats to share. Seating is limited to 220; audience members should arrive early.

Very Truly Yours, Gilbert & Sullivan is a two-act play featuring dramatic and comic readings from the correspondence of William S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, interspersed with songs from all 14 of the operas on which they collaborated. The piece is based on the team's diaries and letters, contemporary memoirs and newspaper reports. It is filled with joy, exuberance, tenderness, and—as always with Gilbert & Sullivan—lovely music and mirthful fun.

Hear some of your favorite G&S singers in concert: **Tamsen Cohagan, June Julian, Holton Johnson, Patrick Wright,** and **David Fontenot** will provide readings, solos, and ensembles. Narration will be by **Allan Longacre** and musical accompaniment by **Karl Logue**.

In an exciting coup for G&S Austin, the playwright himself, Gayden Wren, will be present for this performance. Mr. Wren, the entertainment editor for the *New York Times* Syndicate and author of the best-selling book, *A Most Ingenious Paradox*, will be available at intermission and after the show to sign copies of his book. Those wishing to meet the author and enjoy a private talk and performance before the show may make a donation of \$25 or more and arrive no later than 2 pm. If you are interested in being there, email us at info@gilbertsullivan.org.

Don't miss this rare and charming performance!

Emphasis on the ‘Truly’

by Gayden Wren

I never intended to write a play about Gilbert & Sullivan.

I am a playwright, though—so, when I found myself with something to say about Gilbert & Sullivan, saying it through a play seemed the obvious choice. *Very Truly Yours, Gilbert & Sullivan* was born.



Back in the 1990s I was hard at work on *A Most Ingenious Paradox: The Art of Gilbert & Sullivan* (Oxford University Press, 2001), reading pretty much everything ever written about Gilbert & Sullivan. I'd been a fan since 1973, when my father took us to see *Iolanthe*, but this was the first time I'd really immersed myself in the existing literature—some critical works, but mostly biographies.

Some of these works were magisterial (those by Arthur Jacobs and by Jane Stedman could hardly be improved upon), some were ludicrous (Michael Ffinch, anyone?), but to greater or lesser extents they had two noteworthy failings: They focused too much on Gilbert and Sullivan as people, and they emphasized conflict between the two men.

Conflict is, of course, the central engine of drama. When Tolstoy wrote, “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,” he might have written, “Happy people are boring; unhappy people are interesting.” When a book editor, dramaturg or script doctor is hired to “punch up” a story, she usually does so by isolating and heightening the drama.

No wonder, then, that Mike Leigh's brilliant *Topsy Turvy* (1999) focuses on the so-called “cipher quarrel,” or that Sidney Gilliat's *The Story of Gilbert and Sullivan* (1953) focuses on the “carpet quarrel.” The characters are strongly defined and the drama is clearly marked. They're natural focus points.

The trouble is, such a focus not only is deceptive, but also misses the real point.

W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan collaborated for 25 years, during which they were actively estranged from one another for slightly less than two years. Accounts focusing on conflict are allowing the 8% tail to wag the 92% dog.

More significantly, we care about Gilbert & Sullivan because of the 92% of the time when they were active collaborators and, for most of that time, also good friends. During their conflicts they exchanged angry letters, harangued go-betweens and consulted lawyers—none of which would matter if they hadn't been writing immortal operas together the rest of the time.

I decided to write a play about Gilbert and Sullivan or, more accurately, about their collaboration as Gilbert & Sullivan. I resolved that the conflicts between them, while not ignored, should occupy an accurate percentage of the whole, and that my play would use the two best available means of discussing their collaboration: their working letters and excerpts from the operas themselves.

The songs I selected for *Very Truly Yours, Gilbert & Sullivan* include some “greatest hits,” such as “When I Was a Lad” and “I Am So Proud,” but also some obscurities. There's one song apiece from the “Big Three,” vs. three from *The Gondoliers* alone.

This is because I wanted songs into whose creation the correspondence of Gilbert and Sullivan (and in some cases the writing of their contemporaries) provide insight. My goal, after all, is only incidentally to explore who Gilbert and Sullivan were. The real question, admittedly ultimately unanswerable, is: How did these two men come to create such unforgettable musical theater?

