

NEGASS
 New England Gilbert & Sullivan Society
 P.O. Box 367, Arlington, MA 02476-0004

Vol. XXIII No.5
This is my joy-day unalloyed

Sunday, February 21, 1999
LMLO YEOMEN
 FORUM: WHY WRITE OR PUBLISH REVIEWS?

LAST MINUTE LIGHT OPERA: YEOMEN, Sunday, February 21 at 2:00 PM at The First Parish Church in Watertown, MA. LMLO, aka **Do-Your-Own Opera**, is your annual chance to try out a role you've always wanted to do. Performance will be On Book; costumes will be Ad Hoc, staging will be Spur-of-the-Moment, and the outcome, as always, will be Fun! Casting will take place after silent auditions, which will be held over the phone by **Patricia Brewer**. Casting criteria do not necessarily include voice type, appearance, or even such minor matters as gender. The most important criterion on which a role is cast: Who wants the role the most? **So call Patricia at (617) 323-3480** and let her know which role you dream of. (*If you already told her your dream some time in the past, please get in touch with her again and remind her!*)

In case you don't remember the story: Phoebe (*mezzo*) loves Col. Fairfax (*tenor*), a man of higher rank who is condemned to die as the result of a trumped-up accusation of sorcery. Phoebe is loved in turn by Wilfred (*baritone*), the Head Jailer and Assistant Tormentor of the Tower of London, where Fairfax is a prisoner. Phoebe's father, Sgt. Meryll (*baritone*) of the Yeomen of the Guard, owes his life to Fairfax's bravery in battle, and plots with his children to save Fairfax's life: His son, Leonard (*tenor*), who has just returned to London to take up a position in the Guards, goes into hiding; Phoebe distracts Wilfred so that Meryll can let Fairfax out of his cell; and Fairfax, shaved to disguise his appearance, is acclaimed as Leonard Meryll, safely hidden in plain sight as the residents of the Tower search in vain for the missing prisoner.

Meanwhile, another plot has been set in motion. Fairfax has explained the cause of his plight to (*baritone*) Sir Richard Cholmondeley (that's pronounced "Chumley", folks!), the Lieutenant of the Tower, and asked him for a favor. Fairfax has been "set up" by a kinsman who expects to inherit his rank and fortune. If the Lieutenant can find Fairfax a bride before his execution, she will cut out the conniving relative. This being an opera, nobody thinks of calling in Phoebe; instead the Lieutenant pulls Jack Point (*comic baritone*) and Elsie Maynard (*soprano*), a pair of strolling players, into the plot. When the Merylls' plot leads to Fairfax's escape, Elsie is stunned to find herself irrevocably married to someone she doesn't know and can't locate, and Point is heartbroken to find that the girl he loves is no longer free to marry him.

Various further plots and counterplots are confused by fate and by Dame Carruthers (*contralto*), the Housekeeper to the Tower, who, with the help of her niece Kate (*soprano*) does her own plotting in an attempt to win Sgt. Meryll's heart - or, at least, his hand. There are a couple of others who sing brief solos - the First & Second Yeomen (*baritone* and *tenor*), and a couple of male Citizens who speak lines which make them unlikely candidates for cross-gender casting. The cast is rounded out by the (silent) Headsman (who usually has an axe and/or great legs) - and a wonderful chorus composed of everyone else present.

Call Patricia Brewer at (617) 323-3480 and let her know which role you want - and how badly you want it!

HOW TO GET THERE: First Parish Church is located near Watertown Square, the intersection of Mt. Auburn, Galen, Arsenal and Main St. (Rt. 20) in Watertown. From the Square take Main St. one block west to Church St. (at the traffic light), then travel north one block on Church. You'll find the church on a hill overlooking a parking lot adjacent to the Registry of Motor Vehicles (yes - you *can* park there, although the church has a lot of its own as well). **Public transportation** is also available: Take the #71 bus from Harvard Square to Watertown Square. The church is within easy walking distance.

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A G&S CHRISTMAS CAROL AT EMMANUEL COLLEGE: The December Meeting of NEGASS at Emmanuel College featured a reading (and singing) of *A Gilbert and Sullivan Christmas Carol* - the traditional Dickens story set to music by Sullivan, with occasional nods to Gilbert, as realized by **Gayden Wren**. Thanks to the noble efforts of our Company Promoter, in the person of **Katherine Bryant**, who got an announcement into the **Boston Globe**, the event attracted a number of interested people so that the event played to a group of 30 - performers and audience.

Among the many highlights of the performance were the three ghosts portrayed by **Amy Allen**, **Rebecca Consentino** and **Jenna Wilkinson** ("Three little ghosts for Scrooge are we"), the Tiny Tim of **Sarah Consentino**, the balladeer ("Bah, humbug. Bah humbug. Bah, humbug") well sung by **Todd Allen Long**, the Jacob Marley's ghost of President **Dick Freedman** ("I am the very model of the mystic supernatural") and of course the all-dominating presence of Ebenezer Scrooge, well portrayed by **Lee Patterson** despite his being in the middle of a cold. **Wayne Ward**, the resident accompanist of **Chuck Berney's Royal Victorian Opera Company**, made his first NEGASS appearance in many years a most welcome one and helped many a performer who was unfamiliar with the music.

