

## Bringing Classic Musical Theatre to the Popular Audience: Joseph Papp's Approach to Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*

**Brian David Phillips**  
Associate Professor  
Department of English  
National Chengchi University  
Taipei, Taiwan

### Abstract

For much of Joseph Papp's career, he worked toward a populist theatre bringing classic dramas and musicals to the popular audience in refreshing and innovative stagings. This paper is an exploration of how Papp brought his particular approach to bear in the production of the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, *The Pirates of Penzance* both in theatrical staging and film production. While in this discussion, we are particularly interested in critical response to the production contemporary to Papp, it is worth noting that Papp's approach to staging and direction continues to influence populist productions to this day.

**Keywords:** *Joseph Papp, Pirates of Penzance, Shakespeare in the Park, Gilbert and Sullivan, Populist Theatre*

### Embracing Populist Theatre via Gilbert and Sullivan and Papp

William S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan could be considered a reflection of the Victorian era within which they lived. Their operettas managed to carry within them the condensed essence of what it meant to be "*Victorian*." To me, one of the more interesting problems in theatre is that of how a modern company approaches such a purely period piece as Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance* in order to bring it to life in a production intended for the modern audience. Critics are divided on just how such a Victorian "gem" should be handled.

Into this controversy stepped the late Joseph Papp, in 1980, with his popular Broadway production of *The Pirates of Penzance*. Papp had been known for his free Shakespeare Festival productions of the past 30 summers in New York City's Central Park. His productions had a broad popular appeal because of his populist philosophy, according to both Papp<sup>1</sup> and his critics<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Gerard Raymond, "Marathon Man: Joseph Papp," *TheatreWeek* 2 May 1988, 22.

The marriage of this populist philosophy to his production of *The Pirates of Penzance* resulted in one of Papp's greatest successes<sup>3</sup>. Critical responses to the production, however, were mixed. In this brief paper, we will examine the differing critical orientations to musicals and modern productions of period pieces like the Victorian operetta in light of the responses to Papp's controversial, but successful, production of *The Pirates of Penzance*.

Various critics may value certain elements of the musical more highly than others. Obviously, there will be especially great differences between the criteria selected as critical to the success of a production by critics who emphasize the music aspects of a musical and those who emphasize dramatic values.

During his long career in theatre, Papp did not regard the critics' reviews as genuinely significant, declaring, "I have no time for that. Most of these things (reviews) quickly deteriorate into very unintelligent discussion. We've lost an intellectual base for the theatre, so consequently most of the discussions in print are vapid--people don't know anything and yet they go on to talk about it."<sup>4</sup> The serious student of drama and literature in production, however, must still give attention to what the critics have to say.

Each of two differing views of the musical, as drama and as music, can in turn be divided into two approaches. In the "music" school are the operatic and the traditional approaches. The key philosophy for these can be represented with a statement by John Alan Tucker in his article "On Directing Opera":

The beginning opera director must not view opera as drama with music added. He should not regard the production as a play which happens to be sung instead of spoken.... elements usually considered to be paramount in drama must often be subordinate to the music.<sup>5</sup>

For purposes of this analysis, the two subdivisions of the "drama" school are American musical, to be considered later, which can be divided further into naturalistic and presentational approaches, and the populist theatre characterized as follows by Papp:

Sure, I'm interested in music, I love music, but you'll find that all my musicals have had a high standard.... Take an old chestnut like *The Pirates of Penzance*, an operetta, a gorgeous piece of work, get Linda Ronstadt to attract

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2Kroll, Jack, "Review of *The Pirates of Penzance*," **Newsweek** v101 14 February 1983, 85.

3Tom Nicholson, "Review of *The Pirates of Penzance*," **Newsweek**, 21 February 1983, 66.

4Ross Wetzsteon, "Joe Papp Gets Big Ideas," **American Theatre**, 3.6, 1986, 12.

5John Alan Tucker, "On Directing Opera," **The Speech Teacher** 24.4 1975, p389-92.

people to the theatre, and make it a popular piece. I've tried to do that with Shakespeare, same thing.<sup>6</sup>

This artificial line between drama versus music in musical or operetta production presentation becomes foundational in how one approaches any production of musical theatre. Both the drama and the music must serve the production success but there can and often is a sort of quest for the one to counterbalance the other. Obviously, productions do strive to have the best drama or acting performances while also endeavoring to have the best music that is possible but in many ways one is always sacrificed for the other. Papp, like any director or producer, had to make hard choices between the two and at various times in the performance choices may have sacrificed one for the other.

