Stages, Steps and Stars

- The evolution of the musical theatre, it's essential elements and its innovators

Overture

Few would deny America's claim to be the birthplace of The Stage Musical or Musical Play, what is now known simply as the Musical. However, without careful examination of the evolution of the essential elements of the wider Musical Theatre and those considered to be the innovators, America's claim taken at face value would be too simplistic as it can be said that these innovations had their roots in at least two other continents of the world.

Nevertheless, what these innovators developed into The Musical has become a world-wide phenomenon and an indispensable part of the commercial success of the theatre across the world. A survey of the theatre listings in mid-2022 revealed 20 musicals playing on Broadway and a staggering 40 musicals across London.

Some 150 years since the stage Musical Play was first introduced in its embryonic forms, the appeal of The Musical is undiminished as a musical art form and is an important commercial element of the theatre scene in the Americas, in Europe and in large areas of Asia. Indicative of this success, Andrew Llloyd-Webber's smash hit *Phantom Of The Opera* is now in its 36th year in London, having grossed worldwide around $6 billion from an audience of 140 million people in 35 countries across the world.

What gives this theatrical entertainment its enduring appeal? How did it evolve? What are the principal milestones and benchmarks that mark its evolution and who were the innovators that set the standards and created the vital elements that make up a successful musical beyond those labelled in the playbills as their principal creators? Should we see the musical simply an entertainment or should we be seeking deeper meanings, objectives and intents?

In the following pages we shall try to answer these questions and to identify and celebrate the lives of those who are regarded as the pioneers. We shall examine not only the successes and triumphs but also the failures and the flops??

This is a journey beginning as early as mankind itself, but most importantly from the beginning of the last half of the 19th century, evolving over the first 25 years of the 20th century, through

the ‘Silver Era’ between the two World Wars and into and out of the ‘Golden Era’ from the Second World War and into the 1960’s. We shall also look at the developments of The Musical after the end of the Golden Era and to present day, noting the unchanging elements of the musical but also the more progressive view of the musical in the 21st century.

Although what we now understand as The Musical is central to our journey, we shall also include the work and careers of those who were part of the wider musical theatre and, though not regarded as being on the direct roadway to The Musical, nevertheless contributed to the musical theatre in its wider arena, the thesis being that every act or production with original music content contributed to the domain of what I shall refer to as The Musical Theatre.

Growing up in post-war Britain and living in the provinces, opportunities to witness much of what is my own experience of the ‘musical theatre’ in live performances in the West End, or even less so on Broadway were extremely limited, my own exposure or experience of the genre being at the cinema and even on radio. I shall not limit my writing therefore exclusively to the stage musical, but to the medium of the cinema (Hollywood) too. This would have been the experience of a large part of the population at the time and much of the success of the musicals of what I shall refer to as the ‘silver era’ (inter-world war years) and the golden era (post war to the 1960’s) owes much to the cinema.

The intention is not to write a totally comprehensive history of The Musical Theatre’s evolution or to critically analyse the musical compositions, the lyrics or indeed the strengths or weaknesses of the works themselves. I will leave this to others; to this end I particularly refer readers to Alec Wilder’s 1972 publication *American Popular Song* and Joseph P Swains 1990 publication *The Broadway Musical, A Critical And Musical Survey.* Lerner??? The intention is to create an easily absorbed, readable and enjoyable potted history and review of the ***Stages, Steps and Stars*** which comprise the popular Musical Theatre in all its dimensions and forms.

Part 1

The beginning…….to 1914

Let's Start At The Very Beginning ….'

(*The Sound of Music,* Rodgers and Hammerstein)



(Picture *from online Word search*)

..of course, a very good place to start! But when or where is the beginning?

Clearly, since mankind has been on this planet and organised himself into social and geographical groupings and found a voice, there have been performers and singers, and evidence from images found in cave dwellings in Europe, such as the pre-historic caves at Lascaux, Dordogne, France suggests that caveman liked to sing, dance and make music, and it has been suggested that early man had discovered the basic science of acoustics and had identified the most suitable spaces and caverns where sound and light best served his desire to perform. We might say that what was learned in these caves formed the basis of the science and design of the theatres that were to follow. Don't we describe the large interiors of theatres and concert halls as 'cavernous'?