From the reception the production received, it seems *A Gilbert and Sullivan Christmas Carol* ought to become an annual event. (But perhaps with a bit more rehearsal?!)
-- **J. DONALD SMITH**

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**JANICE THE EXPERT!** **Janice Dallas** writes: Over the weekend, I was told that I've been drafted for a panel presentation of "Costuming G&S" at this year's **CostumeCon 17**, being held Feb. 12 - 14 in the Philadelphia, PA area. Apparently, I'm considered an Expert by the Convention's Powers-that-be. I knew their Friday night Social was on a G&S theme, but

| Tentative Meeting Schedule, 1998-99: |                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2/21:                                | <b>LMLO YEOMEN</b> , produced by <b>Patricia Brewer</b>                           |
| 3/21:                                | A concert of G&S by performers from the <b>Longy School of Music</b> in Cambridge |

~ NEXT BRAY COPY DEADLINE: February 28, 1999 ~

**Next Bray Stuffing: Sunday, March 7 at 3:00 PM.** Call Us at (617) 253-5810 during the day, at (781) 646-9115 evenings and weekends, or email mlcar@mit.edu at any time, for directions to Our snug and easy-to-get-to home. -- *mlc*



**Welcome, Welcome, Welcome We New Members Arthur M. Dunlap, Don Hawkes and Wayne Ward.** Although he merely lists himself as Enthusiastic Singer and Audience Member, We happen to know Arthur as a valuable bass/baritone member of **MIT, Sudbury** and **SLOC** choruses, with a potential for lead roles, if he'd stir it & stump it & blow his own trumpet. **Don** writes: "I have been a long-time lover of G&S and have been meaning to join NEGASS to keep abreast of activities Finally doing it! - Love your website." As for Wayne - at the end of the **G&S Christmas Carol** he turned down the Usual Bribe for accompanying a meeting, saying that he had enjoyed himself too much to accept it - but willingly accepted a membership instead. Welcome to our hearts! **Hearty Greetings Offer We!**

didn't realize it had crept into the rest of their programming! [*We've also been informed that Janice has been tapped by **Huntington** for costuming advice as they prepare their upcoming **MIKADO**.* - *mlc*]

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MEETING ATTENDANCE: A MESSAGE FROM OUR CHIEF EXECUTIVE. We must be doing something right, but clearly not enough. Although NEGASS membership has been slowly growing, attendance at meetings over the past couple of years has most often been sparse. Again and again, we've seen primarily Board members plus spouses and a handful of others at monthly meetings.

If you are among the missing more often than not, can you tell us why? Is it simply the press of time and competing activities? Is it because we are not offering the kinds of meetings that would induce you to come, or because there *are* no meetings we could hold that would induce you to come?

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|  FORUM:
WHY WRITE OR PUBLISH REVIEWS?  |
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I ask for two levels of response. Firstly, let us know what you want. Should we be holding meetings at different times? Weekday evenings? Saturdays? What should we offer? More scholarly presentations, more entertainment, more audience participatory singing, a banquet *and* a dance? (No, we can't reasonably afford that!) Or if you are a member chiefly to get **The Trumpet Bray**, and no earthly temptation would get you to a meeting, tell us that, too, so we can at least know you are content.

Secondly, get involved. Talk to (or email) the Board. [To reach us, see the handy contact list, known in Journalistic circles as the Masthead, on the last page of the **Bray** - mlc] If you live in some out-of-the-way place (Knightsbridge?) and wish we held events in your area, we can! Offer to help organize an event in your area. We can afford reasonable expenses for venue, accompanist, etc. What we can't do, without your help, is figure out whether the local "cheap" spot is a school, a church, a VFW Hall, etc., and how much they would charge, and whether they have a stage and a piano, etc.



We really would like to hold meetings that cater to the membership's wishes, but we need your help in determining what those wishes are.

-- **RICHARD FREEDMAN**

[*Ha - an idea! Would members be more likely to attend meetings if they knew more about the others who'd be likely to attend? Would someone like to step forward with a note in the next **Bray** that says, "Hello - I'm So-and-so, I'm engaged to all the girls in Ploverleigh, and I'll be attending the next meeting - please come sit with me..." **Tell Us, tell Us all about it!** -- mlc]*

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**Paul Follows**, the General Manager of **Grims Dyke Hotel**, writes: "Thought you would like to know we now have a website on **Grimsdyke**, home to W.S. Gilbert, where he died." The URL: [www.grimsdyke.com](http://www.grimsdyke.com).

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 We'd like to remind folks: To subscribe to **SavoyNet**, the G&S mailing list, send the message Subscribe SavoyNet (your full name) to the address [listserv@bridgewater.edu](mailto:listserv@bridgewater.edu) - and you'll be sent all the information you need.

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**Bob Kirkwood** asks where he can buy or order audio tapes of G&S without driving into Boston. Bob, We'd suggest you start by calling **Tower Records**, or visiting **WWW/Amazon.com** - most local music stores have or can order things for you, as well! Any other ideas, folks? -- mlc

"**Harvard's** show was as bad as Cambridge parking. I don't plan to write about it."

"Don't ask me to review **MITG&SP's** show - I have nothing good to say about it."

We are always requesting reviews of local productions, hoping to let readers know something about shows they've missed or companies they might want to see in the future. But We get the above sort of comment from potential reviewers all too frequently lately.

Or else We receive reviews which, We are assured, are honest, if critical, appraisals of productions - only to receive cries of outrage from friends of the injured - er - reviewed company. (In fact, part of the following series of articles is devoted to responses to the last **Bray's** reviews of **SLOC's GONDOLIERS** and **CG&SS's YEOMEN**.)

Why are reviewers so negative? Why are performing company members so touchy? Attend a performance, and you'll see smiling faces and hear laughter and applause. The *audiences* are obviously having a good time! But for some reason, the *cognoscenti* who are most likely to write reviews (or, We must admit, sometimes even those of Us *cognoscenti* who feel it inappropriate to write reviews) are often dissatisfied by the productions We see, and feel the urge to say so.

So We asked some recent reviewers, and a few others, for comments on the question: **What is the purpose or function of a review?** To sell tickets for our favorite company? To get back at people whose artistic expressions hurt our sensibilities? To exercise our rapier wits? Or, perhaps, to express our own taste, and try to educate/entice others to join our camp? ("Amuse - instruct- persuade", in the terms of the 17th-century English literary philosophers who were trying to define the purpose/function of literature.)

