A Note from Skylight Artistic Director Michael Unger

Skylight Music Theatre was born on Gilbert & Sullivan and we have produced 55 of their works over our 60 years. Of the 409 productions Skylight has presented, fully 13.6% have been Gilbert, Sullivan, or both. In fact, in the 1960-61 season alone, Skylight presented nearly one-half of the entire G & S canon!

Our Ruddigore team, with their customary creative perspective and ingenuity, have made a mashup of two seemingly disparate worlds: Gilbert & Sullivan and silent movies – and found connections and cooperation therein. This production promises to be clever, by definition, but also revelatory in execution.

Michael Unger
Artistic Director

An Underperformed Gem

How is it that one of Gilbert and Sullivan’s most fantastical farces hasn’t been performed at Skylight in forty years? It’s certainly got all the right elements: the wicked witch who issues a terrible curse upon the House of Murgatroyd ("Each lord of Ruddigore, despite his best endeavor, shall do one crime or more, once every day, for ever!") as she is burned at the stake. Then there’s the kindhearted young man with a dark past and the prim young ingénue who falls for him; the dastardly villain, the bumbling servant, the beautiful woman driven mad for want of love.

If you think that sounds like a Gothic melodrama, you might be onto something. Or, in any case, you’d be pretty close. Ruddigore was written as a parody of a Victorian stage melodrama, an extremely popular genre in Gilbert and Sullivan’s era. In bringing Ruddigore to the Studio Theatre, our Creative Team endeavored to create a version which honored Gilbert’s satirical intent, while conceiving of the production in intimate “Skylight Style”.

To this end, Music Director Tim Rebers has created a wildly inventive (almost) a cappella orchestration, nimble enough for the Studio Theatre. And co-Stage Directors Jill Anna Ponasik and Catie O’Donnell have found a trove of inspiration for the production’s visual design in Pre-Code Hollywood and silent film. Skylight has performed Ruddigore three times in its history – 1961, 1967, and 1979. Here’s to a fantastic fourth time around!
The son of a military bandleader, Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900) was raised in a musical household. From an early age, he excelled as an instrumentalist and singer, and wrote his first composition at age eight. In 1856, he attended the Royal Academy of Music, where he was exposed to Mendelssohn, Schubert, Verdi, and Wagner. Upon graduation, he embarked on a composition career, and supplemented his income by working as a church organist and music teacher.

Though Sullivan came to be forever associated with Gilbert, their conflicting personalities often created friction in their partnership. Moreover, Sullivan yearned to write works he deemed sufficiently serious, and in 1883, he agreed to continue collaborating with Gilbert only for financial reasons. Nonetheless, the deceptive simplicity of his conservative musical style complemented Gilbert’s witty lyrics perfectly, allowing them to be intelligibly articulated by the performers, while also enhancing their emotional impact. Transcending personality conflicts and artistic differences, Gilbert and Sullivan’s words and music created alchemical magic onstage.

The magic lasted until April 1890, when Gilbert vehemently objected to being partially billed by D’Oyly Carte for carpet in the lobby of the Savoy Theatre. In the ensuing “Carpet Quarrel”, Sullivan sided with Carte, and though the matter was eventually resolved in Gilbert’s favor in court, the relationship was irrevocably damaged. They collaborated just twice more, but didn’t achieve the same level of success as they previously had enjoyed. They subsequently parted ways, never to work together again.

A Method to Their Madness

Despite a relationship that was not always amicable, Gilbert and Sullivan developed a highly idiosyncratic working method, which can be seen as a key to the success of their collaborations.

Having already done a great deal of brainstorming and tinkering, Gilbert would begin by presenting Sullivan with a proposed dramatic scenario. If Sullivan approved (he often did not, citing Gilbert’s repetitive, fluffy plotlines), they would collaboratively determine the musical structure – how many numbers to include, which would be solos, duets, choruses, etc. Gilbert then wrote lyrics and sent them in batches to Sullivan, who set them first rhythmically and then melodically to create the vocal lines.

Concurrently, Gilbert wrote the spoken dialogue and prepared to stage the production. He was meticulous in his preparation, making models of the actors, set, and props to determine every gesture, inflection, and bit of stage business in advance. In rehearsals, Gilbert was extremely demanding, insisting on verbatim memorization and perfect enunciation from the actors. Once Sullivan had gotten a grasp of Gilbert’s staging, he spent the early rehearsals improvising piano accompaniments and the later ones orchestrating them. Finally, the finished product, staged under Gilbert’s exacting eye and conducted under Sullivan’s graceful baton, was premiered.
An Orchestra of Voices
A Note from Music Director and Orchestrator Tim Rebers

Sullivan's score for Ruddigore is filled with unique orchestrations and instrumental colors which are impossible to do justice to on a single keyboard. Besides wonderfully expressive choral writing, the score also features many moments of orchestral accompaniment which almost have the feeling of vocal writing. These thoughts, coupled with the intimacy of the studio theatre, inspired my concept for a new, predominantly a cappella version of Ruddigore. Knowing the high quality of singers I was writing for allowed me to explore the full palette of vocal colors: operatic to jazzy; beautiful golden tones to wispy, nasal, breathy, or even ugly. Within this new exclusively vocal world, we've recreated Sullivan's rich tapestry of sound – an orchestra of voices!