Although it might be around the second half of the 19th century that the Musical Play or Musical emerged, perhaps with the production of *The Black Crook* in New York City in 1866, it is without doubt arguable that every aspect of music and theatrical performance which pre-dates it contributed directly or indirectly to the emergence of the musical.

To discover some of these early influences we leap forward from caveman to around 500 years BC, the first known theatre being the Greek Theatre of Dionysus, Athens, originally

acting as a venue for religious festivals. It is there that we discover that a poet named Thespis was featured, Thespis becoming recognised as the founder of tragic drama and from which we derive the term Thespian to denote an actor to this day.

The Theater of Pompey in 55BC, Rome's first permanent amphitheatre, was built for a range of theatrical events including plays, pantomimes and musical events, as well as the gladiatorial expositions for which they are best remembered. Designed to enhance the acoustics and the view of the mass audiences (as large as 20,000 spectators), its semi-circular form formed the basic design of what was to become the standard audience blueprint. Expansion of the Roman Empire from 27BC into the 15th Century resulted in such theatres being built across Europe and into North Africa, the culture of each country being added to the range of entertainment, notably adding tribal or traditional music and movement to the performances. In addition, the range of musical instruments increased as well as the range of the music itself from the quills of the European composers.

In the context of the subject of this book, the development of opera (opus or work), a collaboration of composer, librettist, set designer and costumier can be said to be the next important step, bringing together all the musical and performing arts. Monterverdi's opera *L'Orfeo* first performed in Mantua, Italy in 1607 was the first major example, with his score listing around 41 instruments, such works spreading soon thereafter to Germany, France and England, in the latter case taken up in the works of Henry Purcell, the high point being in the first third of the 19th Century and into the early 20th Century where recordings and technology brought such singers as Caruso and Maria Callas to public attention. Opera was most usually, but not exclusively, sung in Italian.

In 18th century England a form of opera, *ballad opera,* such as John Gray's *The Beggar's Opera* with lyrics written to the tunes of popular songs, was widely known and influential, and the 19th century saw the development of the widely attended and popular music halls which brought light musical entertainment to the working classes, spawning such stars as Dan Leno, (the first pantomime dame) Marie Lloyd and male impersonator Vester Tilley.

Arising out of opera, the 19th Century also saw the development of operetta, notably that of French composer Jacques Offenbach with *Orpheus in the Underworld* and *La Belle Helene*. Offenbach went on to write more than 100 operettas. The *Gallop Infernal* in the final act of Orpheus is still heard nightly in Paris' Moulin Rouge as the well-known accompaniment to the Can-Can. Operetta contained spoken dialogue as well as song. Though European opera and operetta strongly influenced the development of the musical theatre, it was not exclusively so.

As well as the development of musical performance of opera, operetta and music hall, the music that came out of the European religions can also be cited as influences in the future musical theatre, especially from the Christian and Jewish faiths, where music played a large part in service and ceremony and was experienced by followers of those faiths, sometimes their first musical experience.

In England, the 1870's saw the emergence of the hugely influential Gilbert and Sullivan comic operas, fusing Gilbert's libretto and lyrics with the music of Arthur Sullivan, the first time

perhaps when the musical play, the music and the lyrics were integrated to provide a tuneful entertainment popular with the emerging English middle classes. Significantly, the lyrics were seen to be at least as prominent as the music in order for the audience to follow the plot, the lyricist being given equal billing and credit as the composer, unlike in opera or even operetta where the librettist and lyricist were hardly mentioned.

The second half of the 19th century also saw an explosion of theatres across Europe's major cities and into the provinces, each country reflecting its own culture in its offerings. This era also saw the development of the mechanical and electrical stage apparatus that enabled the theatre productions to add spectacle, sound and moving scenery.

Dance had also developed as an important feature of musical entertainment in parallel with the music itself, the dance sometimes being incidental to the action, added for spectacle or pure entertainment, whilst in other cases becoming part of the action itself, or expressing mood or emotion, this distinction between incidental dance and integrated plot dance being evident in the musical today. The styles of dance ranged from classical ballet to dances which represented the ethnic characteristics of the nationalities or regions of their origin, such as English clog dancing or Irish jigs and these formed the bases of the type of dance that became part of the development of the stage musical, albeit first introduced as acts or performances in music hall, vaudeville or similar.