We start with a couple of responses to last month's review of **GONDOLIERS**. The first was offered for publication on condition that it not be edited in any way. -- mlc

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I am puzzled about the mean-spiritedness evident in the reviews of **SLOC's GONDOLIERS** in the December **Bray**.

In the interest of full disclosure, let me state that I'm a long time member of **SLOC**. However, I'm writing this letter as a private citizen. I wasn't involved in **GONDOLIERS**. I didn't even see it, as I was in another show at the time. So I'm not questioning the accuracy of the criticism of either review. But I wonder what is to be gained by nasty personal comments about directors, particularly when a show has closed so the criticism can't be used constructively, or even worse, when the criticism refers to a production (**IOLANTHE**) that was mounted seven years ago.

To be specific, **Mr. Smith** says, "The Director either could not have read the play, or understood it." Again, I never met the director in question, but I'd guess that he did indeed read the play, and if his interpretation differed from that of Mr. Smith, it could have been expressed in a less antagonistic manner. And **Mr. Tewksbury** found it necessary to insult a former stage director with not-very-veiled innuendo. That was just mean.

While reviews can be helpful in giving readers a glimpse of productions they haven't seen, and an opportunity for them to rethink those that they have seen, they should be crafted with the understanding that most people involved with these productions do it for love and not for money. If anything, they should be slanted toward the positive. (Frankly, I think that professional reviews of professional productions are kinder than these, but perhaps those reviewers fear libel suits.)

Finally, in answer to Mr. Tewksbury's "It will be interesting to see where they go from here": our Fall, '99 production will be *Of Thee I Sing*, by George and Ira Gershwin. Stage Director will be **Lora Chase** and Music Director will be **Phil Lauriat**. The show has a lot of similarities to G&S: political satire, literate lyrics, silly story, and a large chorus commenting on the action, wrapped up in Gershwin's signature musical style. We hope many NEGASS members will audition and/or come out and enjoy the show.

- **DEB POPPEL**

===== *And in response, We received...* =====

**Deb Poppel** notes that she did not see the **SLOC GONDOLIERS** under discussion. I'm tempted to say she should count her blessings, but that would be mean-spirited, and not entirely justified. The singers and the orchestra were in general very good-- as both of those mean-spirited reviewers observed-- much better than the dramatics deserved. In fact, had the production been billed as a Concert Version, we'd have little whatever to grumble at.

The problem was not interpretation; it was lack of interpretation. The staging was-- to put it politely-- lackluster. And that was not for lack of ability in these players to act and move to better advantage; several of them often have, elsewhere. Why not here, in a show put on by one of the region's foremost community companies?

Which brings us to the crux of Ms. Poppel's puzzlement: Why such harsh criticism? The answer, I suggest, is deep disappointment.

Ms. Poppel suggests that for productions by people who "do it for love and not for money," reviews "should be slanted toward the positive." Well, the two reviewers gave what was positive-- the music-- its due. To have let the uninspired staging pass unnoticed and uncriticized would have been patronizing. A high school troupe should be given leeway and encouragement. A college production might be cut a little slack, but not much; they are older and more experienced. A community company as

experienced and talent-endowed as SLOC (one might call such companies semi-pro) can expect to be held to the very high standard it has itself set by its prior performance. And when it fails by as much as it did this time to reach that standard, it deeply disappoints the knowledgeable Savoyard-- which a reviewer will be. And that disappointment will out. SLOC is, in this instance, the victim of its own past excellence.

(No reviewer, by the way, amateur or professional, need fear libel suits for calling a show lousy. People who sing choruses in public (or solos, duets or sextets) assume the risk of unkind comment.)

-- **SHELDON HOCHMAN**

*We also received a flurry of email from various interested parties, defending the Stage Director of that **GONDOLIERS** as a victim of sabotage by other members of the production team. (One person sent a detailed list of examples, accusing the Music Director in particular and others in general of preventing the Stage Director from doing his job.) After asking a number of people for the facts of the matter, We have to say that the only consensus We can find is that the directors were both very talented people, that the music director may have been more forceful than the stage director, and that his opinions may have had an effect on the outcome of the production.*

*Which raises another point of which some reviewers seem unaware: Theater is a collaborative art. Directors, designers, actors, crew... the audience itself can have an effect on a given performance. Too often We've seen praise or blame for direction when We've been convinced that the critique should have gone to an actor, or to a designer - or comments concerning an actor which should have been aimed at the director - or at a crew member - or at another actor who was cleverly "covering" for the actor who got the praise! There is grave danger in assigning praise or blame in a review. Our Editorial Opinion is that a reviewer is safer commenting on what s/he saw and heard without pointing fingers.*

*Meanwhile, one of last month's reviewers responds to the detailed defense mentioned above:*

A commentator on a performance normally has only two sources of input: what is seen & heard on stage and what is written in the program. It is most unfortunate that, in this particular situation, the Stage Director **Scott Gagnon** still felt obliged to leave his name in the program to receive the 'credit' for a production which ended up being largely out of his control. I have seen his work before and found him to be an original and innovative director who brings a different, yet respectful, perspective to Gilbert and Sullivan. I trust that I will have the opportunity to see one of his productions in the near future - one which truly reflects his own concepts and ideas.

