



***The Pirates of Penzance* Gilbert & Sullivan**

Kidnap

In 1838 an English nursemaid, on holiday with her employers in Italy, took a toddler out for a walk. His name was William Gilbert and he was two. The nursemaid was approached by a couple of charming Italians who told her they'd been sent by the boy's father to bring him home. The silly girl handed the child over and, before the family quite realised what had happened, a note turned up, demanding £25 for the return of their son. Of course the Gilberts paid up, William was rescued and that was that – but the little boy never forgot being held firmly by one of the kidnapers as they clattered on horseback through the streets of Florence. He thoroughly enjoyed it.

Good Boys

Meanwhile Arthur Sullivan was having an unadventurous boyhood back in England. He was getting on with his music, singing in the Chapel Royal and being patted on the head by members of the congregation. There must have been something very appealing about young Arthur, even royalty would summon him, at the end of the service, to pat his head. Not surprisingly perhaps, when they grew up, it was Gilbert, the friend of brigands, who settled down to a respectable married life and Sullivan, the ex-choirboy, who mucked around in gambling salons and bars. However the two men enjoyed writing shows together and something of their different childhoods got into *The Pirates of Penzance*. In that piece the hero, Frederick is handed over (by his foolish nursemaid) to a band of pirates as an apprentice. The boy does his best for the pirates but, as he is actually the soul of honour and duty, he gets into terrible trouble.

The Pirates of Penzance

The opera is set in a secluded harbour on the coast of Penzance. A group of pirates use the bay to moor their ship and drink their stolen booze. They are led by the **Pirate King** (bass), a cheerful villain with an assortment of pistols stuck in his belt, and his lieutenant, **Samuel** (bass). The pirates' cooking and housework is done by **Ruth** (contralto) who was once nursemaid to the youngest pirate, **Frederick** (tenor). Climbing the cliffs that border the bay are a pack of girls, the daughters of **Major General Stanley** (baritone). They are out for a picnic and have no idea that they are about to tumble into a pirates' lair. One of the daughters **Mabel** (soprano) finds the cliffs hard going and arrives after the others, the Major General takes even longer and the servants (with the picnic basket) never arrive at all... Further inland, law and order is maintained by the police, led by their **Sergeant** (bass).

The Story

Act 1

The curtain goes up with the Pirates of Penzance drinking tumblers of sherry in honour of Frederick, who has just turned 21 and is out of his apprenticeship. Frederick is embarrassed by the merry making and tells his friends that, now his contract is over, he intends to leave the band. Worse, so strong is his sense of duty, that he feels obliged to hunt the pirates down and exterminate them. His comrades take this very well and pat him on the back while Samuel remarks sadly, "We don't seem to make piracy pay..." "Ah," says Frederick, "that is because you are so tender hearted that you never attack an orphan." "Well, we're orphans ourselves," says Samuel. "Yes, but it's got about" replies Frederick "and now *everybody* we capture says he's an orphan..." And there you have the problem. The pirates are too nice: too tender hearted to rob an orphan and too decent to stop Frederick following his conscience.

Noble Villains

It seems an odd way to be a pirate but, back in the nineteenth century, the stage was awash with noble villains. Heroes of melodramas and operas were frequently outlaws, robber chiefs or pirates and, though they dashed about firing pistols, carrying off maidens and robbing the rich, they were never guilty of telling a lie or betraying a friend. This was because the robber chief (or whatever) was usually a young nobleman, hounded into a criminal career by a real villain (who had stolen his title and lands) and was *not really bad at all*. Which is all very well but, as Gilbert points out, it does make life difficult if you want to make piracy to pay.

A Mistake

Ruth comes forward to explain how Frederick joined the band in the first place. When Frederick was very small his father sent her off to apprentice him to a pilot, unfortunately she confused the word 'pilot' with 'pirate' and everything was signed and sealed before she discovered her mistake. Rather than face the wrath of Frederick's family, she decided to stay on as a pirate servant but, now Frederick is free, she intends to return to civilisation with him. The pirates cheer up at this news (Ruth is 47 and has a rather overwhelming personality) while Frederick looks depressed. Ruth is the only woman he has ever met and he supposes he ought to marry her, but he can't help feeling there might be other women around who look nicer...