Doo-Dah! Doo-dah

(Stephen Foster, Camptown Races)

"The Father of American Music"



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Stephen Collins Foster was born on 4th July 1826 and died at the age of 38 on January 13th 1864, one year before the end of the American Civil War. Since 1967 January 13th is commemorated in the USA as Stephen Foster Day acknowledging the widely accepted view that he is "The Father of American Music". He was born in Lawrenceville, Pennsylvania to Ulster Scots and English parents, the youngest of ten children. His father, William Barclay

Foster, was a politician and businessman, and his mother Eiza Clayland Tomlinson, who was ten years younger than her husband, was from a wealthy family of Maryland slaveholders.

Stephen Collins Foster, musician, composer and lyricist, wrote around 200 songs which can be called the first American popular songs, later the basis of the development into Tin Pan Alley and then the musical the theatre. Described as periodic, parlour, plantation and minstrel music, Foster's themes reflected attitudes and life of pre-Civil War 19th century America, and in particular Southern themes of home, country life and the position of the black skinned population, though Foster never did live in the Southern States.

In his early life Foster proved to be a gifted musician and became a privately educated man, studying Latin, Greek and mathematics as well as music. He taught himself piano, clarinet, guitar and flute, with a brief spell at Jefferson College, Canonsburg, Pennsylvania.

It was in Pennsylvania, one of a group of Northern States, that he wrote his most famous songs, including *Oh Susanna*, 1848, *Camptown Races* in 1850, *The Old Folks at Home* (or *Swanee River*) in 1851 and *Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair* in 1854, many Southern themes, minstrel songs and performed in blackface. With somewhat revised lyrics from those that would now appear racist and offensive, *The Old Folks at Home* is still Florida's state song, the Swanee River being Florida's second longest river, flowing 246 miles through South Georgia into the Gulf of Mexico. In fact, though associated with the Swanee River, Foster never did visit Florida.

Living in an era before composers earned their living through the royalties earned by their copyrighted songs, Foster generally earned just a single payment for the sale of a song to a publisher, or a few cents by selling copies of the music and lyrics to performers, such as the minstrel show performers. The original blacked face Christy Minstrels adopted *Oh! Susanna* as their signature or theme song and in 1849 Foster had eight songs in minstrel shows.

In time his songs took on a more sympathetic and humane view of the life of the black slave and his songs matured into more refined parlour songs, many to be taken up by the piano-playing female of the sophisticated and better educated families. He also wrote hymns and a large number of instrumental pieces, drawing on his early studies of the music of the great European composers such as Mozart.

The struggles of the American Civil War (1861-1864) which saw the country torn apart by largely slavery issues, brought uncertainty to his writing, though he did write songs specifically tailored for that conflict, such as *Willie Has Gone to War*, but his popularity had waned and by the end of the war he was separated from his wife and daughter and living in poverty in New York where he died on 13 July 1864, when a few days earlier he had apparently fallen onto a washbasin at a lowly New York hotel, gashing his neck and face. He is buried in Allengheny Cemetery near his boyhood home.

When he died, his leather wallet contained only 37 cents and a scrap of paper with the words, "dear friends and gentle hearts", later to inspire the composer Sammy Fein and lyricist Bob Hilliard's song, *Dear Hearts and Gentle People* made popular in the 1949 recordings of Dinah Shore, Gordon McCrea and Bing Crosby.

Foster's music was popular into the 20th century and was sung by many of the popular ballad singers of the era. Bing Crosby sang *The Old Folks at Home* in the 1935 movie *Mississippi* and he frequently featured it in his performances, as he also did in a recording of 1940 of Foster's last song, *Beautiful Dreamer*, published posthumously,. It has featured in diverse musical styles and has featured in more than a dozen films from the 20th and 21st century and more recently, even in *Far Cry's New Dawn* video game. In his 1975 *Hungry Years* album, Neil Sedaka includes his song *Stephen,* a tribute to the "Father of American music"

"Stephen, let me sing your song
I know you held it for so long
I'll sing and play for you
So you can touch the world again"

The Stephen Foster Stakes, an American thoroughbred horse race is run each year at Churchill Downs, Louisville, Kentucky named in his honour where *My Old Kentucky Home* is played as the horses parade pre-race, a reference to one of his most famous songs, *Camptown Races*, published in 1850.