-- **J. DONALD SMITH**

*[We always refrain from reviewing Ourselves, since a) We're the Editor of this Rag and ought to remain impartial, and b) We're a director Ourselves, and have no business criticising others! But We have to say that, in spite of obvious problems, We enjoyed*

that production of *GONDOLIERS*. So - points of view vary...  
what can a reviewer do? -- mlc]

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Then there's the series of responses We've received to Our last issue's review of the *Connecticut G&S Society's YEOMEN*:

Marion, I wanted to resist crawling down to **Gideon Crawl**'s sadistic level of criticism, but wish to make a few responses in tribute to your controversial forum concerning the recent *YEOMEN* given by the 19-year-old **CG&SS**. An art teacher, **Robert Straub**, reviewed the same in a local paper, *The Trumpeter*: "A powerhouse performance! The staging, costumes, scenery, choreography and musical accompaniment were of excellent quality. The Connecticut cast was poised and confident in their roles. ...Some dynamite performances were given by Ms. **Renee Molnar** and Ms. **Susan Wrzosek**, who both played and sang wonderfully. These two women could headline any cast in any production of any theatre group. They were both delightful and convincing in their roles. **John Knudsen**, who played the jester, also did a great job and got lots of laughs from the audience. **Laurie Weissbrot**, who played the head jailer, also did a terrific job; he had a difficult role and won over his audience with ease. **Bill Sorensen**...has a striking tenor voice not to mention his accomplished acting talents."

**Gideon Crawl**'s model G&S company is the former **Light Opera of Manhattan**, whose small-scale productions sans orchestra, I saw regularly on East 74th Street. They inherited **Ray Allen** from **Dorothy Raedler's American Savoyards**, and I believe **John Bridson** helped them out with a few shows. I produced a season of the **American Savoyards** at the Jan Hus Theatre and watched their productions starring **Rue** and **Sally Knapp** on the road and in Monmouth, Maine. I like **NYGASP's** work better and, of course, their full orchestra does more service to Sullivan than **LOOM's** token ensemble using organ and piano (plus a few interpolated instruments for certain performances).

**D'Oyly Carte** did a better job, naturally, and I followed their productions in both England and the States. Many of us went to London to see the **New D'Oyly Carte** to see *YEOMEN* and *IOLANTHE*. **NYC Opera Co.** did a fine job (under Raedler and **Allan Fletcher**). As to Crawl's quibbling over the tragic finale and everyone's involvement, I, as a longtime salaried director from **Lincoln Center** to Middletown [CT], happen to prefer Henry Lytton's staging of Point's death to George Grossmith's. Gilbert said to Lytton: "Keep on like that. It is just what I want. Jack Point should die and the end of the opera should be a tragedy."

Reviewing a **Goodspeed Opera House** benefit for the **CG&SS** "Yeomen Year," **Angela Lehman** wrote in part in the *Main Street News*: "**Bob Cumming** as conductor as well as amusing and extemporaneous narrator...transported the audience back in time through the melodic, romantic and lyrical music...in fine voice. ...If last year's production of *IOLANTHE* is anything to judge by, this rendition of *YEOMEN* should not be missed...The

scenery and costumes last year were very professional, thanks to the dedication of family members who spend untold hours constructing, painting and sewing. Add to this the endless rehearsals under the perfectionist taskmaster Bob Cumming, and it seems a shame that so much effort should be expended on only three performances and thus enjoyed by a limited audience."

Crawl's comment that our Dame Carruthers "wasn't much of a singer" shows how limited is his knowledge of splendid bel canto singing. She is one of Connecticut's finest soprano soloists and voice teachers, holding a degree in voice from **Hartt School of Music**, and brings down the house in our "Night at the Operetta" benefits. It makes one wonder about Crawl's qualifications to force an endless review upon those of us on the front lines, in blue-collar towns, trying to perpetuate the art form of the Savoy. As to our Point "lacking a natural comic delivery" and "I don't think he's enough of a comedian for the patter roles," it is my view that he is the best Point I've EVER witnessed. And I loved Martyn Green and was honored to sing with Martyn and Yvonne at **The Players Club** in NY. I had corresponded with him several times as a fan as far back as 1950.

Ah, well, perhaps the sinister forces keep the rest of us unified all the more. Having reviewed music and theatre for dozens of magazines and newspapers all my life, and having directed, conducted and performed in hundreds of productions (both professional and community) for more than half a century, I have learned to keep my eye on the doughnut and not upon the hole--the hole that I wish someone named Gideon might crawl into; we must not throw the baby out with the bath water. Why can't we all love the art form of the Savoy without trying to wound others who feel that love differently? That thing called ego certainly takes on multifarious forms. In my own case I try to build every scene on Gilbert's known directives, at the same time taking a few liberties for today's audiences and allowing some freedom of interpretation to our most gifted artists.

Respectfully submitted, **BOB CUMMING**, **CG&SS**  
founder/director.

===== *And in further defense of that criticized production, Ted Rice sent the following, which was sent to him by an anonymous friend:*

Dear Ted,

Thanks for faxing me that review of *YEOMEN*. If the reviewer was serious, he (or she) certainly has no background in music or drama. As you know, I saw the performance on Saturday evening, and I disagree completely with that review.

When I agreed to come, I did so out of friendship; I expected to see another somewhat banal amateur production. I was pleasantly surprised, though, and truly delighted with the entire operetta. As you know, I see and review as many as three new plays and musicals each week, reporting to my boss in Denmark on whether they would be worth producing there. I've never thought of recommending Gilbert and Sullivan, since they are usually amateur productions, but had this been a professional

offering, I would certainly have done so. I've seen *YEOMEN* twice before, once by **D'Oyly Carte** on one of their tours, and once by a near-professional group here in New York; I regret that I don't remember their name. While yours was probably not as slick as theirs, your director, **Robert Cumming**, has given a sterling show, and one worthy of high praise.

