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## A READER'S JOURNAL

D'Oyly Carte  
The Inside Story

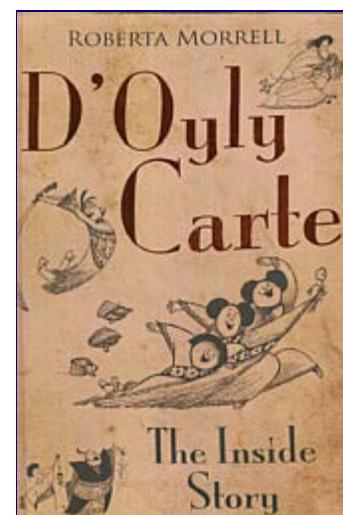
by

Roberta Morrell

Matador/UK in 2016

A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2018

What Gilbert & Sullivan are doing these days?  
And what was D'Oyly Carte doing to their  
wonderful operettas in the old days of the  
nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Roberta  
Morrell was part of the traveling troupe of players



for about ten years, qualifying her to write about their triumphs and shenanigans. But she wanted to include input from as many as possible of the principals and members of the chorus and staff while their memories were as vibrant as their many performances. All will be revealed within.

In the Foreword, Cynthia Morey explains why this book is different from all the other books written about D'Oyly Carte.

**[page xv] I think I must have read every book about the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company ever published, but never one like this! 'Outsiders' who have written on this subject in the past may have given their opinions of the Company, the management, the artists, and the productions, but it is only the past members of this unique organization themselves, who, having experienced it on the inside, truly knew what it was all about.**

But for my attending the annual Gilbert & Sullivan Festival in Harrogate, England in 2017 and attending a lecture by Roberta, I would not have bought and read her fine book. In her lecture she related in an animated fashion many of the tales she tells in this book. The reading is a tough slog at times, mostly because of the barrage of names of cast and management, but my interest picked up as I read along, helped enormously by the 9 G&S operettas my wife and I attended during the festival. Del had never seen a live production, only a TV production, I wondered if she would feel overwhelmed by going to one production a day and want to drop out. The opposite happened. Del couldn't wait for the next staging and we attended them all, including two juvenile productions. One of them was memorable: *H.M.S. Pinafore* — its quality matched that of the other productions in spite of there being only a couple of cast members over 20 years old. Reading this book about seven months after the Festival helped me with Roberta's references to the shows we had attended then.

Here's a collection of terms which will be helpful as you read this book, especially for non-Brits. The word "tannoy" is used in place of "loudspeaker". It was taken from the name of a company which made early loudspeakers in England. The last play of a season was called "Last Night" and was an opportunity for ad libs and spontaneous terpsichore on the stage, enjoyed immensely by the performers and the knowledgeable audience as well. Another important term which Americans rarely use is "digs". Roberta used the term so often in her lecture in Harrogate that I asked her the origin of the term for the various places the company stayed while on tour. She wasn't sure, but I guessed it might an abbreviation of the word "lodgings" into the single syllable word *digs*. Thus, the letters giving new lodging assignment were known as "digs letters" — much easier to say than "lodgings letters". "Smalls" referred to the ladies' undergarments which were often washed and hung up to dry in the theaters between performances. (Page 82) *Rumbustious* is the English version of our *rambunctious*. (Page 87) There's another term describing a

situation familiar to anyone who watched the Carol Burnett show live or selected excerpts from it. It is called *corpsing* or *to corpse* which means to laugh so much and you and maybe everyone on the stage are incapacitated by laughter. (Page 168) Another potentially confusing term is 'caravan' which in England refers to a 'trailer home'.

How John Reed became a star of D'Oyly Carte: He was a dancer and actor, not a singer, but a friend convinced him to take an audition, and he received the usual perfunctory, "Thank you, we'll let you know." John bought a ticket to *The Gondoliers* later which helped convince him not to do any G&S work. But he later received a call from a Mr. Lloyd asking him to join them in Newcastle in a few weeks time.

