W. S. Gilbert: Antiquarian Authenticity And Artistic Autocracy

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Theatre in mid-nineteenth century England had low credibility, but high popularity. A Blackwood's Magazine article in 1842 proclaimed that theatre was for Londoners of all classes their “supreme delight . . . [The] upper, middle and lower classes . . . [attended] theatres from the east, and theatres from the west; theatres for this side of the river, and theatres for that; theatres for performances equestrian and aquatic; theatres legitimate and illegitimate.” (Schoch 1-2). Though wildly popular, theatre possessed credibility in inverse proportion. In Gilbert’s day “… works for the theatre were generally considered inferior, even trivial, compositions,” and Gilbert himself acknowledged that creating plays hardly represented anything close to high art or serious intellectual activity (Stedman 211). Despite the lowbrow nature of the beast Gilbert felt himself drawn to the stage, and he participated significantly in shaping the modern British theatre into one controlled by the director.

“The nature of Victorian theatre was profoundly affected by three forces: . . . the Lord Chamberlain, . . . popular audiences, and . . . Shakespeare.” (Eden 121). Scholars have documented Gilbert’s clever evasions of the first force—censorship. Gilbert ultimately committed himself to a career entertaining the second force—popular audiences. He cut his teeth on the popular theatrical (and literary) forms like burlesque, extravaganza and pantomime. He carefully balanced his appeal to satisfy the wide array of audience tastes. Gilbert acknowledged that he used his libretti to serve up “rump steak and onions . . . a palatable concoction of satisfying and seasoning ingredients which is good enough to please the man of refinement . . . and not too refined for the butcher boy.” (Eden 122). This third profound force in the nineteenth-century London theatre-Shakespeare-provides the springboard for this study.

The adolescent Gilbert, like many of his fellow audience members, appreciated Shakespearean productions. Inspired by one such performance, “in his last year at Great Ealing [1852?], . . . Gilbert went to ask [Charles] Kean if he might join his company at the Princess’s Theatre.” (Stedman 4). Fortunately, the great star had the perspicacity to decline the lad’s request. Gilbert’s enthusiasm about Kean’s productions arose from the newfangled trend for authentic staging, and he joined the London-wide embrace of historical accuracy as the lastest aesthetic fashion. As he matured into a seasoned theatre artist, Gilbert (and some of his compatriots in show biz) shrewdly appreciated a shift in the backstage power structure that accompanied the move towards authenticity, and he made it his business to exploit this opportunity. This realignment of green-room power eventually toppled the star actor’s primacy and elevated the director to the position of artistic and logistic autocrat. As actor-managers made the “commitment to producing Shakespeare’s history plays with unmatched antiquarian precision we can also glimpse the shadowy figure of the modern director.” (Schoch 29). Theatricians such as Gilbert shared with the modern director “the recognition that a performance is composed of signifying elements which are made to interact through the efforts of a single individual.” (Schoch 30). Gilbert’s directorial career provides a superb case study of this historical development—the director’s ascendance to power, accomplished by wielding the club of authenticity.

Since the days of David Garrick, Shakespeare had great credibility across all social classes (Booth 52). Nineteenth-century star actors such as Charles Kean, attempting to raise the credibility of the theatre, moved Shakespeare to the core of their repertoires. Kean, in particular, hoped to reinforce that ironclad credibility of Shakespeare with archaeological authenticity. Charles Kean cleverly translated the growing public taste for visiting museums to learn about the archaeological past into attending the theatre to fulfill that same appetite. “[T]he nineteenth century’s obsession with recreating the past” became a very effective hook to create box office boffo (Schoch 2). By the end of his management at the Princess’s Theatre in 1859 Kean had earned universal acclaim for his historical accuracy. This achievement gave credibility and social acceptance to an otherwise disreputable business-theatre (Schoch 58-59).