Overall, I thought the operetta was very well set, well acted, and beautifully sung. [*The reviewer went on to praise every performer intelligently and specifically, saving the strongest praise for the Dame Carruthers, and not forgetting the chorus and orchestra. Ted did not tell Us the name of this reviewer - but s/he certainly seemed to enjoy the show!* ]

And finally, a stalwart NEGASSer wrote:

I admit to a certain bias towards the **Connecticut G&S Society** ever since they premiered my version of *THESPIS*. Having said that, let me respond to a few of the points made by **Gideon Crawle** in the last **Bray**. Aside from miking problems (which could be done away with by going acoustic, hard as that may be in a school auditorium with no pit), I found the recent CG&S *YEOMEN* an illuminating production. You can go two ways with *YEOMEN*: let Fairfax come across as a beast -- which he surely may be -- and Elsie as thoughtless, keeping Gilbert's original finale lines about loving her lord and laughing aloud, or you can alter those lines as Gilbert did in 1897 to the "nestling near... dropped a tear." And from this decision proceed a number of other ones concerning the character of Point's tragedy and the grimness of the other pairings., Phoebe-Wilfred and Meryll-Carruthers. Usually I favor the grimmer, harsher angle, but **Bob Cumming's** thoughtful and coherent direction entirely convinced me. For once, Elsie really felt Point's death, with a shriek and tears, falling upon the body. Why have I never seen an Elsie do that before? It seemed so right -- and moving. **Renee Molner** was an Elsie I'll long remember. **Bill Sorenson's** solid tenor and charm made real sense of a Fairfax worthy of being loved. **Mr. Crawle's** notion that this detracts from Point's tragedy seems entirely wrong: all the worse, indeed, for Point not just to be tricked but to be truly bettered. And **John Knudsen's** Point was so crisply and feelingly acted and sung that I can't imagine where Crawle found him not "enough of a comedian." It was precisely that he did not gag and wink that made him both funnier at first and sadder at the last. As for Phoebe (**Susan Wrzosek**) and Wilfred (**Laurie Weissbrot**), they were wonderfully matched and were in danger of stealing the show -- but Cumming didn't let that happen. Weissbrot's jailer was endearing as well as ineptly lustful, and I for one caught every word of his freshly nuanced dialogue. Crawle is mistaken in calling **Carroll O'Neill** not much of a singer; she has a big round warm voice and made a stately Dame. One quirk of the production: an off-stage high soprano vocalized above the funeral march in the Act I finale. Though hardly sanctioned, it seemed a simple way to make a grand effect on a small stage without much room for marching. Short of a top-flight professional production, we're not likely to get as stylishly performed a *YEOMEN* in the region soon. (A challenge for MIT, **Simsbury** and **New Canaan!**)

-- JONATHAN STRONG

[*Again, We try not to review, and, since We didn't see the show, We truly have no right to express an opinion... but, having opened Our mouth, We must put Our foot in it: We happen to approve of the idea of a sympathetic Fairfax, and have always intended to direct him as such at Our first opportunity. Our first opportunity approaches this spring at MIT - We hope We'll succeed as clearly as Bob Cumming obviously did in emphasizing the positive qualities of this charismatic tenor for whom so many are willing to risk their lives and reputations!*]

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#### FURTHER FORUM: WHAT ARE REVIEWS FOR?

*As We explained above, We went beyond accepting comments about last Bray's reviews, and requested general comments on the subject from various people. Here are a few replies:*

===== As I understand it, the original purpose of reviews was to give potential viewers a sense of what to expect if they went to the show/concert, and perhaps to alert them to what portion of their cultural knowledge they needed to put into play. This seems to me to be a very 19th-century concept. The 20th century has been the "here's what I think" century (to wit, this mini-treatise), and so the review has become simply an opportunity for the writer, whose credentials need satisfy only his/her editor, to sound off. Frankly, in this light I don't think they're worth much. In the context of the **Bray**, however, it's just fun to read what others think about the same shows we've seen (or, in my case, for example, it's fun and comforting just to see which of my old compatriots whom I miss is doing what!). As for the ruffled feathers, I'd say that it's up to the writers of the reviews to keep them friendly, and up to the readers not to get bent out of shape on the occasions when they don't. End of opinion.

-- BOB WEINGART

[*who, by the way, is headed home to the USA after his latest sojourn in the Far East, and who may end up in Boston soon!*]

===== Any production that is open to the public and that charges admission invites a review. I do not believe that a review should treat performers gently because they are amateurs, or offer general praise for the whole cast so as not to bruise potentially fragile egos. To do so patronizes the weak players, deprives the strong performers of the credit they have earned, and prevents the reviewer from exercising taste and judgment.

A responsible reviewer will acknowledge that amateur companies face certain challenges; for example, if a review opines that "Cyril was overparted," the article might note that it is often difficult to find two principal tenors. Certainly given the role of tradition in the performance of Gilbert and Sullivan, it is helpful if a reviewer knows the canon, and can comment on the interpretation as well as the technical ability of the cast and crew.

Do reviews belong in **The Trumpet Bray**? It depends. Is the **Bray** a club newsletter whose readers are friends? Or is the **Bray** a semi-academic journal, whose subscribers may be friends, but who also critique one another's work? If the former, then I think

reviews are not appropriate, for in that case the **Bray's** identity would be social; its goal would be to keep members updated on one another's activities and on developments in "the world of Gilbert and Sullivan." On the other hand, if NEGASS members are students of Gilbert and Sullivan first, then critical reviews of both amateur and professional productions are desirable. Given the large geographic area covered by NEGASS, many members cannot attend one another's productions, and detailed reviews may supply food for thought.

