

Course Syllabus: “The Operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan” Spring 2008, London Center ILACA Program

Professor: Dr. Anita King, Willamette University

This course will be an interdisciplinary study of the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan. The operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan can be considered as no less than a cultural phenomenon. A hundred years after the deaths of their creators, they remain a deeply embedded, and for the most part, treasured part of our collective artistic culture. Yet, no art could be more intricately tied to its time and place. The course topics will radiate from the operettas like the many spokes of a wheel, crossing disciplines and depicting the broader culture of the Victorian period.

The course will examine three operettas chosen for the nature of their satirical topics: *H.M.S. Pinafore*, *Patience*, and *The Mikado*. Another operetta may be added depending on what will be performed during that time. Topics will include: Gilbert and Sullivan’s impact on the history of the theater and the genre of the “musical”; the genesis and structure of the librettos; and the relationship of text to music. We will also examine aspects of Victorian culture that form the basis of each operetta’s satire. These include the hierarchical class system, the Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic Movements in art and literature, and Orientalism. Students should be prepared to take several excursions including a Gilbert and Sullivan “walking tour” in London, a visit to the Tate Gallery and to Gilbert’s home and museum at Grim’s Dyke. We will also attend several live performances.

Please note: The ability to read music is **NOT** required but a good sense of humour will be an asset!

COURSE OUTLINE

*“When they’re offered to the world in merry guise,
Unpleasant truths are swallowed with a will-
For he who’d make his fellow-creatures wise
Should always gild the philosophic pill”*

Jack Point from the *Yeomen of the Guard*

I. Placing Gilbert and Sullivan in an Historical Context:

1. The state of comic theater in early 19th-century London
2. Gilbert, Sullivan, and D’Oyly Carte’s reforms of musical theater
3. Richard D’Oyly Carte: the role of the Impresario and the challenges of marketing and production
4. The problem of pirated productions especially in New York due to lack of copyright laws
5. Gilbert and Sullivan’s long-term, intimate and stormy relationship
6. The 20th-century musical
7. Differing modern-day perceptions: England and America

Background reading:

- 1). Selections from the prefaces and theater criticism of G.B. Shaw
- 2). "Gaslight and Greasepaint" from *Gilbert and Sullivan and Their Victorian World*

Reference: *Oh Joy! Oh Rapture! The Enduring Phenomenon of Gilbert and Sullivan* by Ian Bradley

II. The Development of a Genre

A. The genesis and structure of the librettos

1. Literary sources for the librettos (especially Gilbert's own "Bab Ballads")
2. Gilbert's plots: the use of formulas and particular character types (the influence of Tennyson's poem "The Princess")
3. The innovative use of the chorus
4. The language of Gilbertian humor: rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, allusion, and parody
5. The nature of Gilbert's satire
6. The biographies, important life incidents, and psychological profiles of Gilbert and Sullivan

References: 1. *The Savoy Operas* by W.S. Gilbert, the complete text of
of all the libretti

2. *The Bab Ballads of W.S. Gilbert*

3. *The Language of Humour* by Walter Nash

B. Setting the Text to Music

1. How poetry is translated and interpreted in a musical setting
2. Examining the elements: rhythm, melody, harmony, form
3. Sullivan's approach to setting Gilbert's texts
4. Other examples of text-setting by Sullivan; his cycle of songs to poems of Tennyson and his famous song, "The Lost Chord"

Reference: journal article- "*Rhythm and Text Setting in the Mikado*"
by Robert Fink

III. The Satires as Windows to the Victorian World

A. Satire of the Victorian Class System: *H.M.S. Pinafore*

Background reading:

1. From *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* by David Cannadine, chapter 3, "The Nineteenth Century: A Viable Hierarchical Society"
2. Selections from *The Book of Snobs* by W.M. Thackeray
3. Selections from *The Compleat Gentleman: 5 Centuries of Aristocratic Life* by Geoffrey Beard

4. From *Melodrama: The Cultural Emergence of a Genre*, chapter 8, “He Never Should Bow Down to a Domineering Frown: Class Tensions And Nautical Melodrama” by Marvin Carlson

B. Satire of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Aestheticism Movement: *Patience*

Background reading and viewing:

1. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde
2. Selected poetry of Swinburne and D.G. Rossetti
3. “The Influence of Nature” and other essays by John Ruskin
4. We will also view examples of Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic painters at the Tate Museum

C. Satire of Orientalism and Victorian Morality: *The Mikado*

Background reading and viewing:

1. Journal articles on the nature of the “Orientalist” content of *The Mikado*
We will explore the strong controversy surrounding this topic and its impact on contemporary performances
2. Additional short readings/poems that pertain to the Western view of the East
3. We will visit museums with 19th century paintings that exemplify Orientalism

Students will purchase the librettos of the operettas studied and a short dual biography containing synopses of the operettas. Students will also receive a packet that will include excerpts from books, important journal articles, and the poems and prose works relevant to our study. Cd’s and video performances of the operettas will also be on hand.

IV. Course Requirements

There will be 3 short writing assignments or quizzes pertaining to the class content in relation to each of the three operettas studied. (30% of final grade)

There will be one major paper, due three weeks before the end of the term, in which students will combine analysis of aspects of the operettas with research from the perspective of their own discipline. (25% of final grade)

There will be a final group project in which students will create a performance piece in which they satirize aspects of their own culture in the manner of Gilbert and Sullivan. Students may work individually or in small groups to write poetry, dialogue, monologues, ensembles, short scenes, etc. that will contribute to the piece as a whole. Satirical drawings are also an option. Music, when needed, may be borrowed from Arthur Sullivan. (20% of final grade)

Students will write a short reflective essay describing their role in the final project. (10% of grade)

Finally, attendance and class preparation will count toward 15% of the final grade.