So, any theatre person would see the clear signal that authenticity would be rewarded with social acceptance (and larger audiences). Indeed, Kean’s work at the Princess’ Theatre did much to recapture a better class of audience for the theatre (Booth 48). This better class of audience consisted of more middle and upper class patrons who—because of their social values-enjoyed
attending theatre they viewed as divine emollient. Enter
the Bancrofts, future theatrical mentors to W. S. Gilbert.
Ambitious and young actor-managers, Squire and Marie
(Wilton) Bancroft hoped to build their own success at the
Prince of Wales’s Theatre by emulating Kean’s authentic
conventions (and by reconfiguring the seating and
pricing). The Bancrofts began the laborious process of
attracting fashionable audiences back to their theatre.
Their efforts ultimately succeeded partly because the
rowdier elements were being siphoned off to the Music
Hall—a new form of theatre (Rowell 83-84).
They also succeeded because of their professional
collaboration with the dramatist, T. W. Robertson.
Robertson was “. . . untidy, sensitive, sarcastic, the eldest
of a large theatrical family, at one time Mme Vestris’s
stage-manager, and soon to be the author of a series of
innovative plays which brought domestic realism to the
English stage.” (Stedman 16). The Bancrofts shared
Robertson’s—and other theatre artists of the day such as
John Hare and Ellen Terry—aspiration to offer a more
naturalistic staging in a rather intimate space, and togeth-
er they found audiences who responded positively to it.
The typical theatre of the day was large, encouraging
spectacle and outsized (Shatner-esque) acting (Savin 10).
Robertson and the Bancrofts did not displace the main-
stream acting style, but they offered an alluring alterna-
tive (Rowell 82). Robertson’s work ethic immediately
impressed the equally hard-working Bancrofts, who
quickly learned to trust his thorough professionalism.
Robertson never flagged in his zeal to improve his craft.
The Bancrofts reported that he monitored audience
response obsessively, even using a feedback technique
that we would label as focus groups today. He also
planted naïve confederates in the audience and got their
opinions the next day (Savin 42).
“Robertson’s insistence on precise detail in perform-
ance was possible because of the authority with which
the Bancrofts invested him in the presentation of his own
plays.” (Rowell 80). With the Bancrofts’ eager conniv-
ance, Robertson made a fetish of realistic touches like
snow blowing through the door and leaves flying from
trees (Bancroft 87). The entire theatre world had wit-
nessed the enormous success of Dion Boucicault, who
had achieved control over his spectacular melodramas, so
that profitable precedent inclined the Bancrofts to let
Robertson supervise the staging of his more intimate
“cup and saucer” comedies (Stedman 87). Robertson
succeeded beyond Boucicault or any other contemporary,
because he did NOT act in the shows. He was 100%
director (Rowell: 80).
The Robertson scholar, Maynard Savin, observed that
this author-director was able to create a new kind of play
and performance for several reasons. First, the Bancrofts
supported his intentions by spending resources on
attracting a more upscale audience that would more likely
find his kind of shows appealing. They sought to turn
their “Dusthole” (the wags’ nickname for the Prince of
Wales’s Theatre) into a “bandbox of gentility.” They did
this by: a) upscaling the auditorium with sumptuous
appointments; b) gradually eliminating the pit and
replacing those benches with stalls; and c) raising prices
of stalls. This strategy succeeding in attracting “better”
audiences and more revenue. Second, the Bancrofts
applied Robertson’s attention to detail to every aspect of
their management. As he was fastidious about the shows,
they were equally so about the operations of the theatre
and company policies. As employees felt the positive
results of Bancroft management, they accepted Robert-
son’s artistic methods as equally likely to benefit them.
Third, the Bancrofts disdained the star system, mainly
because THEY were the stars of their theatre. A company
of young, ambitious actors “free from a mind-set condi-
tioned by the star system” could be directed in ensemble
techniques. Fourth, the Bancrofts liked to play comedy,
and Robertson excelled in writing that genre. Fifth, the
Bancrofts committed their best talents, their full financial
backing and their splashiest promotional ballyhooing to
attract attention to Robertson’s efforts (36-37).
Though Charles Kean had dashed his theatrical
ambitions in the early 1850’s, W. S. Gilbert had the good
fortune to cross paths with Robertson and the Bancrofts
over the next decade. “In 1856 W. S. Gilbert saw the first
Bancroft-Robertson collaboration at the Prince of Wales’s
Theatre. The production was Robertson’s Society (Sted-
man 13-16). Gilbert admired Robertson’s work. Gilbert
began writing for Fun in 1861, where he befriended Tom
Robertson. Gilbert’s already passionate interest in the
theatre naturally enlarged as a result of the acquaintance
he made with this author-director. Gilbert worked inten-
sively as a theatre critic from the late 1860’s to the early
1870’s (Stedman 23). He had occasion to see plenty of
theatre, acquiring a complete knowledge of the trends,
the terrain and audience expectations. In the 1860’s
Gilbert participated in amateur theatricals with Marie
Wilton [Bancroft] and Tom Robertson (Stedman 42).
Later, through his friendship with Robertson and the
Bancrofts, Gilbert attended rehearsals at the Prince of
Wales’s where he observed and absorbed Robertson’s
working methods as an author-director, and where “the
foundations of Gilbert’s friendship with the Bancrofts
were laid.” (Stedman 16). Gilbert also ranged beyond the
walls of the Prince of Wales’s Theatre to learn the theatre
crafts. He wrote and participated in rehearsals for Dulca-
mara in 1866 at the St. James Theatre, for example.
Gilbert directed his script, *La Vivandière* shortly thereafter (Stedman 35-39). By 1870, Gilbert had earned his peers’ regard as a solid director, and he always acknowledged Robertson as the person who gave him his first opportunity to break into the theatrical world (Stedman 62). For Robertson, it was a no-brainer. He recognized Gilbert’s talent, so he naturally urged managers to consider the latter’s scripts (Pemberton 240).