Some members of NEGASS evidently feel ambivalent about these two sides to the **Bray's** role. For example, after I contributed a largely negative review of a production two years ago, several **Bray** readers privately thanked me for the piece, which they had felt unable to write because they were acquainted with members of the company. Inevitably, the more one cares about G&S, and the more friends one makes in the extended NEGASS company, then, the more one may feel constrained on occasion to keep silent or to write blandly positive reviews. If the most informed and engaged members of NEGASS are reluctant to share their opinions of one another's work, that's a loss to the G&S community. -- **LISA BERGLUND**

===== What I look for in reviews of amateur and semi-professional G&S productions is a noting of the intentions behind the performance, especially something fresh or insightful that deepens our understanding of these infinitely fascinating operas. It's also nice to give particular praise to worthy performers, but I see no need to dwell on the minor inadequacies of well-meaning local Savoyards. -- **JONATHAN STRONG**

===== All the preparatory work is accomplished. The reviewer has indulged in adequate preparation for the task by consulting the libretto before and after the production to be reviewed and has looked at the score as well. An old recording or two has served as a reminder of other approaches, and one has stayed awake during the performance. In fact, one may have been madly scribbling notes about all sorts of details, textual alterations, instrumentation, costumes, and even lighting. Some were tolerably familiar, some brilliantly innovative, and others best squelched with haste. In the absence of a computer program (or a good-natured fairy) to turn the thoughts into a review, there is still some writing to be done.

It is clear that an unalloyed helping of treacle will not help either the reader or the company. Even if one does feel that no singer in the history of **D'Oyly Carte** could hold a candle to the Zorah in the **Gall and Wormwood Company** production of **RUDDIGORE**, that is unlikely to be true of every member of the cast. A generally favourable assessment of a production can afford to look critically at a couple of details. There are benefits to picking the sort of detail that one can consider as possibly just a matter of misinterpretation on the reviewer's part. The reviewer knows that it is not a matter of misinterpretation, but cast members are frequently ready to grasp at that straw.

For similar reasons, a prolonged tirade at the expense of every aspect of a production is likely to raise suspicions of rancour.

Perhaps there were no two violins in the pit playing in the same key and that was just as well, because the singers could not remain in the same key either. If there is really absolutely nothing to say that reflects intelligence and judgment on the part of director or performers, it may be that no review at all is best. One should at least be ready to look for the idea behind a production, no matter how imperfectly realized.

Most productions will excite mixed feelings of pleasure and pain. Paying homage where homage is due can usually be done without indulging in too many superlatives, which devalue the currency of criticism. Taking issue with a certain performance or a directorial decision can be done with a modest amount of diplomacy. In addition to the suggestion of reminding readers of one's own fallibility, one can also direct attention to the reactions of the audience where they are in disagreement with the reviewer's sentiments. There are some performers who will be perfectly content with this way of avoiding too emphatic a condemnation. *Mundus theatricalis vult decipi.*

It could be argued that if such guidelines are too closely abided by, the reviews produced thereby would tend to be of rather a gray tint and similar from one production to the next. With regard to the latter claim, there are not many reviewers who have to worry about their critical opinions being consumed about more than one production at a time. As for the accusation that reviews ought not to make the opinions of the reviewer hard to see against the background, care in assessment of aspects of a production can leave the equally careful reader in no doubt. If a gentleman of the irreproachable antecedents of the Pirate King can describe Ruth as 'very well', a reviewer can make some similar assessment and reflect on the extent to which it is supposedly at the bottom of a well that Truth is found.

--**THOMAS DRUCKER**

===== Setting aside for a moment the specifics of the present instance, I wish to address a controversy which has arisen recently with regard to one or more unfavorable reviews. On the one hand, we have a duty to our members, as individuals, to make them aware of failings of organizations or performers, to assist them in deciding what to attend. On the other hand, we might be said to have a duty to our organizations, and our general purpose of promoting G&S, to "puff our goods" a bit.

It's a difficult line to walk. We do no service to G&S if we tell people that such-and-such a group is putting on a superb performance of whatever, and people go to see it, perhaps bring their non-G&S friends, and they see a terrible production. If we say, well, this group is struggling, but they have a superb singer in the ingenue role, for example, people can make their decisions to attend on that basis. But we cheapen our praise for the good things, if we give it out indiscriminately for the mediocre.

Not everybody likes the same things. As in beverages, one man's mead is another man's poison. But I use a certain source for wine reviews, even though I disagree with some of their preferences, because I have found I can trust their objective statements. If they say a wine is fruity, or has strong flavors of the oak cask, or

there is citrus in the aftertaste, I can trust those statements, even if we disagree as to the desirability of some of those characteristics.

Similarly with performance reviews. I believe we fulfill our duty as reviewers whenever we provide objectively the basis for opinions, and then we should be free to state whatever opinions we derive from that basis. If people can rely on our descriptions, that is more important than whether they agree with our opinions.

One suggestion for groups that feel badly served by our reviews: submit your own! It is rare for our editor to receive more reviews than she can print, and sometimes inside information can be slipped into a review and thereby mollify the critics. Statements like "It's true Lucinda croaked a bit at times, but her husband was, until two nights before the show opened, an ensorcelled frog," or "The director was trying to convey an image of aestheticism in which hard drugs were regularly used," may go a long way to help in the understanding of what the uninformed might have perceived as mistakes.

-- RICHARD N. FREEDMAN

=====AND AN ACTUAL REVIEW! We received this from someone who claimed that he had liked the production in question, and felt that *The Boston Globe's* review had not done it justice. Class, now please read this review and let Us know if you consider it a positive one...

**BOSTON ACADEMY OF MUSIC'S PINAFORE: The subjective Opinions of an Anonymous Observer.** BAM's *PINAFORE* was not a bad show, but inconsistencies and peculiarities kept it from "coming together" to be a memorable performance. To start with: The set purported to present the rear section of the vessel. Although I realize there have been dramatic changes in recent years in ships designed for rapid deployment of landing craft and so forth, I don't believe there were any ships of the line c. 1878 whose primary means of ingress and egress was a door set into an unusually, and unnecessarily, high stern bulkhead. Nor, I believe, was it customary to come aboard at a level higher than that of the maindeck; although obviously, from a theatrical standpoint, this arrangement allows for the "grand entrance" as performers descend to join the action. (The maindeck exit, also to the rear, appeared designed to drop cast members into the water somewhere above the rudder.)