**[page 24, 25] His earlier decision flying out of the window, John found himself saying, "yes". Thus, one of the truly great D'Oyly Carte performers hesitantly signed up what proved to be an illustrious twenty-eight year career with the company.**

Roberta explains how difficult auditions are to performers. In my own experience with amateur stage productions I have never had to undergo auditions, and had no idea of the rigors of musical auditions.

**[page 27] It is difficult to explain to someone who has never been involved in the theater how much more nerve-racking it can be to audition for a role than to play it in performance. Auditions have to be endured and it is true to say that some performers are better at auditioning than others. An audition panel may be faced with a singer who gives a reasonable account of themselves, but who, when employed, proves never to be more than ordinary, regardless of how much coaching they receive. On the other hand, someone who gives a shaky, nervous audition could prove to be a fine performer once outside of the audition situation. How is an employer to make this distinction? For experienced directors, it often comes down to gut instinct; they just seem to know the difference.**

D'Oyly Carte forced principals to accept the roles in which they were cast, and in one case, John Reed was stuck with a part he didn't like for several years.

**[page 35] John Reed was never happy playing 'The Major-General' in *The Pirates of Penzance*, but loved all of the other comedic roles. It was several seasons before he was able to relinquish it to his understudy, on the basis that it was better for the understudy to play a role in his own right than suffer audience disappointment when a scheduled night off meant John did not appear.**

One performer came up with a unique way of memorizing her lines by first converting them into French; this seems so unwieldy, but it worked for her.

**[page 37] No rehearsal time was allowed for dialogue, so it must be supposed that the company assumed they would be proficient in the acting department. Every performer has their own way of learning lines, but Jane Metcalfe's was most ingenious. Whilst learning the music for the soubrette parts she had inherited from Judi Merri, she came up with a novel way to get to grips with the dialogue. When studying singing in Geneva, she had become fluent in French and found that by translating Gilbert's words into French, their meaning readily stuck, making them easier to remember when she translated them back into English.**

Hard to believe that for many decades the traveling company of D'Oyly Carte had to set about hiring pickup bands in each new town it arrived in. The local musicians had just one rehearsal to get up to speed and in a lot of production numbers that was a high speed indeed!

**[page 50] But, in the early 1960s, the management made a huge leap forward when it took the decision to have its own touring orchestra, although it is not clear who, or what,**

**prompted this move. Without the hassle of having to hire a scratch orchestra and rehearse it for every show wherever the company appeared, Isidore Godfrey had more freedom to devote to the performers and all-important dress rehearsals became possible.**

The word *digs* appears in this droll story of a young boy meeting the man playing the Mikado on a train to the theater.

**[page 61] Not all train journeys were from one venue to another. Sometimes, getting to the theater from home or *digs* was best managed by rail. On one such occasion, Donald Adams was traveling by train to the theater in Wimbledon when it came to a shuddering halt. The following lengthy delay was an irritation for all the passengers, but a lady with her small son, seated near Donald, seemed particularly agitated as the time passed. Repeatedly checking her watch and tut-tutting, she eventually turned to Donald and bemoaned the hold-up because she was taking her little boy to see *The Mikado* and it was looking increasingly likely that they would be late for the performance. In his inimitable lugubrious style, Donald replied, "I don't know what you're worrying about, madam. I am *The Mikado*." A favorite anecdote amongst D'Oyly Carters, Thomas Round confirms this to be exactly what Donald told him when he eventually made it to the theater.**

Another amusing incident involved a flasher accosting a female performer in the woods.

**[page 68] One day, Peggy was walking her dog, Judy, in the woods when she saw a man ahead of her fiddling with the front of his coat. Ever naive, she carried on until he was right in front of her, whereupon he opened his coat and exposed himself. Petrified, she turned tail and ran back to the caravans, hysterically alerting the others to this unpleasant experience. With the girls anxious to commiserate, Peggy soon began to calm down, until Michael Tuckey and John Broad came along to see what was going on. When Peggy tearfully explained what had happened, prankster Mike went to unzip his trousers and said, "It's not your lucky day, is it?" Once the giggling men were shown the door, the girls advised Peggy to report the incident to the police, who duly came along to interview her. She still remembers their guffaws of laughter when they asked what the flasher looked like. "I don't know; I didn't see his face."**