Gilbert learned some fundamental principles from Robertson and the Bancrofts. First, he always remained sensitive to audience appeal, learning from Robertson how to craft a show that would not offend his upscale audience’s tastes—and so earn a tidy profit. (Incidentally, by working at the St James, Gilbert befriended Henry Irving, actor and stage manager at that theatre. The two of them avidly discussed the innovative possibilities of stagecraft (directing), but Gilbert later abjured Irving for selling out artistic ideals for popular acclaim and wealth (Stedman 38). That certainly must have been a pretty howdy-do to Irving!) Moreover, Gilbert followed his mentors’ example in attempting to create theatre that appealed as little as possible to the lowest elements in the audience. The Victorian scholar, David W. Cole, observed that Gilbert “frequently and strongly expressed his sentiments favoring the maintenance of the strictest propriety in the theatre.” (Helyar 29). Neither Robertson’s plays nor the Bancrofts’ productions had any vulgarity in them, so Gilbert, equally sensitive to the pulse of activity at the box office, took his cue from his mentors (Bancroft 122). He never presented his solidly middle-class audience with satiric material that disturbed their sensibilities. Unquestionably, Gilbert spent his entire literary and theatrical life mining the satiric lode, taking even greater pains to avoid any risk of offending his well-heeled customers (Helyar 4). Buying ancestors was old hat. So was Gothic revival. Mocking the past was—and always is—risk-free. To soften further the sting of his wit, Gilbert also took care to mix a strong dose of sentimentality into his operettas (Rowell 93-94).