"De Camptown ladies sing this song,
Doo-da, Doo-da,
De Camptown racetrack's five miles long
Oh, doo-da-day"

Though Stephen Foster cannot be identified unequivocally with the musical theatre which was yet to evolve, he was the first to make his living from writing popular songs, which then evolved into Tin Pan Alley and later into Broadway, and his work marks a milestone in the history of the American popular song. Admired, remembered and acknowledged by those who followed him including Irving Berlin who mentions *Swanee River* in this 1910 international hit *Alexanders Ragtime Band* ,and by George Gershwin with his first hit *Swanee* written in 1919, Stephen Foster's name will endure as The Father of American Music.

The life of Stephen Foster is honoured on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh with the Stephen Foster Memorial and the Stephen Foster Memorial Museum which holds many of Foster's compositions and memorabilia. A statue of Stephen Foster by Giuseppe Moretti with an Afro-American banjo player at his feet stood in Schenley Plaza in Pittsburg until 2018 until it was felt to be inappropriate and racist. The statue is now to be located as part of an exhibition of 14 other similarly 'inappropriate statues' at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.

"…..THE MOST PREPOSTEROUS PEG TO HAND BALLETS ON THAT WAS EVER SEEN"

(Charles Dickens)



(Wikepedia)

In 1842, at the age of 30 Charles Dickens, England's most famous novelist of the period, with his first five novels already having made him a sensation in the USA as well as in England, made his first visit to the USA in the company of his wife Catherine. Hailed as a social reformer as well as a brilliant novelist, Dickens was initially feted wherever he appeared at the numerous celebratory events held in his honour.

At first intrigued by the New World he was to discover, he became disenchanted with what he saw as the vulgarities of the American way of life, finding Americans overbearing, insensitive and motivated by money. He was also fervently dismayed by slavery and the lives of those bought into this iniquity and which was indirectly reflected in the songs of Foster. Eventually this was to create ill-feeling between him and his hosts, and it would be another 26 years, four years after the death of Foster and only two years before his own death, that Dickens returned in 1868.

By the time of his return American popular music had moved on, notably with the production in New York of *The Black Crook*, in the opinion of many the first popular musical presentation conforming to The Musical Play or The Musical. A romantic comedy with a libretto by Charles M Barras and a selection of music arranged by Thomas Baker, it contained some adaptations of existing songs or music and some new compositions and had a running time of five and a half hours. However, It was largely its spectacular staging and the skimpiness of the skin-coloured costumes of the 70 lady dancers out of the cast of around 100 which created much of its attractiveness resulting in its record breaking 474 performances and subsequent revivals in America and London (1872) and eventually a film in 1916.

Purists argue that due to the absence of a unified and musically integrated story, it was nothing but a hotchpotch of theatrical entertainment and not a Musical Play, with many moralists and critics condemning the piece, Dickens again entering the fray on his second visit with his analysis that *"…it is the most preposterous peg to hang ballets on that was ever seen. The people who act in it have not the slightest idea of what it is all about"*. At the time Dickens was not to know that six of his novels would themselves be taken as the basis of musicals in

the 20th century with various degrees of success, *Oliver*, based on this novel *Oliver Twist,* being the most successful, marking what was the beginning of the late 20th century British dominance of the musical in London's West End and on Broadway.

The Black Crook is often omitted in an historical review of the evolution of The Musical Play. However, it can equally be said that, like so much musical and theatrical entertainment that existed in its various forms, it cannot be dismissed on such a purist basis that sometimes leads to its exclusion. Many examples exist of thinly based plots or stories that form the basis of yet popular and successful musicals in the 150 years since.

BLACKFACE AND THE MINSTREL SHOWS

"Come listen all you gals and boys
I'se jist from Tuckyhoe,
I'm goin' to sing and little song,
My name is Jim Crow"



(Word online picture)
Minstrelsy can be dated back to the 1820's when Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice performed his song and dance routine in New York City in 1828, popularising a traditional slave song called *Jump Jim Crow*. Today the term Jim Crow is used to describe the system of segregation and discrimination that blighted American society into the late 20th century particularly in the Southern states, though Rice, a white man, actually came from the north, having been born in New York City in 1808.