In the 1960s on a flight across America Abby Hadfield was in the rest room when it hit an air pocket, and afterward she was known to boast that "she was the only mezzo-soprano ever to pee uphill." (Page 73)

In 1969 as a young computer programmer I went to the Fall Joint Computer Conference in San Francisco, my first trip to the City by the Bay. On a dark and stormy night I ended up in Chinatown and had to buy an umbrella to keep dry. It rained from that soggy Friday night, on and off, but always with a heavy cold mist which made going outside unpleasant. On Wednesday morning I drove across the Golden Gate bridge to the overlook and when I got out of the car I was greeted with the first sunshine as I looked across the bay to the city! It was a magnificent sight! Later that afternoon, as my airliner banked taking off and I got a view of the city from the air and my heart flushed as my head filled with the unforgettable lines of Tony Bennett singing, "I left my heart in San Francisco . . ." Roberta had a similar experience nine years later, only the whole passenger cabin was filled with the song.

**[page 74] For me, the most memorable flight of the 1978 tour was from San Francisco to Los Angeles. Many of the company had family or friends visiting for the California leg of the tour and my parents were among this group, for whom arrangements were made to travel with the company between venues. Taking off in perfect conditions, with no fog to obscure the view of the iconic bay, the plane soared high over the Golden Gate Bridge. As one D'Oyly Carte voice started to sing "I Left My Heart in San Francisco", the rest of the company picked up the melody to give a thrilling rendition of the famous**

**song, much to the astonishment of the other passengers, who cheered and clapped as we hit the big finish. The only person not applauding was my mother who was in floods of tears. It had always been her ambition to visit the city she had seen in movies, but she never seriously thought about it actually happening. Thanks to the D'Oyly Carte, I was able to help fulfil that long-cherished dream, something for which I shall always be grateful.**

In the 1970s, the digs letters were generally posted in the Company Manager's office,"the tannoy announcement of their availability causing a stampede from the dressing rooms. One time digs letters were being passed around and Lorraine Daniels happened upon a postcard of Edinburgh Castle and remarked to her digs sharer, Barry Clark, "Ere, Barry, this place looks nice" which caused peals of laughter. [Page 81] You see and hear Roberta relate this postcard story by [Clicking Here](#).

How does a group of northerners celebrate Christmas in New Zealand in the middle of their summertime? Roberta and Ken Sandford found a way to liven up their celebration.

**[page 92] When word of the seasonal feast spread amongst the company, Ken Sandford and I came up with an idea to surprise the revelers. He took his make-up box back to his little house and painted an intricate blue design on my face in the distinctive style of the indigenous New Zealand population. Wearing a borrowed hooded red coat and with a stuffed pillow case over my shoulder, I burst in on the festive five as they tucked into their meal and shouted, "Maori Christmas!" before disappearing as quickly as I had arrived. By the time the astonished diners had stopped laughing, their festive meal had nearly gone cold. Happy days indeed.**

Sometimes the search for last minute digs led to a little "udder" madness, but even that turned into the start of a beautiful friendship, such as with the lady living alone in a bungalow on a small farm that Kathryn Holding met while searching for a B&B.

**[Page 98, 99] Betty Bishop, as she introduced herself, worked the farm on her own, looking after her herd of Charolais cattle and milking them by hand. Something of an eccentric, she nevertheless made Kate welcome in her home, which was basic, but clean. Not someone to worry about the lack of a plug in the bathroom sink, or other simple amenities, she and Kate made an instant connection and the unexpected stay was great fun for both. Of the many odd things to happen in Betty's home, Kate talks fondly of her host's inability to grasp the idea that theater folk work until late and don't get up early. Nevertheless, she politely drank the cup of tea brought to her at 5am every morning. Swimming with fat from the fresh milk, which often boasted udder hairs, it was not exactly what Kate would have chosen, but it was delivered with generosity. Breakfast was a newly-laid egg boiled in a kettle on the stove, the water from which was always later used to make tea for the postman! Arriving home late one night after a show, Kate saw a large pan bubbling away and asked Betty what she was cooking. "I ain't cooking, I'm boiling me knickers. Yours are in there as well." Meaning only to be helpful, she did not realize that going into Kate's room to look for underwear to wash was an intrusion, but Kate let it pass, bemoaning the grey fate of her pristine white underwear in silence. Thetwo became firm friends, keeping in touch for many years and Betty even attended Kate's wedding. She was not the usual landlady type, but Kate would not have wished her any other way.**

I have an old saying that I made up which goes, "You can piss in your soup, but it doesn't necessarily improve the flavor." This applies to people who make a big deal out of nothing, among other things. I was reminded of this saying when I read this next story about two guys who pissed in their bottle of sherry to betray a thief.