Second, Gilbert acquired his fetish about authenticity from his author-director mentor. The stories about Gilbert’s attention to authentic detail in preparing the inanimate elements of *HMS Pinafore*, *Iolanthe* and *The Mikado*, for example, are well known. Achieving eye-popping authenticity in the scenery, the costumes, accessories, and properties, however, fundamentally requires little more than deep pockets and ruthless determination. Charles Kean had already shown this maxim to be true. Ellen Terry, for example, spent her way across central Europe purchasing authentic costume fabrics for her latest productions. As one would expect of a shrewd diva such as Terry, she turned this spending spree into a public relations triumph. The Duke of Saxe-Meinigen also threw his money around lavishly to ensure that his productions had completely authentic visual details, because like Kean, the Duke wished to make authenticity his artistic trademark. (Recent films such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Titanic*, or even *Topsy-Turvy* have affirmed the awesome power of money in our own day when it comes to achieving a certain visual authenticity.)

In any case, ruthless and determined come to mind as two words that anyone can attribute to W. S. Gilbert. His meticulous (and expensive) recreations of actual locations and personages in Trial by Jury and Iolanthe anticipated by several decades the often cited innovations in authenticity that theatre historians attribute to the American author-director, David Belasco.

Gilbert was not so simple-minded to believe that every aspect of a production should imitate social reality in a literal, one-to-one correspondence. Yes, he made a fetish of his attention to physical details such as the armor worn by the three sons of Gama Rex in *Princess Ida* and the military uniforms in *Patience*. No, he did not adopt a radical, Antoine-esque commitment to Naturalism with a capital “N” about character actions, visual composition and staging. Gilbert distinguished between “social probability” (one-to-one correspondence with social reality) and “esthetic probability” (consistent with the conventions of the genre) (Sutton 53). In physical detail, Gilbert remained true to a representation of real assets to a precise, authentic extreme. In dramatic detail, he remained true to a representation of an internally consistent set of conventions to the same precise, authentic extreme.

Gilbert did not pursue this ambition for authentic extreme for its own sake, nor for art’s sake, nor even necessarily for the box office’s sake. The Gilbert scholar, Jane Stedman, provides superb analysis of Gilbert’s intentions by asserting, “Gilbert used Tom Robertson’s realistic stage techniques to give his own plots and satire
a basis in reality and a point of reference to human beings.” (Helyar 200). Gilbert’s authenticity agenda would carry him far beyond Robertson’s achievements, as Stedman observed. Gilbert applied his mentor’s authenticity obsession to a far broader spectrum of elements in his own shows. Gilbert understood that it all had to hang together. The world of the show had to have an internal consistency. If the sets and costumes conformed to a unified design concept (authenticity), then so must line readings, gestures, characterizations, choral movement patterns, and the entire illusion presented. By insisting on authenticity at all levels, Gilbert could concentrate decision-making power in his own ruthless and determined hands. Authentic scenery, costumes and décor provided the fulcrum point for him to use to gain control over all aspects of production.

Gilbert carried his passion for authentic consistency into the realm of characterization. “Indeed, when Gilbert’s characters cry, he almost always gives them handkerchiefs to cry into, whether they are peers or pirates.” (Helyar 204). In social reality, pirates would be unlikely to carry handkerchiefs upon their persons. Gilbert, however, is applying an authentic response to weeping (using a handkerchief to dab away the tears) to the situation he has created in the story. Indeed, Gilbert believed that comic characters should behave with genuine earnestness “however absurd their lines” or situation (Stedman 219). This Gilbertian gravitas pervades the entire canon of operettas. The entire ensemble of HMS Pinafore woefully sings, “no telephone connects to his dungeon cell,” as Ralph Rackstraw descends to the brig. In Yeomen of the Guard Jack Point and Wilfred Shadbolt comes to blows quibbling about the details of the phony story they made up about Colonel Fairfax’s death. (“He was creeping. He was crawling.” “STONE! LEAD!”) “Frederic and Mabel [in The Pirates of Penzance] . . . sincerely belie[v]e what they say.” (Sutton 101). Frederic’s genuinely earnest but pompous passion for duty, for example, becomes ludicrous, comparable to the laughably obsessive passion for honesty expressed by Alceste in Molière’s The Misanthrope (Smith 74). The Gilbert scholar, David Eden, correctly observes, “The idea of duty has become meaningless in the twentieth century, but in its derivation from Kant’s Categorical Imperative it was one of the central tenets of the Victorian age . . .” and he concludes, “The Pirates of Penzance is the most thoroughgoing of Gilbert’s essays in absurd logic.” (127-130). The crucial word in Eden’s remarks is “throughgoing.” Gilbert locked onto an authentic, believable character trait, for example, and then sustained it, reprised it, foregrounded it, and enthroned it in the world of the show—a world governed by his gravitas, his absolute commitment to genuine human response to all situations.