### The Play

Gilbert and Sullivan premiered *The Pirates of Penzance* almost simultaneously in New York and England on December 30 and 31, 1879, to protect both American and English copyrights. The production at Paignton, England, was performed by a touring company of H.M.S. Pinafore, already a Gilbert and Sullivan standard.<sup>7</sup>

The play, subtitled "*The Slave of Duty*," concerns the apprentice pirate Frederic who gives up piracy to "*devote myself heart and soul to your (the pirates') extermination.*" His plans are complicated by the revelation that, since he was born on February 29 of a leap year, he has thus not yet had 21 birthdays so he is not out of his indentures after all. He is faced with the dilemma of choosing between staying with his true love, Mabel, and going with the pirates whose lifestyle he hates but to whom he is still legally indentured. Since this is Gilbert and Sullivan's satire of the overblown Victorian sense of duty, he chooses to go with the pirates.

One of the most striking songs in this piece is Mabel's "*Poor Wandering One*," a favorite display piece for coloratura sopranos. Since the piece is so difficult, after this operetta, Sullivan did not make such excessive demands upon the voices of his sopranos.<sup>8</sup>

### Papp's Production

Due to the quality of his company and his stature in the theatrical industry, Papp was able to attract many popular performers to his productions. He was aware of this ability and used it to his best advantage, declaring, "I can get any major actor I want. A major actor on the stage is

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<sup>6</sup>Wetzsteon, "*Joe Papp...*," 13.

<sup>7</sup>**The Compleat Gilbert and Sullivan Collection** (New York: Random House), ii.

<sup>8</sup>**The Compleat Gilbert and Sullivan Collection**, 208.

someone who can make the walls rattle without shouting, someone who can rivet your attention. The very being of that actor is a magnet."<sup>9</sup>

Although he was not necessarily following the advice of Rickett and Hoogland who advised producers of *The Pirates of Penzance* to "first find your Mabel,"<sup>10</sup> that is basically what Papp did as pop singer Linda Ronstadt was the first to join his cast. Critic Barbara Graustark explains:

Ronstadt mentioned to Papp that she'd like to try her hand at "something small, beautiful, and sweet" outside the realm of high-wattage rock belting.... She had always adored the music of Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*, which she'd sung as a child. She'd never heard of *The Pirates of Penzance*.... With coaching, she has turned what Papp calls a "tiny little upper register" into a careening coloratura that earned her a round of applause from the cast during the first rehearsal.<sup>11</sup>

Another popular music personality to join the cast was Rex Smith as Frederic to Ronstadt's Mabel. The cast was completed with respected theatre actors Kevin Kline (as the Pirate King), George Rose (The Major General), Tony Azito the Sergeant), and Estelle Parsons (Ruth). Parsons was replaced by Angela Lansbury for the film version.

The Free Shakespeare production was successful and moved to Broadway. A film with the same cast and staff was made and released in 1983. The film's producer was Papp, and the director was Wilford Leach (the principal director of the Shakespeare Festival); the music was adapted by William Elliott, and Graciela Danielle was the choreographer.

As producer, Papp declared that he gave his directors artistic freedom, although some critics have called him a manipulator:

"Ask Wilford Leach if I interfere with his productions. I respect his work. He's a first-class artist. Why am I going to interfere and screw it up, unless I'm a destructive person? I can't build an organization by interfering with people's work. They wouldn't work here!"<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Raymond, 23.

<sup>10</sup>Rickett and Hoogland, *Amateurs Guide to Producing Gilbert and Sullivan Plays* (New York: AG, 1932), 105.

<sup>11</sup>"*The Pirates of Penzance*," *Time*, 7 March 1983, 69.

<sup>12</sup>Wetzsteon, "*Joe Papp Gets Big Ideas*," 15.

In some respects, Papp's position as producer provided him some degree of oversight of productions that stood over the directors, although he professed that he kept his interference to a minimum.

