

A Most Ingenious Paradox

The Pirate King Is an Actuary

*"Oh, better far to live and die under the brave black flag I fly,
than play a sanctimonious part, with a pirate head and a pirate heart."*

Strange thing for an actuary to be singing. And strange dress: black trousers, puffy white shirt, gathered at the wrists, open down to the chest, with a sash, high-topped black boots and—what's this?—a sword! A real sword! What's going on here?

What's going on is the Actorsingers' production of Gilbert and Sullivan's "Pirates of Penzance," with an actuary (me) playing the title role. An avid G&S fan for the past 30 years, I devote much of my spare time to light opera, both on and off the stage.

My love of acting began in my early teens. I appeared in plays in junior high and high school, and took some acting classes in college. As with many in our profession, I put it all aside while concentrating (successfully) on actuarial exams. Then came marriage and family. It wasn't until 1984, when the children began taking music lessons, that I thought about returning to the stage. After 11 years of listening to me sing off-key in the shower, Kathy (my wife since 1973) got me singing lessons as a Valentine's Day present. That fall, I sang the role of Fyedka in a local production of "Fiddler on the Roof" and a star was born.

Well, maybe not. But it was the first role of a 16-year (so far) amateur stage career.

I spent the first 5 years with Simsbury Light Opera Company, singing in the chorus and understudying a variety of principal roles. The discipline of studying for exams made learning lines and music an easy task, and I understudied 14 roles in six shows. In 1988, I joined the Connecticut Gilbert and Sullivan Society

LAURENCE R. WEISSBROT IS DIRECTOR OF ACTUARIAL AND RESEARCH AT NORTH-EAST DELTA DENTAL IN CONCORD, N.H.



(CG&SS), playing the part of Grosvenor, an aesthetic poet modeled after Oscar Wilde, in G&S's "Patience." Twelve years and 12 roles later, I still sing with CG&SS and sit on their board of directors, although working in New Hampshire the past 2 years has made attendance at rehearsals a challenge. I do a "weekend commute" to Concord while Kathy holds down the fort in Glastonbury, Conn.

Actorsingers is a new group for me, although not a new group by any means, having been in the Nashua, N. H., area since 1955. Since arriving in New Hampshire in 1998, I'd been searching for a G&S performing group. After a 37-year hiatus, Actorsingers returned to their G&S roots with "Pirates of Penzance." I learned of the auditions for this production on

Savoynet, an Internet listserv devoted to all things Gilbert and Sullivan, hosting about 600 ardent G&S lovers all around the world. Nashua is on the route from Glastonbury to Concord, so Sunday night rehearsals were a stop-off on the trip back north.

Steel and Stamina

This is the best staging of "Pirates" I've ever been involved with or seen. Was it the full chorus of pirates and a separate full chorus of policemen? No. Was it the 28-piece orchestra? No. Was it the well-run organization, with dedicated publicity and set construction and ticket committees? No.

It was the steel! A professional stage combat coach brought real swords and choreographed realistic-looking dueling for the pirates. And, of course, it was Gilbert's libretto and Sullivan's music, which have delighted audiences for more than 100 years.

My odyssey with Actorsingers began on a cold evening early in February. I approached the auditions at Actorsingers Hall with nothing to lose. I've always wanted to play Major General Stanley (the very model of a modern major general), and I'd already been the pirate king, in 1991 with CG&SS. (And it is, it is a glorious thing to be a pirate king!) If I got either role, I'd do the show; otherwise, it would take too much time. On the other hand, I did feel some trepidation. The group enjoys a good reputation, and few amateur theater groups own their own three-story building where they can conduct auditions and rehearsals, and construct scenery and store costumes.

At auditions, few of the other hopefuls were very familiar with Gilbert and Sullivan. Some had seen the Linda Ronstadt movie. One gentleman, who really looked the part, was a fencing student of the fight coach, and the two of them put on an impressive fencing display. Luckily for me,

he couldn't sing! The audition judges, however, did know their G&S and I was able to impress them well enough to be cast as the king. While I was waiting for a call back, I got a call telling me the part was mine if I wanted it. I did.

Our cast comprised a variety of people from all walks of life and all levels of experience. Teachers, real estate agents, a house painter, an insurance account executive, a pharmacist, high school and college students, stay-at-home moms, and, of course, one actuary. A husband and wife team played Frederic and Mabel; it works out well when the romantically involved couple is married in real life. Fewer jealousies. They were both trained singers and had done many shows before. Others were newcomers.

This group functioned amazingly well together. One young man who had never before done a show was somewhat rough around the edges and had jewelry sprouting out of many parts of his face



and body. He was surprised to find that, during the final week, we were expected at rehearsal every night! When someone with many shows under his belt made a disparaging comment, the young man said, very sarcastically, "well excuse me for not knowing."

