

Cutting “Toto” To Size

Last summer I was approached by Peter Mountsteven, the Programme Secretary of the London Gilbert & Sullivan Society, with the idea for an entertainment to be held at the G&S Society’s 85th Anniversary at the Grimsdyke Hotel, Harrow Weald Home of W S Gilbert from 1890 to 1911), the following April.

The exceptionally talented soprano Katie Leaver, had already been engaged to play the lead, “Princess Toto”, in the little known comic opera of that name by WS Gilbert and Frederick Clay. Peter asked if my society, KAOS, would be prepared to provide the supporting characters and chorus.

Somewhat guardedly I agreed to ask them, knowing the sort of response one gets when something virtually unknown is put to them to perform. However a chink of light appeared in the negotiations appeared when I reminded the society that a while ago three of us had performed a trio from Princess Toto at a G&S meeting and had been well received, although some newer members said the only Toto they knew was the dog from “The Wizard of Oz”!

The next problem was learning the music. They all insisted they hadn’t time to sing without scores as rehearsal time was very limited and couldn’t start until late November, when the current show, “Annie Get Your Gun” was over. Peter provided us with vocal scores, and some DVD teach tapes were acquired. We agreed that the music (apart from a few judicious cuts) should be performed in “Toto”! By the time rehearsals started (three quarters of an hour once a week, barring holidays!) I had persuaded some loyal friends from other societies to join our ranks.

Then there was the script. The full opera was in 3 acts, taking over three hours with intervals, and our allotted time of performance was approximately two hours. Lengthy cuts in Gilbert’s wordy but witty and amusing dialogue would have to be made. I particularly wanted to retain those scenes and situations which were forerunners of those that appeared in later operas.

For instance, as in “Toto” we have baby brides and husbands coming to claim them at 21 in “Princess Ida” and “The Gondoliers”. Prince Caramel (and two friends) arrive, three days late, to collect his bride. He is described as a well-behaved young man, who plays the flute and wears galoshes (Robin Oakapple?), whilst Jelly (Toto’s maid) is described as a “bold faced thing” (Patience?). Prince Doro “at last arrives at his destination” (“Gondoliers”). His song “There are brigands in every station” has clear parallels with the Pirate King’s song and is extremely topical, some 133 years later!

A narration does not give the same development of characters as in even a truncated semi-staged version, so we agreed on the latter, using soloists. We only had two rehearsals with Katie, but she arrived at the first, a “dress rehearsal” at a G&S meeting on 22nd March, word perfect, whereas (as in most Amateur Societies) we never had a full cast till the actual performance! Our accompanist, due to play there, was called away to play for another society. Fortunately David Mackie, the indefatigable G&S Society Vice President, took over as MD and accompanist with only one rehearsal with the full cast (in a tiny room in the hotel annexe, with a useless keyboard!).

“What to wear?” also caused controversy, as the chorus were supposed to be King Portico’s Court in Act 1, but changing to Prince Caramel’s Court disguised as

brigands in the Act 1 Finale and Act 2. They then reverted to the King's Court (disguised as Red Indians!) in Act 3. We compromised with changes of headgear, added shawls and blankets!

The chorus were adamant that, within the confines of the Grmsdyke Music Room "Acting Area" they should not have to do any movement, so only the Principals "moved".

Nevertheless, with all these difficulties and restrictions, we managed to put on a good show, which was commented on very favourably by the audience.