The tide is turning, the band shoulder their casks of sherry and the Pirate King takes leave of his ex-apprentice in a rousing song that warns him that ordinary life might not be as straightforward as he thinks: "Away to the cheating world go you, where pirates all are well-to-do," he sings, "but I'll be true to the song I sing, and live and die a Pirate King." How right he is, almost at once Frederick's life becomes very difficult indeed as a horde of girls descend on the stage.

Girls

They are all sisters, all young, and everyone of them much nicer looking than Ruth. Frederick dismisses Ruth and (ashamed of his pirate costume) hides as the girls run down to the beach. They sing a cheerful chorus about the sea and decide to paddle. Frederick is shocked and rushes forward to stop them. (Victorian chaps were not supposed to see a girl's bare legs, but Frederick is overdoing it; toes were not nearly so important...) The sisters jump up in alarm and, confronted with more girls than he's ever seen in his life, Frederick proposes to the lot. Unfortunately he doesn't know much about women and is incredibly tactless, but Mabel turns up at just the right moment and steps forward to accept him. She does so in a waltz song which sounds like a standard operatic aria - trills, high notes the lot - but has a swing that could only come from comic opera.

Pirates

The lovers have barely had time to sing a duet when the pirates return, delighted to find the beach full of girls. They each grab one each and sing hopefully about a clergyman they know, who lives nearby, and who'll marry them all (probably at gunpoint). But before this can happen the girls' father, Major General Stanley, arrives. He is a light baritone (a man with a fast agile voice) and comes forward to introduce himself in a patter song. You get some idea of the rhythm by its first line, "I am the very model of a modern Major General, I've information animal, vegetable and mineral..." and he proceeds to reel off the things he knows. It is most impressive, ancient history, maths, biology, even modern opera, until we reach the final verse and discover what he *doesn't* know are the most basic terms of military vocabulary. (Gilbert was having a swipe here at contemporary exams for soldiers which seemed to cover everything except soldiering).

A Lie

Once he's introduced himself the Major General wants to know what's going on and is horrified to discover that he's about to have a load of pirates as sons-in-law. Fortunately he knows their weakness. "Tell me, " he says, "have you ever known what it is to be an orphan...?" "Often!" says the Pirate King, and to get this force of this famous line you have to remember that the old fashioned pronunciation of 'often' sounded just like 'orphan'. Well you either like puns or you don't, anyway the Pirate King and Major General misunderstand each other for a bit longer but, by the end of the scene, they've established that General Stanley is an orphan and the pirates will have to let the girls go. The Major General whispers to the audience that he's lying, but what else can he do? And the act ends with the pirates making him an honorary member of their band, while Frederick and Mabel join hands thinking their troubles are over – little realising it's only the interval...

Act 2

Act Two is set inland in a ruined chapel by moonlight. The Major General is discovered sitting on a tombstone, weeping, and surrounded by his daughters. It's a very Gilbertian scene, touching and silly at the same time. The girls sing some rather lovely lines "Oh dry the glistening tear that dews that martial cheek.." and Sullivan floods the theatre with beautiful silvery

music. And then we discover that the old soldier is only crying because he has told a lie to the pirates. Frederick tries to cheer him up by saying he's got a fine body of men, in the wings, who he's about to lead against the pirates. "Oh, bring them on!" says the General, and in march the police. They are in full Victorian uniform, helmets, buttoned up tunics and truncheons at the ready, but you can see their heart isn't in the job. Matters are not helped by the girls who sing enthusiastically about the coming fight, "Go to death and go to glory!" sings one of them; the policemen nearly faint with fright. The whole scene builds up to a parody of grand opera, everybody singing different lines while the policemen bellow, "Yes, forward on the foe!" as they stay rooted to the spot.