Among the performers, **Anna Maria Silvestri** was the most outstanding in her role as Buttercup. Having arrived without a ticket less than ten minutes before the 8:00 PM curtain, your correspondent was forced to sit in an outrageously overpriced seat in the rear mezzanine, roughly a hundred feet from acoustical ground zero. But Ms. Silvestri's vibrant contralto carried even unto this auditory outpost, and not a syllable of what she sang or said was lost.

**Richard Conrad**, as Captain Corcoran, also gave a sterling performance. His singing was great, and he got just the right balance between seriousness and foolishness in portraying a man who, after all, does experience more than his fair share of life's shocks and who goes through a most serious change of fortune.

Mr. Conrad's performance was appropriately, and humorously, focused at all points.

Unfortunately, **Keith Jurasko**, in the role of Sir Joseph, was a bit of a disappointment -- not in terms of his technical ability, but because he seemed not to have achieved in his own character just that comedic balance that Mr. Conrad so successfully found in his. To force the orchestra to repeat the lead-in to *Monarch of the Sea* a few times, for example, is amusing, but to hold off one's vocal entrance too long, as Mr. Jurasko did, can lead to boredom, and then actual annoyance, on the audience's part. Sir Joseph then comes across as arrogant and manipulative rather than simply pompous and absurd.

**Richard Simpson** and **Debra Rentz** were fine as Ralph and Josephine, although Ms Rentz in particular could have perhaps loosened up a bit. **Bryan McNeil** was a strong and convincing Bill Bobstay. Unfortunately, **William Thorpe's** (Dick Deadeye's) diction did not pass the rear-mezzanine test.

It was nice to see **Eoin Gaj** making his debut with the company as Tom Tucker. Eoin was inspired to search out kids' parts when he saw **Aidin Carey's** memorable performance as the Midshipmite in MITG&SP's *PINAFORE* in the autumn of 1996. He went on to appear in the *Sea Revels* this past spring, where he did some very good work. He certainly seems to have a promising career before him.

As far as the choruses went: They were good vocally, but when it came to blocking, the men were atrocious. At more than one point, one or more rogue choristers appeared to be marching to the beat of an entirely different drummer; if "marching" indeed is the word. In fact, what the men were *supposed* to be doing was obviously intended to make them look foolish and incompetent, thereby making extremely implausible the necessary premise that one was watching some real, albeit marginally able-bodied, seamen.

There were, however, some very interesting bits of staging. The most interesting was the blocking for Josephine, Captain Corcoran and Sir Joseph in the Bell Trio. As the number reached its climax, each of the singers in turn took a swig of the Champagne they were using to toast one another with, and proceeded to spew it out in various directions over the stage. At last the male choristers had some convincing blocking... with their mops.

--- LUCIUS JUNIUS BRUTUS

===== Yet another review - how does this one stand up to the ideas suggested in the above commentary?---

**HARVARD/RADCLIFFE G&S GONDOLIERS** The cast and musicians and crew of HRGSP's fall production of *GONDOLIERS* had a lot of energy to spend on their matinee, and it was energy well spent, judging by the audience's enthusiastic response. An unusually handsome and inspired set, cheerful and unaffected lighting, an animated orchestra and the never-flagging antics of both chorus and leads conspired: adults departed whistling and children skipping. The less-captivating

aspects were easily overcome by this overall energy, which, in my experience, is a HRGSP tradition.

You'll find energy in the details (blurbs in the program, ordinary-looking medals which read as cartoon characters up close) and in the acting. **Lee Poulis** as Don Alhambra, the single cheerless character who tries to end everyone else's merriment, gave a delightful performance. He could act, he could sing, and, with sufficient prodding, he danced. Gianetta and Tessa (**Julie Quenlan** and **Cary Rosko**) both sang nicely and behaved just silly enough. When histrionics were needed, Quenlan showed herself vocally quite equal to the task: her "Kind sir, you cannot have the heart" was a high point, a sort of visual duet with the ever-reserved Don Alhambra.

Marco and Giuseppe were a little weaker -- funny at times, but less dramatically involved. Marco's (**Stephen Beaudoin**) "Sparkling eyes" sounded very well, but Giuseppe's (**Krishnan Unnikrishnan**) making eyes at a mop throughout the song really spoiled the moment for me.

Although Casilda (**Alison Walla**) actually stepped upon poor Luiz (**Jordan Cooper**) while descending from the wagon, I could predict a great relationship for them. Confident, melodious voices, exquisitely-timed acting -- it all made one wish that Gilbert had given them more tender moments. As the Duke and Duchess, **Seth Fenton** and **Kristin Brouwer** were also well-cast, though, by the script, ill-matched. Brouwer gave "On the day that I was wedded" a lot of energy and charm.

I have always felt that their ensuing duet ("Small titles and orders") is one of Gilbert's less-inspired, it being incredibly difficult to make funny. Why don't directors cut portions from long shows which they do not understand? At least another common error was avoided in casting **Jayne Flores** as Inez -- that short, short part usually reserved for the least of talent. Flores hammed and made her moment a great and memorable one.

Oh, the trials the director of an often-produced old play faces! On the one hand, he or she must be firmly grounded in the tradition and, for Gilbert and Sullivan, have a heartfelt awe for both music and script. But it is also the director's job to tease out fresh jokes and invent business. So I was delighted with the look Casilda and Luiz gave the audience, as if to say, "How curious! I will have to think about this," after Luiz admits that his own mother was nurse to Casilda's royal, infant husband. (Along those lines, it would be fun to see Inez trying to claim Marco or Giuseppe as her true son during the finale, but Flores's trying to get a kiss out of the Duke was just as amusing.)