More than a century later, that's the only question that matters. If they'd had the same personalities but had established a cotton brokerage, we'd never have heard of them. The operas are what matters, and that's what this show is about.

Very Truly Yours, Gilbert & Sullivan is funny, I hope, because both men were natural humorists. It's also dramatic and, I hope, moving, because life is like that and this is a story about life. Most of all, though, I intended it to be thought-provoking. In the 20 years since the show debuted on Long Island, it's been presented Off-Broadway and in more than a dozen other productions in six states, Canada and England as well. In each case, people have told me that it's helped them see the operas themselves in a new light—and, if so, I couldn't be happier.

Very truly yours,

Gayden Wren

p.s.—In a personal note, in the two decades that I've known Rafe MacPhail, I've always fantasized about having him direct one of my plays. I had expected it to be *A Gilbert & Sullivan Christmas Carol* (the one everybody does), but I couldn't be happier to have it be this one, and to have it happen in Austin. I feel as if I know the group well from all his letters and from reading the Society newsletter, and I'm sure it will be a phenomenal show!

The Gondoliers Auditions

The Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Austin will hold auditions for *The Gondoliers* on Saturday, February 27, from 10 am to 6 pm, and on Sunday, February 28, from 1:30 to 6 pm, in room A-130 of Brentwood Christian School, 11908 North Lamar. **Michelle Haché** and **Jeffrey Jones-Ragona** will be artistic and music directors, respectively, and **Bill Hatcher** returns as production manager.

Auditions are approximately ten minutes long and are by appointment only. Call **Pat Turpin** at (512) 963-9021 (7 am to 8 pm) or email audition@gilbertsullivan.org to reserve a time slot. All roles are open for casting including principals and chorus. All performers will be compensated.

Those auditioning should memorize a song from Gilbert & Sullivan or something similar that will show their voice and range to best advantage. **It is mandatory to provide a copy of the music for the accompanist. Please note that no unaccompanied (a cappella) or self-accompanied auditions will be heard.** Although an accompanist will be provided, singers are welcome to bring their own if they wish. Please visit our website at www.gilbertsullivan.org/SummerProduction.htm for a libretto, and a complete description of the opera and its characters, including characters' vocal ranges. A completed audition form (available from that website) is required, and a résumé and headshot are requested.

The Reminiscences of a Savoyard

by Michelle Haché



Because this is our final newsletter before auditions for our Summer 2016 Grand Production of *The Gondoliers*, I have decided to dedicate this month's subject matter to the performers and all of those who contribute in "making the magic happen." We salute our family of cast and crew members, our directors and instrumentalists, and all those who have gone before us. I have chosen to include a few historic memoirs of the performers of Gilbert and Sullivan within this issue—one of which is my own. There is nothing quite like the magical world of the stage, and the unbreakable bond that is created within the theatre family.

So please allow me to offer one of my fondest memories. It just so happens that this moment took place while I performed in *The Gondoliers* in graduate school. As many of us know who have spent a life on the stage, anything can and will happen in the heat of a performance. Personally, I have always enjoyed the unusual challenge of fixing sudden problems that arise during a show. But every once in awhile, a special kind of situation comes along that one never forgets....