Gilbert also carried his passion for authentic consistency into the realm of dramatic action and staging. His directing style tended toward the habit of staging “a continual enchainedment of small motions, each one carefully suited to the immediate line or word that it accompanied.” (Helyar 203). For example, the women’s chorus in The Pirates of Penzance sings “How Beautifully Blue the Sky.” The lyrics offer a series of phrases that describe various aspects of the weather, and these phrases offer the opportunity to link unique, distinctive and appropriate gestures to each one. Through this precise, detailed, specific directing technique (that perhaps anticipated the work of Max Reinhardt), Gilbert could choreograph a complete stage composition that presented a consistently authentic picture—in terms of esthetic probability. “The solid reality of Gilbert’s stage picture [was] an anchor for the impossibility of his denouements . . .” (Helyar 200). When staging the chorus, he carefully utilized its visual dynamics to accomplish the important dramatic goal of character depiction—revealing who they were, what they believed, their consciousness (Cox-Ife 11). The logical, believable, seemingly obvious choral response of shocked dismay to Captain Corcoran’s “Damme!” in HMS Pinafore offers an excellent example of this authentic presentation of character depiction in the chorus. Indeed, Gilbert demonstrated sublime mastery of choral staging, earning him praise from critics and gratitude from generations of Savoyards (Eden 133-34).

Third and most importantly, Gilbert learned the importance of concentrating power in the hands of the author-director in order to impose his vision on any production. Gilbert said later in life that rehearsing was not considered important in his day, but when he rehearsed something, the show was successful. He came to believe that any dramatist “incapable of directing his own plays was at a great disadvantage.” (Stedman 216). His experience also taught him to avoid any situation where a theatre manager or performer could alter his scripts (Stedman 217). This meant he would only work with artists who had less artistic power than he possessed. His quarrel in the mid-1870s with the actress-manager, Henrietta Hodson, affirmed for Gilbert his conviction that the author should hold executive supremacy over any productions of his scripts. Hodson wished to handle the staging of Gilbert’s scripts at her New Royalty Theatre and cast supporting actors who suited her. Gilbert naturally said “I object” and prohibited her from appearing in any of his shows for three years (Goodman 60-61). In an
1883 autobiographical essay in *The Theatre*, Gilbert mentioned several actors he worked with early on who later became Savoy mainstays (Jones 55). He chose to work with these actors over the long haul because he knew he could dominate them. Why did author-directors such as Robertson and Gilbert feel the need to have control? Up to that point in time “the dominant stars controlled the texts of the plays . . . and their performances depended upon the making of ‘points’-picturesquely dramatic moments by which the artist’s greatness is tested, much as an opera singer’s is by certain display arias.” (Helyar .195) The famous curse scene in Bulwer-Lytton’s *Richelieu* provides an excellent example of this practice of making points. James O’Neill employed this convention often when he performed in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. “Text . . . was thus subservient to isolated display,” and in comedy, the star would insert “ad libs, gags, and idiosyncratic routines.” (Helyar 196). At the Prince of Wales’s Theatre Gilbert observed a company of actors submitting themselves to the dictates of an professional author-director, and he saw that this hierarchical system brought all of them—manager, performer and author-director—financial success.