In the process of finding new perspectives, however, it is also the director's responsibility not to go beyond the intentions of the script. I am not averse to a few anachronisms, but I could name too many excesses in **Frank Habit**'s conception. For instance, a clever visual pun (the singers holding hands, tangling themselves ever tighter into a knot) was belabored through the whole of "In a contemplative fashion", eliminating the musical impact of three

singers accompanying the agitated fourth. Also, Marco's housekeeping while Giuseppe rattled off his list of royal duties-to-be-done was close to tasteless and left poor Giuseppe nothing to do but hold his scroll and rattle.

All-around good costuming has always seemed to be difficult for HRGSP (perhaps there's a tiny budget?) and so the robes and hat of Don Alhambra and the gowns of Casilda and the Duchess (elegantly tailored, good colors) must be mentioned. I am myself a Republican and prefer the clothes of the chorus to show the same attention to detail as the leads'. Ouch! The men's hats were too small; the women's were too large. The ladies' blouses both evoked the period and fitted well, but they met with unremarkable skirts. I hope that I shall never again see the men's chorus in towels or pink striped shirts, although I realize that I am doomed in the 1990s to endure pants which do not fit.

Yet, as I remarked before, the insuitabilities of various items of clothing, props, gestures or nonsense bits did not detract from the pleasure my family and I had in once again watching this enthusiastic group enjoying their own performance.

-- NELL WRIGHT



**MITG&SP** will hold auditions during the first week in February for its spring production, *YEOMEN*, which will be performed the weekends of April 17 and 24. Stage Director: **Marion Leeds Carroll**; Music Director: **Alan Yost**. For more info, contact MITG&SP via e-mail at [savoyards-request@mit.edu](mailto:savoyards-request@mit.edu), call (617) 253-0190, or visit <http://www.mit.edu/activities/gsp/home.html>

**Harvard-Radcliffe G&S** plans Gershwin's *Of Thee I Sing* [yes, *We know it isn't*] as their Spring show. For more info, contact [tmoore@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:tmoore@fas.harvard.edu), or phone 617-496-4747 - or visit their Web page: <http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~hrfsp/>

The **Sudbury Savoyards'** 1999 production, *IOLANTHE*, will be performed April 22-24 at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School. Once again, **Kathy Lague** will be both Stage and Music Director, with help from **Eric Schwartz** and **Bill Kuhlman**. The cast is very exciting: **Dennis O'Brien** is the Lord Chancellor, **Laura Schall Gouillart** the Fairy Queen, **Todd Allen Long** is Strephon, **Amy Allen** is Phyllis - and other NEGASS favorites cram the rest of the roles. Visit the SS's Web site at <http://www.sudburysavoyards.org/> or call 508 443-8811 for more information.

**THE Gilbert & Sullivan Society** (of England) 1998-99 meeting plans include the dates Feb. 24, April 9, and May 5 -- if you're on that side of the pond, give them a look-in! Write to Honorary Secretary **Margaret Bowden**, 1 Nethercourt Avenue, Finchley, London, N3 1PS for more info.

**NYG&SS** (the New York society) will hold its next meeting on Wednesday, February 10 Other meetings: Fri., 3/19; Thurs., 4/15; Fri., 5/14 and Sat., 6/12. All meetings are at CAMI Hall, 165 W. 57th St., NYC. Doors open at 7:00; the meeting starts at 7:30 (*new time!*), and the Inner Brotherhood go out for coffee afterwards.

**The Royal Victorian Opera Co.** (**Chuck Berney's** gang) will perform a G&S concert for the **Friends of the Memorial Hall Library in Andover** at 3:00 PM on February 21 - so if you don't get cast in your dream **LMLO** role and can't stand to watch anyone else perform it, go see them instead! The performance is free.

**The Hancock County G&S Society** will perform *TRIAL/PINAFORE* February 5 - 7, 12 - 14 and July 15 - 17, 1999 at the Grand Auditorium in Ellsworth, Maine. Leads include NEGASSers **Lee Patterson** (*TRIAL*) and **Irv Hodgkin** (*PINAFORE*). For more info, call Lee at (207) 244-4044.



Visit the **Metropolitan Museum of Art** in NYC this winter for a celebration in honor of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of **The Blue Hill Troupe**. On Sat., Feb 27, **Ralph MacPhail** will lead a panel discussion on the partnership among G, S, and D'Oyly Carte, which will be followed by a concert at 7 PM by **The Blue Hill Troupe**.

The **New England Opera Club** newsletter informs Us that **Simsbury (CT) Light Opera** plans *YEOMEN* in April: 4/10, 11, 17, 18, & 24. Call (860) 658-9824 for more info.

**Troupers Light Opera Company** will perform *YEOMEN* on May 8, 9, 14 and 15, 1999 in New Canaan High School. For further information contact **Bobbie Herman** at 203-255-1577.

Past members of **Boston University Savoyards** will hold a reunion May 21-23 sponsored by the alumni association. For information, contact **PHYLLIS FORMAN**, [fforman@aol.com](mailto:fforman@aol.com)

The **Huntington Theater's** run of *MIKADO* will take place May 21-June 20, 1999. The Huntington now has a web site at <http://www.bu.edu/HUNTINGTON>. See last month's **Bray** for **President Dick's** info about auditions.

For news about next summer's *International G&S Festival*, visit <http://www.btinternet.com/~richards.gands/buxton98/welcome.htm>

## THE NEW ENGLAND GILBERT AND SULLIVAN SOCIETY

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