It was the second night of our production. I was playing the mezzo-soprano role of Tessa, which I was not particularly thrilled about because I was a coloratura soprano and this role required an especially low-placed, dark-timbred mezzo. But I loved our cast, I loved our set and costumes, and I especially remember being quite pleased with my dishy, band-singing baritone partner who played the role of Giuseppe. In Act I, the ensemble had a rather involved, well-choreographed dance around a maypole. My soprano counterpart, who played the role of Gianetta, joined me for the beginning of this dance before coupling up with our handsome partners. Unfortunately, on this particular evening, Gianetta hadn't secured her large blonde wig, and it was knocked off her head onto the stage by a fellow cast mate during the maypole dance. Panicked and mortified, she dashed off stage to the dressing room while I chased the tattered wig around the stage as dancing ensemble members unintentionally kicked it from place to place. Because of the dance's intricate choreography, I was unsuccessful at grabbing the darned thing, so the best I could do was perform a sort of football-style punt, which lofted the wig behind the cast to an off-stage crew member waiting to catch it. It then became painfully apparent that my Gianetta was not coming back on stage to sing our next scene. So, after attempting to perform our scene as a solo (a moment that I'm sure must have been quite confusing to the audience), I ran downstairs to the dressing rooms to find her. She sat there sadly with her pantyhose wig-cap still partially on her head, weeping into her crumbling Kleenex. I sat beside her, completely aware that I had a limited amount of time to convince her to return to the stage before our next scene. Slowly, worried and terrified-looking cast members began to trickle into the room as I tried to get her to laugh about the incident. Within a few moments, all of us in the dressing room were crying with laughter about all of our various personal stage mishaps, and thus, a beautiful memory was created that night as we all united with our joyful acceptance of the unpredictable nature of a life lived on the stage. We returned just in time for our next scene with slightly smeared makeup, and I remember feeling so completely happy and alive—and thankful for the beautiful life of theatre I had chosen.

The life of the theatre is not a life for everyone. But it is the richest of lives that I can imagine, lived to the fullest with joyful moments that I have shared with the dearest of friends and companions.

And so, in memory of Reba Gillman, who had the youngest of spirits, I offer the following excerpt from "The Life and Reminiscences of Jessie Bond, the Old Savoyard," (1930):

"Will you listen to an old woman's story, dear people who remember me in my prime, and you others to whom I am only a name, but a name connected with so much that is mirthful and gay? Who does not laugh happily at the whimsicalities of *Pinafore* and *Patience*, of *Iolanthe* and *Ruddigore*, of *The Yeomen of the Guard* and *The Gondoliers*? Pure fun with no sting in it, leaving no bad taste in the mouth. What a bright spirit conceived that fun, what a master of humorous melody set it to music, what jolly, talented folk interpreted it and first made it visible and audible to the enraptured London of their day! And I was one of that bright band—I, now a little old woman of nearly seventy-seven. I danced and sang and coquetted with the best, and all the people loved me. They do so still, as I dare to think, when I revisit my old haunts and am received with open arms and acclamations. They are all gone now, my fellow-actors and companions, I only am left to speak from personal knowledge of that brilliant episode. For twenty years without a break I played in Gilbert and Sullivan's delightful operas—longer than any of my fellow-artists—and now I sit down to write about it all, the only woman of our company who has attempted the task."

Please come join me in our little world. Make your memories and write your story. We are all waiting to embrace you as family!

Auditions for *The Gondoliers* will be held on February 27-28. All performers will be compensated. If you wish to receive timely information about auditions and schedule, please confirm that we have your contact information by visiting our website and joining our mailing list: www.gilbertsullivan.org/SummerProduction.htm

See you at auditions!



Jessie Bond (photo from *Russell & Sons* - from the 1914 edition of *Cellier & Bridgeman's Gilbert and Sullivan and Their Operas*)

The Gondoliers
SUMMER
GRAND
PRODUCTION
June
16-26
9 Performances

Wand'ring Minstrels

If you would like to have the Wand'ring Minstrels perform at your school, retirement center, civic club, business meeting, or private party, please see the web site, www.gilbertsullivan.org, for information, or contact Robert Schneider at minstrels@gilbertsullivan.org.

Send Us Your News!

The next newsletter should arrive in late April; the deadline for submissions is April 5. Please send your news to news@gilbertsullivan.org. Thanks!

The Pirates of Penzance Revue

by Rosa Mondragon Harris



What a treat we had in store for us after the Society's annual meeting on Sunday, January 10! The Society was delighted that an audience of 102 people joined us at the fellowship hall at Genesis Presbyterian Church for our first gathering of 2016. The day brought back fond memories of attending last year's meeting. The late, dear **Reba Gillman** and I had been corresponding about my joining the Board in some capacity and she invited me to attend the 2015 annual meeting. That day, I spoke with Libby about Board opportunities and stayed long after others left to chat with Reba. I am thankful for Reba's encouragement, and I am proud to serve on the Board today.