A Paradox

Frederick is left alone. He is delighted at the thought that he can at last atone for the crimes he's committed with the pirates, when a well known voice hails him. It is the Pirate King. He enters cautiously, with Ruth, and begs Frederick to listen to them. Frederick is about to brush them off when he discovers a couple of pistols pointed at his head; he calms down immediately and joins his old comrades in the Paradox Trio. This is a very famous number, half the fun of which is to work out how Gilbert is going to get another rhyme for 'paradox', while the other half is finding out what on earth the paradox *is*. Eventually the Pirate King explains and, curiously, he starts to sing about Leap Year. "Although for such a beastly month as February" he says, "28 days as a rule are plenty, one year in every four its days are reckoned as 9 and 20..." and so on until he suddenly turns to Frederick, "*You* are the victim of this clumsy arrangement, having been born in Leap Year on the 29th of February..." Which, once you've done the sum, means that Frederick although actually 21 is (going by birthdays) only 51/4.

Back to the fold

Frederick is extremely amused until the Pirate King points out that he was apprenticed to the pirates until he reached his 21st *birthday*. He pulls out the contract to prove it. "You're not going to hold me to that!" cries the poor boy. "Oh no," says the King, "we merely remind you of the fact – and leave the rest to your sense of duty..." Well that does it. Frederick always does his duty and he reluctantly joins the band once more. More than that, he feels it's his duty to tell his commander that General Stanley is not an orphan and the pirates have been fooled yet again. The Pirate King is furious, "Our revenge shall be swift and terrible. We will go and collect our band and attack the castle this very night!" And with this splendid melodramatic line they plunge into a trio and exit.

True Love

Frederick hangs back to tell Mabel the news. He does some more sums and explains to her that he won't be free of the pirates until 1940; Mabel is naturally dashed, but she rallies wonderfully and says she'll wait for him. It's another dotty moment, but again Gilbert and Sullivan amaze us with a beautiful and touching duet for the lovers before they part.

A Policeman's Lot

Now it's Mabel's turn to pass on the bad news, she waits for the policemen and tells them they will no longer be led by Frederick. They are deeply disappointed, but the Sergeant reminds them that being a copper is always difficult; it breaks his heart to arrest burglars and cut throats but "A Policeman's lot is not a happy one..." This song is sung to a gavotte (a light eighteenth century dance) which Sullivan has turned into a galumphing chorus for eight basses. They have barely finished when, to their horror, they hear the pirates approach. They immediately dive for cover as the brigands crash onto the stage. "With cat like tread!" they roar, "upon our prey we steal..." and they start dishing out weapons. The police sing a trumpet chorus to themselves (to keep their courage up) and the whole stage is full of noise and confusion when the Major General stumbles on in his nightgown. The pirates dive for cover as well (fortunately they don't choose the same hiding places as the policemen) and General Stanley is left looking at a peaceful scene, bathed in moonlight.

For Death Prepare!

The General advances cautiously. He was tossing and turning in bed, brooding over his lie, when he thought he heard a noise... But, no, everything seems still, and he breaks into a lilting song about the loveliness of nature – with *pianissimo* pirate and police accompaniment (not that he seems to notice). Of course the mood can't last, and it is broken by the girls, who rush on in their nightgowns to see what's happened to father. The Pirates erupt on stage. The Pirate King upbraids the General for his deceit, and continues grimly, "With courage rare, and resolution manly, for death prepare, unhappy General Stanley!" The girls are appalled and Mabel turns to Frederick to save them. But, alas, Frederick is now a pirate again and sings what is probably the wettest line in all opera, "Beautiful Mabel! I would if I could, but I am not able..."

Rescue

Mabel is in despair, "Can no-one help us?" she cries. Well, whenever you ask a question like that in a melodrama it is always answered and the policemen bob up at once. They dash into battle – but their truncheons haven't got a chance against the pirates' cutlasses, and the next minute they're on the floor. Everything looks very grim indeed until the Sergeant plays his trump card. "We bid you yield!" he sings, "in Queen Victoria's name!" The appeal is irresistible. The pirates might cut the odd throat or two but, naturally, they love their Queen and throw their weapons to the floor. At which point, enter Ruth. Like many contraltos in Gilbert and Sullivan, Ruth knows a secret that will change everything and sure enough here she is, at the end of the show, to put everything right. How she does so, we'll leave you to discover...

Sarah Lenton 2004

ENO Baylis
London Coliseum, St Martin's Lane, London WC2N 4ES
Telephone +44 (0)20 7632 8484 Fax +44 (0)20 7845 9443
email baylis@eno.org www.eno.org/baylis

eno baylis

creativity | access | participation

English National Opera's Education Team