### Approaches to the Musical

Although Papp's theatre production of *The Pirates of Penzance* was commercially successful,<sup>13</sup> the film version did not fare so well.<sup>14</sup> Critical responses to both were mixed. Some critics took a strongly favorable view, like one who declared it "and almost indecent amount of pleasure."<sup>15</sup> Other took a less favorable and sometimes hostile view. Jack Kroll refuted a writer who condemned the film as "a dog."<sup>16</sup> Kroll countered, "Well, *Pirates of Penzance* is no dog. The movie has problems, but no fleas."

Part of the basis for these divergent views, despite Papp's insinuation that theatre critics have no taste and seldom know what they are talking about,<sup>17</sup> may stem from differences in how various critics understand the concept of what the musical is -- drama with music or music with drama. Thus it is not surprising that conclusions about a production's artistic success may differ.

### The Operatic Approach

As indicated earlier, Tucker offers some helpful criteria for the director who is a novice in working with opera. He emphasizes that the philosophy for and opera production is radically different from a theatre approach:

The worst possible directorial fault is to refuse to acknowledge the immense significance of the music--opera's lifeblood.... Such a refusal will have negative implications in practical terms. It is in practical terms that the director must deal with what may be a new and disturbing concept to him: music taking precedence over drama.<sup>18</sup>

Critics writing in this school of criticism tend to focus on musical aspects of the production. Writing for the New Yorker, Andrew Porter concentrated his criticism on that aspect of Papp's Pirates:

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13 "*The Pirates of Penzance*," **People Weekly**, 7 March 1983, 41.

14 Nicholson, 66.

15 Kevin Boyd Grubb, "Review of *The Pirates of Penzance*," **Dance Magazine**, February 1983, 48.

16 Jack Kroll, "Review...", 85.

17 Raymond, 23.

18 Tucker, 47.

Linda Ronstadt.... had accurate and pretty coloratura for Mabel's waltz song. Lower down, she sounded short-breathed, and the "insert aria".... did not suit her.... Clarity and musical alertness distinguished all the performance....

Obviously, this can be problematic as those who focus more on one aspect – musical performance or dramatic acting – will miss something. However, this in no way makes any such focus of no value.

### The Traditional Approach

Also coming from the "music with drama added" school of thought is the more practical approach which one could call "*traditional*." This view has been skillfully outlined by Rickett and Hoogland in their textbook. They have set criteria and guidelines to aid directors with specific problems in dealing with the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, devoting an entire chapter to each play. Their work is intended for the amateur's use as a guide to successful production, and they state in their foreword, "This book is chiefly a record of how these operas have been presented..... and is based upon the experience gained through working on them."<sup>19</sup>

Although meant for the amateur with little theatre background, their work still adds insights into an important approach to the production. Michael Geliot staged an example of this approach to *The Pirates of Penzance* with Peter Allen for the Judith de Paul productions of *The Compleat Gilbert and Sullivan* aired by many American PBS television stations in 1984. A notable fact about Geliot's production is that Gilliam Knight played Ruth, the piratical maid of all-work, a role she portrayed for the D'Oyly Carte company during its John Reed years decades earlier.

The focus of this approach is still on the music, but the acting and other theatrical elements are given more weight than in the operatic. John Yohalem, a confirmed *Savoyard* (devotee of Gilbert and Sullivan), writes, "For a hundred years the lovers of the works of Gilbert and Sullivan have sat tight-lipped before stages in every corner of the English-speaking world, reciting the sacred texts verbatim, ready to rise in ire at a missed syllable, a heretical staging, or, worst of all, an omitted song."

He comments on the staging of Papp's production as being "wild yet respectful, a sincere attempt to have fun while getting every word, every note to the crowd, to make every non-sensical sentiment sincere."

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<sup>19</sup>Rickett and Hooglan, iii.

## American Musical Approaches

Criticism of modern productions of Gilbert and Sullivan's Victorian English plays is affected by developments in the evolution of the American musical. We may classify the basic performance styles into two categories, naturalistic and presentational. The former has the closer ties to drama; the latter evolves from music-oriented approaches, although with a stronger emphasis on the dramatic elements of the show than previously.