Musical Coordinator **June Julian** provided the audience with details on when and how to lend their voices during the revue. Reprising their roles from the 2008 GSSA summer production of *The Pirates of Penzance*, our performers included (in order of appearance): **Holton Johnson** as Frederic, **David Fontenot** as Pirate King, **Janette Jones** as Ruth, **Carol Brown** as Mabel, **Arthur DiBianca** as Major-General Stanley, and **Russell Gregory** as Sergeant of Police. June encouraged everyone to sing out heartily.

June set the scene of Act I by taking us to the coast of Cornwall with a gang of pirates celebrating Frederic's birthday. Frederic, a pirate apprentice, told the Pirate King that he was released from his indentures that very day, as he turned 21. Ruth, Frederic's nursery maid from when he was younger, stepped up to explain that she had made a mistake by apprenticing him as a pirate instead of a pilot in "When Frederic was a little lad." Frederic forgave Ruth for her mistake, and told the Pirates that he was leaving them. He also announced that he was "a slave of duty" and vowed to destroy them when he was no longer a pirate. The pirates understood, and complained that they could not seem to make money. Frederic proceeded to tell them why: Because they were all orphans, the pirates would not rob another orphan, and since all their potential victims were aware of this, they all claimed to be orphans! Frederic tried to convince the Pirate King to go back to civilization with him and render their extermination unnecessary, but the Pirate King declined, proclaiming "Oh, better far to live and die," which was the first song of the afternoon to include audience participation.

Frederic bade farewell to the pirates and was left with Ruth. Because Frederic had spent his entire life with the pirates and Ruth, he had never seen another woman. Thinking he wanted to take Ruth with him as his wife, he asked her if she was beautiful, and, of course, she responded "yes." A trusting young man, Frederic believed Ruth, but he then heard a sound he'd never heard before: young, lovely ladies! He immediately fell in love with them and wanted to marry one. Frederic then pleaded with the ladies to help him reform, singing "Oh, is there not one maiden breast," with the ladies and audience joining him as the chorus.

His plea was answered when Mabel, dressed in an apron, appeared from the kitchen of the fellowship hall and sang "Poor wand'ring one" to Frederic; audience members sang along to one of Gilbert and Sullivan's finest, and one of my favorite, pieces of music.

It seemed as though true love had won the day, but the pirates soon returned and captured all of the ladies. Major-General Stanley

entered and identified himself as the girls' father, demanding to know what was taking place. When the pirates told Major-General Stanley that they intended to marry his daughters, he objected, and sang "I am the very model of a modern Major-General." The audience was pleased to join in singing along with arguably one of the most famous songs in Gilbert and Sullivan's repertoire. Knowing about the pirates' weakness, Major-General Stanley told them he was an orphan and, thus disarmed the pirates and took his daughters, along with Frederic, away to his family chapel and estate.

As Act II began, the Major-General's daughters were trying to console their father. The Major-General was not actually an orphan and he soon felt guilty about the lie he had told the pirates. In the meantime, Frederic had a plan to lead a squad of zany policemen against his former gang. Before he could act, however, the Pirate King and Ruth arrived and told him that he was still obligated to the pirates, as they sang "Now for the pirates' lair" and "When you had left our pirate fold." They explained that he was born on Leap Day, 1856, and had been indentured as a pirate until his 21st birthday, not age 21. True to his character once again, his strong sense of duty forced Frederic to relent, and he revealed the truth that Major-General Stanley was, in fact, not an orphan. Enraged, the Pirate King vowed that he would have revenge on the Major-General.

Back at the castle, Mabel begged Frederic to stay, but he felt bound by duty to return to the pirate fold until his 21st birthday. He swore that in 1940, he would return and claim her hand in marriage. Meanwhile, the policemen prepared for the impending battle with the pirates, and the Sergeant of Police, backed by his men, stepped forward and sang "When a felon's not engaged in his employment." The police readied their attack on the pirates, while the pirates crept in to take their revenge on the Major-General. The Major-General stepped forward and sang a lovely ballad accompanied by the men, "Sighing softly to the river."