**[page 107, 108] Sometime in the 1950s, two D'Oyly Carte men were staying in digs in Glasgow with a landlady who made them very comfortable and was an excellent cook. There was just one problem, their bottle of sherry. A favorite after-show tippie for them at that time, each day they noticed the level in the bottle seemed to have gone down a little. Thereafter drawing a line in pencil on the bottle after each drink, they always found it had gone down by the next evening, so it became obvious they were not imagining it. The boys were rather annoyed. That the landlady should help herself to their drink did not seem right, so they decided to teach her a lesson. Downing the remainder of the sherry after a show, one of them then went to the toilet and used his own amber liquid to fill the bottle back up to the mark they had made. Giggling like naughty schoolboys, they went to bed and looked forward to seeing what happened the next day. Sure enough, the level in the sherry bottle had gone down again, so they continued to refill it each night, finding the whole thing hugely funny. On the final day of their stay, the landlady brought in dinner and made a confession: "I kept meaning to tell you, but forgetting, and I hope you don't mind, but I noticed your bottle of sherry and I've been putting a wee drop in your soup every night." Now that's what I call getting your own back.**

Sometimes you can have more fun thinking about doing a practical joke than actually doing one — that's another old saying I made up which is applicable here.

The job of an understudy was *semper paratus*, the slogan of the U. S. Coast Guard, "always ready." For the understudy it was *always ready* to take the part of a principal at a moment's notice. Enough to get one's head spinning when it happens at the last moment before a performance. Instead of standing or sitting in the wings going over your lines as the principal says them on stage, you're on stage and not only saying those lines, but having to do other things which you cannot easily rehearse in the wings, as Lorraine Daniels found out while playing the lively, flirtatious Phoebe in *The Yeomen of the Guard* for the very first time.

**[page 151, 152] Lorraine Daniels, has a tale to tell about going on for the first time, in the mid-1970s, in that most appealing of soubrette roles.**

**"Whilst we were playing Leeds, I had a meal in a café before the show. It took a lot longer than it should have done and I just managed to get into the theater on the half-hour call. It was *The Yeomen of the Guard* and I would usually allow an hour before the start of this opera. As I climbed the stairs, I was greeted by Jimmie Marsland, who said, "You're on." My head went into a whirl, as it was my first time playing 'Phoebe'. Yes, 'Phoebe', the first person on stage! 'Trying to get ready was a real panic. The biggest challenge was the spinning wheel, because we never had a rehearsal with the wheel and it wasn't easy. Trying to use my feet; spinning the wheel; stopping it at the end of the first verse, only to start it again for the second. The only practice I had was during the overture. My opening song, 'When Maiden Loves' was interesting; there I was trying to work the spinning wheel and remember the words. Hence, I sang the second verse first and the first verse second, whilst the wheel was spinning backwards! What a start, but unless you knew the song, nobody could tell. I'm pleased to say that the rest of the performance went without a hitch and Phoebe became one of my favorite parts but, after that, I made sure I could use a spinning wheel."**

Disasters on stage can be triggered by mundane everyday occurrences, like a need to urinate which happened to Michael Rayner in a 1970s *Mikado*. He had underestimated the time need to undo and redo his elaborate costume and left John Reed and Ken Sandford ad libbing while awaiting the arrival of Michael bringing the letter to the Mikado.

**[page 162] Eventually an out-of-puff Mike rushed onto the stage to gasp out his line 'I am a bearer of a letter from His Majesty the Mikado', to which Ken Sandford drolly**

**retorted, "Second class, obviously." The uproarious laughter greeting this delightful sarcasm at least gave Mike a chance to get his breath back.**

An unexpected change of words in ordinary conversation can be quickly explained away, but on stage, it may cause one or more in the cast to corpse. Roberta gives us some examples from *Patience*, *The Mikado*, *HMS Pinafore*, and *The Yeomen of the Guard*.