There had been blackface performers before Rice, but in the 1830's Rice, a tall man of at least six feet in height, began performing the act that made him famous, painting his face black and wearing shabby dress, imitating a white man's impersonation of a southern slave, singing, dancing and speaking in a stereotyped, mocking caricature, usually as part of a variety show or as an entr'acte in another show. His act became a sensation, and he gained fame in the USA, and in England in 1836 he performed to sell-out audiences by which time he was now creating his own plays with variants on the Jim Crow persona. In 1837 he married his English bride, Charlotte Bridget Gladstone and they had four children, two of whom died in babyhood. Suffering ill-health in the last twenty years of his life he died in 1860 at the age of 52, his death also apparently alcohol-related, and though at one time he had enjoyed and displayed great wealth, he died penniless, and his burial was paid by public subscription.

By 1840 a group calling themselves the Virginia Minstrels further developed minstrelsy with a programme of singing and dancing in blackface to the accompaniment of fiddle, banjo, tambourine and early bone castanets. They usually performed in New York City using in particular established songs from the Stephen Foster era, and in the next thirty years when such entertainment was at its height, there were around ten theatres in New York mostly devoted to such entertainment.

During its heyday numerous other blackface groups emerged adding novelty acts, dancers and comedians, each act continuing to use the stereotype plantation caricatures, often appearing foolish and ignorant, but portrayed as happy and content with their lot.

An important figure in the history of minstrelsy, and now a genuinely black African-American but working with white blackface performers, was William Henry Lane, more famously known as Master Juba, born around 1825 whose birth-place and parentage is uncertain but who by 1840 was living in the notorious Five Points District of New York where, in 1842, his dance was witnessed by Dickens during his stay during his 1842 American tour.

Dickens American Notes written later in 1842 describes his dance, *'…. Single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross-cut; Snapping his fingers, rolling his eyes, turning in his knees, presenting the backs of his legs in front, spinning about on his toes and heels like nothing but to the man's fingers on the tambourine; dancing with two left legs, two right legs, two wooden legs, two wire legs, two spring legs-all sorts of legs and no legs what is this to him? And in what walk of life, or dance of life, does man ever get such stimulating applause as thunders about him, when, having downs his partner off her feet, and himself too, he finishes by leaping gloriously on the bar counter, and calling for something to drink, with a chuckle of 1,000,000 off counter feet Jim Crows…..'*.

Dicken's witness of Lane's act earned Lane the additional title of 'Boz's Juba', to add to the name of Master Juba, Boz being the pen-name that Dickens adopted early in his career. (Dickens had developed Boz from the name Moses, the name he had given to his younger brother after a character in Oliver Goldsmith's, The Vicar of Wakefield, Moses becoming Boses, and then eventually shortened to Boz).

In 1848 Juba toured in England with an otherwise white but blackface minstrel group called the Ethiopian Serenaders, Juba himself wearing blackface obscuring his real ethnic identity, and he became a sensation throughout the British Isles.

His dance techniques, as well as displaying his ethnic origins, also incorporated Irish jig and clog dances as well as other European dancing styles. Juba was therefore highly influential in the development of American tap dance and the other styles of dance which became an essential part of musical entertainment thereafter and which was to have its heyday in the musicals of the pre-second world war era, especially in the hands of such immortals as Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly.

Minstrelsy is without doubt and important stage in the development of the musical and is still evident in the next step, the era of Harrigan and Hart.

Harrigan and Hart

'As we marched, marched, marched
In the Mulligan Guards'



Though having an Irish grandfather who had emigrated to American in the 18th century, Edward 'Ned' Harrigan was born to what has been described as Protestant family on 26 October 1844 in the squalid and seedy conditions of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, one of 4 surviving children of a family of 13. His parents divorced when he was 18. He worked as a caulking labourer in shipyards which took him to San Francisco and where he started writing lyrics to popular songs as a pastime, eventually becoming a professional entertainer, and developing as a comedian, actor, singer, dancer, playwright, lyricists and producer, initially singing in blackface to his own banjo accompaniment. He was also an exponent of clog dancing, one of his specialities, and he excelled doing impressions of other foreign characters.