As is usual in Gilbert and Sullivan's operas, June told us, our story would see a happy resolution. However, the audience was left with a cliffhanger as to how the resolution would be achieved, and all were encouraged to return for the 2017 production of *The Pirates of Penzance*. We were given a taste of the show's finale as Mabel came forward to lead everyone in "Poor wandering ones."

June thanked the audience for their lively participation as well as the company of singers that delighted us with their talent. Additional thanks were extended to Libby for her work on overhead projection of words for the sing-along, and to our talented pianist **Jeanne Sasaki**. Jeanne led congratulations for her exceptional student and page-turner **Cody Ireland**, who has just been accepted into the Bachelor of Music in Piano Performance program at Baylor University. Then our Pirate King sang the lead-in to "Hail, Poetry" from *The Pirates of Penzance*; the audience joined in, then finished the afternoon with "Now to the banquet we press." All gathered for refreshments and social time with new and familiar faces. June's spirited narration coupled with the fine lineup of singers and a jolly audience led to a most charming afternoon. The Society's year is definitely off to a splendid start!

NEWS of our MEMBERS

The GSSA congratulates board member **David Treadwell** on his recent marriage to the love of his life, **Steve Faure**.

Annual Meeting and *The Pirates of Penzance* Revue

photos of the event courtesy Steve Schwartzman

see more at gilbertsullivanaustin.smugmug.com



(above, l-r): Russell Gregory, Carol Brown, Holton Johnson, Janette Jones, Arthur DiBianca

(left, l-r): David Fontenot, June Julian, and Rosa Mondragon Harris

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).

Please check a membership category:

- Individual (\$20-\$29)
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- Grand Duke or Duchess (\$100-\$249)
- Major General (\$250-\$499)
- Pooh-Bah (\$500-\$999)
- Pirate King (\$1000-\$2499)
- Savoyard (\$2500 & up)

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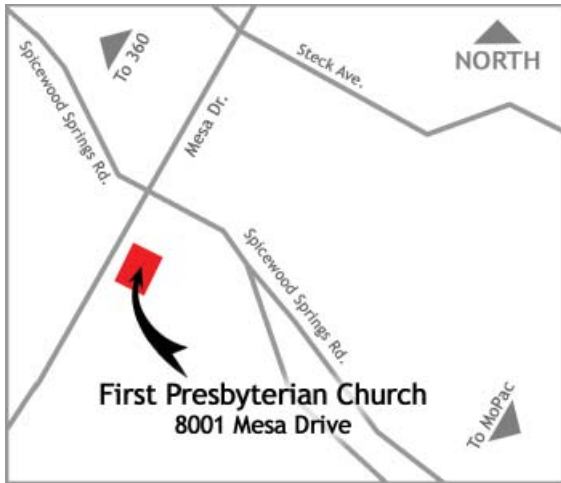
We are proud to list our members in our programs, but if you would prefer NOT to be listed in our programs, please check here:



(left): The newly reelected GSSA Board of Directors for 2016:
 (front, l-r) Roberta Long, Rosa Mondragon Harris, Diane Radin,
 Michael Meigs, Libby Weed, June Julian
 (back, l-r) Charles Smaistrila, Robert L. Schneider, David Treadwell,
 Allan Longacre, Dave Wiecekowski, David Little



(right) Pianist Jeanne Sasaki and page-turner Cody Ireland



Map to Mid-Season Show –
See details on page 1!

Coming Events

- Feb. 21 Mid-season production: *Very Truly Yours, Gilbert & Sullivan* (see pages 1 & 2)
- Feb. 27-28 *The Gondoliers* Auditions (see page 2)
- May 15 *The Gondoliers* Preview Musicale
- June 16-26 *The Gondoliers* summer production



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FEBRUARY-MARCH 2016

The Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Austin

Since 1976, we have been spreading the joys of G&S through

- Annual Grand Productions**
- Educational/Community Outreach**
- Musicales**
- Musical Scholarships**
- Newsletters**
- Holiday Season Shows**

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 E-mail: info@gilbertsullivan.org



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 Visit Austin at NowPlayingAustin.com



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

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 Music Director **Jeffrey Jones-Ragona**

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