The World of Silent Film

At first glance, silent film and Gilbert & Sullivan may seem like strange bedfellows. On one hand, silent film relies predominantly on visual modes of storytelling, with dialogue interspersed only sporadically in the form of title cards; on the other, Gilbert’s intricate comedic wordplay constitutes an essential aspect of his dramaturgy. Yet, upon closer inspection, commonalities between the mediums abound, and the two seemingly disparate artforms may fit together more comfortably than they initially appear.

There is perhaps no greater actor-director of early cinema than Buster Keaton. Along with Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd, Keaton came to epitomize the Silent Movie Comedian, designing and performing elaborate (often dangerous) stunts and sight gags, which always ended in a perfectly timed comedic payoff. Keaton sought to use as few title cards as possible, letting the visual tools at his disposal – gesture, movement, and pantomime – do the heavy lifting. Dramatic films of this era were equally dependent on images to convey meaning, and many silent film actors relied on intense facial expressions and body language to communicate emotion in the absence of words. Although this broad, expressionistic style of acting would strike a modern day viewer as over-the-top, its raw power to articulate even the most inexpressible emotion is impossible to deny.

Both slapstick and high drama find a home in the paradoxical, multifaceted world of Ruddigore. As melodrama, it wears its heart on its sleeve; as parody, it pokes fun at the intensity of feeling expressed so freely. And so, their unlikely pairing may just be the perfect combination to realize Gilbert’s directorial dictum “to tell a perfectly outrageous story in a completely deadpan way.” Mike Leigh, The Guardian, 4 Nov 2006
The Magic Lozenge

The Magic Lozenge is a plot device whereby, through the possession or consumption of a magical agent (such as a talisman or love potion), a character’s personality is radically altered. The use of an enchanted lozenge traces back to one of Gilbert’s unrealized projects in which the characters fell in love against their will after taking one. Gilbert was especially fond of the trope, and proposed including it in several of his collaborations with Sullivan.

Although outwardly ridiculous, variations on the Magic Lozenge motif are actually widespread throughout operatic history, appearing in such works as Donizetti’s *Elixir of Love* (1832), Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* (1865), and Britten’s *Albert Herring* (1947). Far from frivolous, the journey of the lozenge-taker serves as a means to explore the emotional implications of the unexpected, earth-shattering events which life sometimes throws our way: the potion imbibed by Tristan and Isolde sets their ill-fated love affair into motion; Albert Herring’s night of drunken revelry becomes a vehicle for introspection and self-discovery. In this respect, the Magic Lozenge connects the inner lives of the characters directly to the audience, whose satisfaction is derived from experiencing both silliness and profundity at the same time.

This profundity, however, was apparently lost on Sullivan, whose dislike of supernatural plot devices prevented Gilbert from including them in nearly all their collaborations. The closest example can be found in their early work, *The Sorcerer*, in which a love potion serves as the catalyst to the dramatic action. In *Ruddigore*, Gilbert covertly incorporates a subtle variation on the Magic Lozenge motif in the form of the Witch’s Curse, which alters not only the personality of one individual, but of a family line spanning many generations. Though nonsensical on its face, the psychological toll of committing a daily crime is ghoulishly articulated in Sir Despard’s introductory aria: “Oh, why am I husky and hoarse? It’s the workings of conscience of course. And huskiness stands for remorse.” Who else but Gilbert could write a lyric at once so macabre and so sublime?

Quibbling

Another of Gilbert’s favored plot devices, quibbling, occurs when a character fulfills the exact verbal conditions of a contract literally so as to avoid satisfying the contact’s intended conditions. Theater history’s most famous quibble belongs to *The Merchant of Venice’s* Portia, who discovers a loophole in Antonio and Shylock’s agreement: although Shylock is entitled to a pound of Antonio’s flesh, shedding even a drop of his blood is not expressly allowed by the contract; and since one cannot procure a pound of flesh without shedding blood, the terms of the contract cannot be fulfilled without Shylock breaking the law.

Gilbert’s experience as a barrister gave him an intimate knowledge of the intricacies of British law, but more importantly, of its absurdity. Thus, in Gilbert’s world, quibbling is always employed for a dual purpose: to advance or resolve the plot and to poke fun at what Gilbert perceived as an arbitrary, overly-complex, and excessively punitive legal system: in *The Pirates of Penzance*, Frederic, having been born on Leap Day, is determined to only have reached the age of five on his twenty-first birthday, with dire legal consequences; conversely, Ko-ko bends the law to his advantage through semantic trickery at the end of *The Mikado*. Given that the Witch’s Curse is essentially a contract (albeit one whose terms were foisted on many generations against their will), could a quibble find its way into *Ruddigore’s* resolution? You’ll just have to watch and find out!