Harrigan had two early partners, Alex O'Brien and Sam Rickey who both proved to be drunken inebriates and both ending up in the gutter.

Tony Hart, born Anthony J Cannon in Worcester, Massachusetts on 25th July 1855, began his career in Boston but teamed up with Harrigan when they met in Chicago in 1871, Hart being only 16 at the time, henceforth changing his name from Cannon to Hart, a more satisfying accompanying name alongside that of Harrigan. Hart, who was slight and short, had escaped reform school to find his way in the world of entertainment. Starting in the circus, he was already a highly rated performer as a singer, particularly as a result of singing *Put Me In My Little Bed*, a tearjerker, which he sang impersonating a girl and being described as a genius who "*…sung like a nightingale, danced like a fairy, and acted like a master comedian".* Hart performed frequently as a female character, sometimes in blackface and especially as an African washerwomen he name Rebecca Allup.

Harrigan and Hart met in Chicago in 1870 and they enjoyed their first success in Boston in 1871 at the famous Howard Athenaeum, also known as The Old Howard Theatre, moving to New York and beginning a long successful run at the Theatre Comique devising musical variety shows using Irish, German and black characters, mimicking characters observed on Manhattan streets, and in 1873 they hit the jackpot with a production named *The Mulligan Guard* which included a song and routine called *The Mulligan Guard March*. This was to be the first of 17 shows and plays they devised over the next 17 years, many with the *Mulligan Guard* theme. Mulligan was depicted as Irish immigrant Dan Mulligan in ill-fitting uniform and performing inept military drill. The Mulligan Guard March became known all over the world and was mentioned in Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim,* noting that British troops in India used it, replacing New York street names with those from towns and villages around their cantonment.

In 1876 Harrigan married Annie, daughter of English-born composer David Braham, born 1834, whose family had emigrated to America in 1849 when Braham was 15. Braham was a talented musician studying and mastering firstly the harp and later the violin (the violin a more practical instrument to travel with than the harp). In his early career Braham had written for a number of producers including for P T Barnum. However, his daughter's choice as a husband opened up new opportunities and he is best remembered as the collaborator and composer of music for his son-in-law's Mulligan productions between 1878 and 1884, subsequently earning him the title as 'The American Offenbach'.

So successful was their partnership at the Theatre Comique that by 1876 they had taken over the theatre itself. One of the most popular productions in the Mulligan series was *Mulligan Guard's Ball* of 1880 drawing the commendation that *…'America has produced nothing more national, more distinctly its own, than these plays of the Irish in New York.'*

Harrigan, with his father-in-law supplying the composition, wrote the story lines, the lyrics, produced, directed and performed re-enactments of real-life occurrences taken from observations on the streets of Manhattan. The normally lower- and middle-class audiences adored the humorous, sentimental and catchy songs as part of a loosely connected plot or storyline – and though perhaps best described as variety, the shows developed with a story line, interspersed with songs and dance routines, marking a move towards the musical theatre.

In the first years of the 1880's the partnership had built The New Theatre Comique, though this was devastated by fire in 1884, marking the beginning of the end of the Harrigan and Hart era.

Their successful partnership ended in a split in 1885 partly caused by Harrigan's practice of using family members in their productions, (several went on to have successful performing careers) alienating Hart and one year later Hart died aged only 36 having spent his last days in a mental institution and dying from the effects of syphilis. Harrigan continued as an entertainer until 1893, opening his own Harrigan's Theatre in 1890 and he continued writing plays and performing until 1910, dying in 1911.

Later George M Cohan (see later) wrote a tribute to Harrigan in a song *H-A-double R-=G-A-N spells Harrigan*, and in 1985, a musical, *Harrigan 'n Hart,* was produced at Broadway's Longacre Theatre, though it had a very short run of only 4 actual performances.