Rather than escalating the incident into a battle, the first fellow apologized and spent some time explaining the "tech week" schedule to the newcomer. If

you've never done a show, it's hard to explain the feeling of "instant family" that can develop.

Rehearsals went well except for missing people. I've always believed that if you commit to doing a show, you should make rehearsals a priority. Two weeks before the performance date, the stage manager informed me I was the only cast member who had never missed a rehearsal. Moreover, I started already knowing all the words and music!

Clueless Cops

Learning music can be a challenge. Many of the cast don't read music, present company included. Personally, I think this is an advantage when you have to learn songs. Looking at the notes doesn't help much, so you have to internalize it and commit it to memory. The good sight singers always take longer to get "off book."

The music director made practice tapes for the cast members who asked for them, in which he isolated just the voice part requested. I have my own method. Years ago I wrote a BASIC program that generates tones on the computer, and I create data lines for each song. It's dull, but the tones and note durations are perfect. At the end of each workday, I run the programs, and in five minutes I go over all the music I have to learn. I wrote the program originally for a 64K machine without a hard drive and I have upgraded it and kept it with me for almost 20 years. It now resides on a Pentium II/233. And yes, it was Y2K compliant.

One problem was that we kept adding people. The last pirate joined the cast about six weeks before the show date. Sometimes, when you're in the middle of it, you wonder whether a two and a half month rehearsal schedule is necessary. When you factor in all the absences, I guess it is.

The policemen were especially challenging. As I alluded to earlier, we had a separate full chorus of police. In most stagings of "Pirates" there's a large band of pirates in the first act, and then half of them (the basses) magically disappear in

1/3
Quasar
Page 66

Act 2, only to show up in dark blue uniforms with nightsticks. This group has a sufficient talent pool to be able to field a second men's chorus. But while the pirates had their words, music, and movement down after a few weeks of rehearsal, we did a charity preview performance about three weeks before the production and discovered a clueless bunch of police. Happily, thanks to some concentrated last-minute drilling, they were perfect on stage and really stole the show.

Playing with steel swords does have its drawbacks. In dress rehearsal, with microphones on stage for the first time, I drew my sword to threaten another cast member and swung it down and forward. A resounding BOOM echoed through the auditorium as the tip of the sword made contact with the floor mike. The combat coach spent a little more time with me, and I learned how to draw the sword and bring it out and up at the same time. No more "booms."

Sharp edges weren't the only hazard. It was an especially bad spring for colds, and I managed to catch a nasty one that settled right into my vocal cords. It left me with half my singing range, and the part calls for an optional high "G." Never being one to play it safe (except in pricing and valuation, where I use appropriate margin), I tried for the high note. Two out of the three shows I made it, thanks to lots of warm salt water gargling. After the show closed, it took two weeks to get my voice back.

It's always a sad event when a show closes, especially such a good one. All that rehearsal for only three performances. We performed at the Elm Street School, the town's former high school with a 1,500-seat auditorium. We played to a total audience of about 3,000, almost selling out the theater Saturday night. Financially it was a huge success. A large part of that is because there are no royalties on a G&S production.

Singing light opera has given this actuary the opportunity to express a great many alter egos. In addition to playing Grosvenor in "Patience" twice, in "H.M.S. Pinafore" I've been a carpenter and Dick Deadeye, a "disabled bodied" seaman. I've played an usher in a British courtroom in "Trial by Jury," a country gentleman in "The Sorcerer," a recovering alcoholic who gets to trade places with Bacchus, the Greek god of wine, in "Thespis," a Japanese nobleman in "The Mikado," a Venetian gondolier in "The Gondoliers," a Buckingham Palace guard in "Iolanthe," a head jailer/assistant tormentor in "Yeomen of the Guard," and, of course, a pirate king. I've never appeared in a production of "Princess Ida" or "Grand Duke," and I'll be in my first "Ruddigore" this fall as lead ghost Sir Roderick Murgatroyd.

Belonging to Savoynet has opened additional possibilities. Members of this virtual community occasionally meet at "sing-outs" to run through the entire G&S canon in a weekend. It gives people the opportunity to sing roles for which they might otherwise be unsuited. I participated in one such event recently in Westport, Conn. We had attendees from five countries and nine states, and I had the chance to sing some of the parts I'd previously only understudied. By the time this is published, I will have visited another such event in Toronto, Canada.

My passion for this branch of the arts has also carried over into my work. Northeast Delta Dental uses the Baldrige quality management framework. Part of the Baldrige criteria is community involvement by the leaders of the organization. To meet that end, I've recently replaced our CEO as a member of the board of directors of the Opera League of New Hampshire.

Branching out from Gilbert & Sullivan and coming full circle, I will audition for the role of Tevye in Actorsingers' production of "Fiddler on the Roof" next spring. "If I were a rich man. Ya guh dih guh dih guh dih guh dih guh dih guh dih guh dum . . ."

1/3
DW Simpson
Page 68