The naturalistic elements, including acting, became most important to some critics of Papp's Victorian adventure. While Kevin Kline's *Pirate King* was hailed by most critics for both his acting and his singing, Ronstadt received unfavorable ones for her acting. A typical comment is, "Ronstadt.... is pathetic.... Her problem is that she has no stage experience, her movements are less ardent than a housewife's in a bargain basement--and how it shows on a stage full of real actors!"<sup>20</sup> Coming to Ronstadt's defense, Jack Kroll writes of her work in the film version of the production:

Some critics found Ronstadt's acting to be wanting. But they found it: it was there. An observer notes, incidentally, that she does not have pigeon toes in the offstage world. In *Pirates* her little white toes gaze bashfully at each other as they stick out of the bottom of her long white dress.... It is clear.... (this) is characterization and not malformation.<sup>21</sup>

It is also possible that her abilities increased with her experience over the length of the Broadway run.

## The Populist Approach

According to Papp, "People want to go to a live show. It has to do with ritual.... Theatre still plays a role."<sup>22</sup> It was Papp's goal to expose as many people as possible to theatre. His concern was with popular shows that appeal to as wide a spectrum as possible.<sup>23</sup>

There are three key elements to understanding Papp's theatre: (1) the goal of more populist theatre, (2) a stress on quality dramas, and (3) a star-oriented theatre. At first, this seems like a three-fold paradox, but Papp maintained that such a system can and has worked:

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<sup>20</sup>Brubach, 203.

<sup>21</sup>Kroll, 85.

<sup>22</sup>Wendy Wasserstein, "*Joseph Papp*," **New York**, 25 April 1988, 107.

<sup>23</sup>Wetzsteon, "*Joe Papp Gets Big Ideas*," 15.



The idea is to get people of some reputation to appear in these plays, so that people.... have a reason to go aside from the play itself.... To gain this new constituency I'm after, this new audience, you have to create a different kind of theatrical culture. The old theatrical culture had great stars, stage stars.... and it was those people who attracted audiences. People never went just to see a play.<sup>24</sup>

It is here that Papp succeeded with his production of *The Pirates of Penzance*. As Grubb writes:

"Making rock 'n rollers Rex Smith and Linda Ronstadt the leads proved a clever move.... Ronstadt's fans waited day after day, for performance after performance...."<sup>25</sup>

Papp was able to both appease the traditionalists through an excellent production and to introduce a new generation of prospective theatre goers to Gilbert and Sullivan. Yohalem continues, "Oddly enough.... most of the faithful who did get in rather enjoyed the production. Odder still, the hordes come to hear the pop idols liked it too, despite the fact that there were few concessions to Ronstadt's special status."<sup>26</sup>

This combination of star and excellent production criteria was explained by Papp:

When I say star, I'm not talking about a star system. A star system is when you get one major star and then you get a second rate company together.... What I'm looking at is different--a major actor can attract other actors who want to work with that person.... I'll get them. And I'll get them to do classics as well as contemporary plays--and at low prices too.<sup>27</sup>

Papp's devotion to bringing classic theatre to the popular audiences defined his approach to his work and the work of those with whom he collaborated.

## Conclusions

It becomes evident that, when one reads theatre criticism, one should bear in mind the potentially different criteria which critics may be applying -- particularly when the production is a period piece such as the Victorian operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan. Critics may have differing

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<sup>24</sup>Wetzsteon, "Joe Papp Gets Big Ideas," 16.

<sup>25</sup>Grubb, 49.

<sup>26</sup>Wetzsteon, "Joe Papp Gets Big Ideas," 16.

<sup>27</sup>Wetzsteon, "Joe Papp Gets Big Ideas," 16.



but appropriately valid basis for their evaluation. It is important to be aware of and to understand the various approaches that are possible when both producing and evaluating a musical like *The Pirates of Penzance*.

Each director or producer has his own goals which he sets out to accomplish in a production, choosing the approach best suited to these goals. The informed critic should examine the work in terms of how well these goals are met, grounding the criticism in appropriate criteria.

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## Author Biography

Brian David Phillips is a lifelong educator, academic, and more. He has taught in higher education in Taiwan for forever and a day – well, over thirty-one years in the English Department at National Chengchi University. His doctorate in Comparative Literature is from National Taiwan University where he worked in Interactive Drama for his doctoral research. He is the founder and organizer of the Taiwan Virtual Reality Meetup which encourages developers and members of the public to explore and develop new ways to employ the new media of virtual reality in new and exciting ways.