We Sail The Ocean Blue

(HMS Pinafore, Gilbert and Sullivan)



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In the hot London summer of 1879, the third collaboration of librettist and lyricist William Schwenk Gilbert and composer Arthur Seymour Sullivan was receiving an enthusiastic reception at London's Opera Comique after a slow start. Unlike the first two productions, Trial By Jury and The Sorcerer for which Gilbert and Sullivan were paid a commission, HMS Pinafore was the first production for the new formal partnership of Gilbert, Sullivan and theatrical empresario Richard D'Oyly Carte, the latter a trained musician himself who left composing and performing, and his father's business as an instrument maker to concentrate on his theatrical management business. This business ranged from managing theatres for their owners, to representing foreign composers in London, such as Charles Gounod, to acting as agent for actors and musicians. Under the new arrangement, the three partners would each make an initial investment of £1,000 and share the profits of Pinafore and subsequent productions of the G&S works.

Encouraged by the success of these new *'comic operas'* which filled the previous void for the middle classes between grand opera (usually performed in Italian) and the bawdy music hall, which was the entertainment of the working classes, Carte decided to explore the possibility of taking Pinafore to America. So, on 16th June 1879 Carte set sail from Liverpool for New York on the new Cunard ship, *Gallia* for what turned out to be an eight-day crossing, arriving on 24th June.

Carte's arrival in New York revealed an array of musical theatrical offerings which included Harrigan and Harts latest offering at the Theatre Comique, *The Mulligan Guards Ball*, *The Black Crook* at Niblo's Garden, *Die Fledermaus* performed in German at the Thalia Theatre and *La Belle Helene* performed in French at the elaborate Booth's Theatre built by the famous Shakespearian acting family of that name.

Moreover, he must have been astounded, and indeed perturbed, (yet encouraged) on arrival do discover that, rather than bringing *Pinafore* to America, it was already being performed, or had already been performed at twelve venues across New York, one even with an all-male cast, one a totally black cast, one a Yiddish edition and even *'The Baby Pinafore'*. It seems that similar productions had been performed in Baltimore, San Francisco, Philadelphia and Boston. There was no international copyright and these pirated productions, of various quality, had already been secreted across the Atlantic. Returning to for England on 30th July, Carte vowed that this must not happen again. *'Pinafore'* was even used as a product branding and in advertising of products such as soap, cotton and cigars and Gilbert's line for Sir Joseph Porter, The First Lord of the Admiralty, *"what never?" "No, never, well hardly ever"* had entered into America's vernacular. The Pinafore craze had indeed hit America.

On his return to England , Carte arranged with his two partners that they must take their own production of *Pinafore* to New York and that, at the same visit, they would premier their next production, *The Pirates of Penzance*, in New York. Gilbert was well advanced in his contribution to the new work, but Sullivan was yet to complete the music, the lyrics always being written first.

The party of Carte, Gilbert, Sullivan and Sullivan's musical assistant, Alfred Cellier, together with some strong members of the chorus, subsequently returned to New York on the liner *Bothnia* on 5th November 1879 to produce their own *Pinafore,* with the unfinished *Pirates of Penzance* in their bags. Sullivan and Cellier had become acquainted when as boys they were both choristers at London's Chapel Royal, the private chapel of Queen Victoria within the grounds of St James Palace, where both had become known to The Queen herself. Also in attendance was Blanche Roosevelt, an American soprano who had made her opera debut at the Royal Italian Opera in 1876, and who now was to take the leading soprano roles in *Pinafore* and the planned *Pirates* in the New York productions at the Fifth Avenue Theatre in arrangement with theatre manager John T Forde.

The party received an astonishing reception from a fleet of *Pinafore* boats and tugs off New York, some welcoming the party, others, representing the producers of the pirated productions still playing in New York, attempting to hinder *Bothnia's* progress into New York Bay. However, in a letter to his mother after his arrival, Sullivan described his American hosts as "…wonderfully kind and hospitable".

These productions were directed under the stern eye and ear of Gilbert in addition to his contribution as librettist and lyricist. For Gilbert's original London production, he had demonstrated his skill and thoroughness in his additional role by studying and replicating the rigging and deck of *HMS Victory*, then still afloat at Portsmouth Harbour, and having the naval uniforms made by a naval tailor in that city. Gilbert himself appeared in the chorus at the opening of Pinafore in New York on 1st December 1879, no doubt goading his fellow players along the way. Playing opposite Blanche Roosevelt as Captain Corcoran in *Pinafore* was Irish tenor John Clark who more operatically renamed himself Signor Broccolini.