**[page 168] One of the most famous D'Oyly Carte stories of all time involved an unintentional change of words, the culprit being Peggy Ann Jones, who was playing 'Lady Angela' in *Patience*. Ken Sandford, as 'Archibald Grosvenor', made his entrance in the first act finale and took his rather camp pose as the heartbroken poet, his appearance supposed to send the ladies into transports of delight. Peggy soon put an end to that when, instead of singing, 'But who is this, whose godlike grace proclaims he comes of noble race', she sang, 'But who is this whose godlike grace proclaims he comes from outer space'! Barely able to believe what she had done, the cast members were in a dilemma, because they were supposed to repeat Peggy's line and, of course some could not resist adding to her faux pas, although many were too convulsed with laughter to sing anything at all. But spare a thought for Ken Sandford trying to keep composed for his upcoming lines after an introduction like that. Even today, Peggy is at a loss to know why those words came out of her mouth, but does make the rather feeble excuse that, perhaps, it was because men had recently landed on the moon for the first time. However, she could not use such a reason to explain another hilarious mistake, this time in *The Mikado*. In the second scene in which 'the Mikado' questions 'Ko-Ko', 'Pooh-Bah' and Sing' as to why they have had his son executed, the three miscreants claim they didn't know who he was. Peggy was supposed to say, 'It wasn't written on his forehead, you know' but, for reasons known to herself, instead said, 'It wasn't written on any part of his anatomy you know', reducing the others to jelly and leaving John Reed incapable of getting out his next line.**

Great example of John Reed corpsing. And next, the able seaman, Dick Deadeye, has his name tarred and feathered on stage:

**[page 168, 169] Ralph Mason was another experienced performer to make a slip of the tongue which left the stage in uproar. Playing 'Ralph Rackstraw in a performance of *HMS Pinafore*, he addressed John Ayldon as 'Dead Dickeye'!**

The next inadvertent line changed completely the tenor of the ending of a tragic opera; and it wasn't even a verbal line, more of an easily recognizable music tone.

**[page 172] In the second act finale of *The Yeomen of the Guard*, John Reed, as 'Jack Point', had just made his entrance for 'Oh, thoughtless crew, ye know not what ye do', with the assembled cast looking suitably sad. At the back of the stage, the phalanx of red-clad yeomen warders framed a spectacular scene. John always left a small, but highly emotional pause between 'Attend to me and shed a tear or two, for' and 'I have a song to sing-O'. With unbelievably bad timing, one of the yeomen, who will not be embarrassed here, found that exact moment to accidentally break wind. A second either side of that poignant gap in the music and it would have gone unnoticed, at least *audibly*, but everyone on the stage heard it and the effect was immediate. Of all the moments in the Savoy Operas not to have everyone shaking with laughter, that was it. Heads were bowed, or turned away from the audience, but the mass hysteria could not be stopped and poor John had to continue, not having a clue as to why everyone was laughing so much during the tragic ending of the opera.**

And now my promised answer to the question, "What are Gilbert and Sullivan doing now?" It first

appeared publicly during a radio interview.

**[page 225] Definitely falling into the fun category was the radio interview Ken Sandford did for a small radio station in New Zealand, when it immediately became apparent to him that the young presenter asking the questions had no idea about Gilbert and Sullivan or the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company. Ken struggled valiantly to make some sense of the interview, doing his best to plug the tour and trying not to smile at the naive questions put to him, but he was rendered almost speechless when asked, "What are Gilbert and Sullivan doing now?" After a few moment's thought, Ken cleverly remembered Gilbert's famous quote and countered with "Decomposing"!**

Roberta Morrell does a masterful job of portraying the trials, tribulations, and fun associated with "a life lived out of a suitcase"! There's much more in this book than any short review can even point at, so there's the place to get your full boat of HMS Pinafore and the rest of the fleet of Gilbert and Sullivan's operas.