The Savoy Theatre prospered under the management of Richard D’Oyly Carte, an entrepreneur and entertainment industry mogul surpassed only by P. T. Barnum in business acumen. Recognizing that he was sitting on top of a gold mine, D’Oyly Carte naturally indulged Gilbert’s muscular pursuit of authenticity and directorial control. In the same way that the Bancrofts allowed Robertson to make them artistically and financially successful, D’Oyly Carte gave carte blanche to Gilbert (and Sullivan) at the Savoy. Unlike Gilbert, D’Oyly Carte did, indeed, have ambitions driven by the box office’s sake. He gladly empowered Gilbert as author-director, because the kind of shows Gilbert (and Sullivan) wanted to create would generate solid profits. Gilbert and Sullivan appealed to the upscale market with original music instead of borrowed popular tunes, rejection of parody (as in burlesque and pantomime) and careful use of mild political satire-rowed popular tunes, rejection of parody (as in burlesque, for example, “girls in male attire were barred from Gilbert’s mature works.” (Eden 123). His rejection of this convention represented a bold choice in an era when popular theatre exploited such hijinks to the hilt. “Red noses, huge wigs, comic or music hall songs, cellar flap breakdowns, short skirts, transvestism, and low necklines were de rigueur… Both *The Pirates of Penzance* and *Ruddigore* are burlesques in motive, though the method has been refined according to Gilbert’s own canons of taste.” (Eden 123-24). D’Oyly Carte also allowed Gilbert to manage the personnel at the Savoy. Gilbert imposed strict policies about behavior and public appearance in order to avoid any sort of scandal that would adversely affect the company’s reputation for wholesomeness (Helyar: 29). (Perhaps, this overwrought moral rectitude and sharp concern for keeping up appearances within Gilbert inspired George Gross-Smith’s lampooning of middle-class values in his “Diary of a Nobody.”) In any case, D’Oyly Carte knew that Gilbert’s controlling tendencies made his job as theatre manager easier and more profitable: easier because less of his energy would be spent on company discipline, and more profitable because he could focus his attention almost completely on front-of-house concerns (Goodman 27). In other words, D’Oyly Carte could turn his considerable energies to the task of seducing the respectable, upscale audiences into parking themselves in plush, cushy (and pricey) stalls where they would be seen as proud consumers of clean and wholesome entertainments.

The successes of their Savoy operas kept Gilbert and Sullivan cranking them out. Neither man could wean himself away, for “[t]he only unambiguous element in [their collaboration] was the desire of both men for money.” (Eden 192). So, Gilbert followed the trend of authenticity in performance style and harmlessness in substance that had brought financial and social success to his inspiring models-Kean, Robertson and the Bancrofts. Gilbert also became convinced during his journeyman years that he could produce successful shows if he could maintain control over the product. He saw this idea working well with the Bancrofts and Robertson, and he lived by that conviction through all his years as an author-director. Gilbert always acknowledged Robertson’s innovative achievements and revered Robertson as the prototype of the ideal artistic director (Rowell 81). Gilbert, late in his life, informed William Archer of his indebtedness to Robertson. Gilbert said “Stagecraft was an unknown art before his time.” (43) Gilbert, unlike Robertson, did not have the immediate, willing cooperation of colleagues such as the Bancrofts. During his earliest years as an author-director, Gilbert had to wrangle for control of the production process, and he did this
by investing in authenticity at all levels, directing every aspect of his productions and bullying anyone (Henrietta Hodson, for example) who challenged his authority. Fortunately, it did not take long for D’Oyle Carte to empower him, and Sullivan—never an egotist—virtually always adapted himself to Gilbert (Eden 175). From Robertson through Gilbert and Pinero to Shaw emerged the British director’s authority based on his pre-eminence in the eyes of the manager and/or expertise by way of his identity as a writer (Rowell 81). In late nineteenth century London the nascent authority of the incipient director had begun to replace the star performer’s control of the theatrical event. The free-standing director (Edward Gordon Craig, for example) would arise early in the next century as a direct product of this power shift. Another essay can investigate that phenomenon and perhaps determine whether the rise of the director and the fall of the star performer was a progression or a degeneration in the history of the British theatre.

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