This authentic English production was an unparalleled success, with Gilbert, Sullivan and Carte being called to the stage by the appreciative and admiring audience on the opening night.

Simultaneous with the nightly performances of *Pinafore*, the same cast immediately went into rehearsal and production of the next opera, *The Pirates of Penzance*, which had travelled with them across the Atlantic. This was a stupendous effort for all concerned, but especially for Sullivan who had yet to complete the second act and to write the overture. This task was made all the more difficult when Sullivan found that he had left a large part of his incomplete second act back in England and much of the success in completing this lay with Alfred Cellier, whose hand can be seen on the original score, now displayed at New York's Morgan Library. Also, Sullivan was in ill health from a troublesome kidney disorder, something that would mire his entire future life and cause his future premature death at the age of 58. The orchestra rehearsal of the overture took place only on the morning of the opening on 31st December 1879. In an apparent attempt to calm his nerves, Sullivan is said to have indulged in an early supper of oysters and champagne! He needn't have worried since *Pirates* received a great New York reception further cementing the already successful, influential and lasting legacy of Gilbert and Sullivan in America.

Simultaneous with the preparation for the opening in New York for its apparent world-premier performance, Carte set about securing the English copyright by arranging for a one-off performance of *Pirates* in a small theatre in Paignton, Devon on 30th December 1979. This was a quickly scrambled and under-rehearsed production under the direction of Carte's London office assistant, the former Helen Black who had at one time been on Carte's books as an actress with a stage name of Helen Lenoir, but who, with an impressive academic background and a talent for organisation, had been brought by Carte into his busy office. Little could have anyone have foreseen that later, following the death of Carte's wife during the later London run of The Mikado in 1885, Helen would become the second Mrs Richard D'Oyly Carte and become stepmother to his two sons. Moreover, she would become a vital negotiator in keeping Gilbert and Sullivan together in later years when their relationship came under strain.

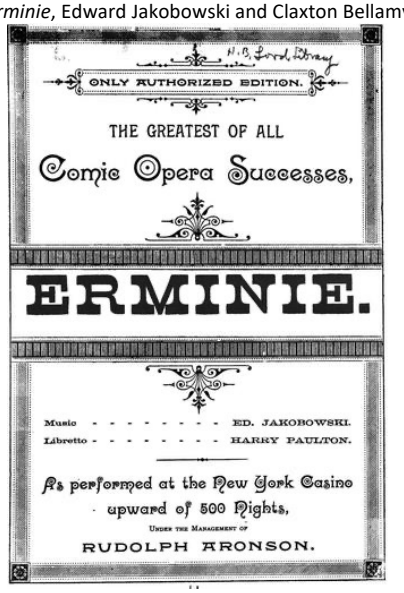
With the considerable organisational ability of Helen Lenoir who herself travelled to New York in early 1880 to join the triumphant Gilbert, Sullivan and Carte, four companies were established to tour *Pirates* across America at more than 100 venues in the first half of 1880, further establishing and extending the reputation of Gilbert and Sullivan across America. It must have been a huge logistical task but one which further enhanced Helen Lenoir's credentials as an organiser and manager.

The New York production closed in late March 1880, having established the new phenomenon of the comic opera as a model of what was to develop as the musical play and eventually as the musical. It's essential elements of story told with dialogue and with lyrics, easily absorbed and enjoyable non-challenging music, its form and structure, and Gilbert's directing and production and rehearsal techniques would become the model that would endure.

Gilbert and Sullivan, though recognised as an important step in the development of the musical, acknowledged as such by the giants of the art that were to follow, other influences and elements were also emerging within America largely as a result of those who had, or were now arriving to make America their home evidenced by the range of diverse musical productions in New York in 1880 that played concurrently with *Pirates,* such as *The Mulligan Guards' Surprise* (of which we shall return later) at the Theatre Comique, *Les Noces d'Olivette (The Wedding of Olivette),* a French Opera Comique by composer Edmond Audran at the Bijou Opera House and the 'pantomime musical' *Humpty Dumpty*, the latter with comic actor George Fox who eventually played the role more than 1,400 times.

AH, WHEN LOVE IS YOUNG, ALL THE WORLD SEEMS GAY

(*Erminie*, Edward Jakobowski and Claxton Bellamy)



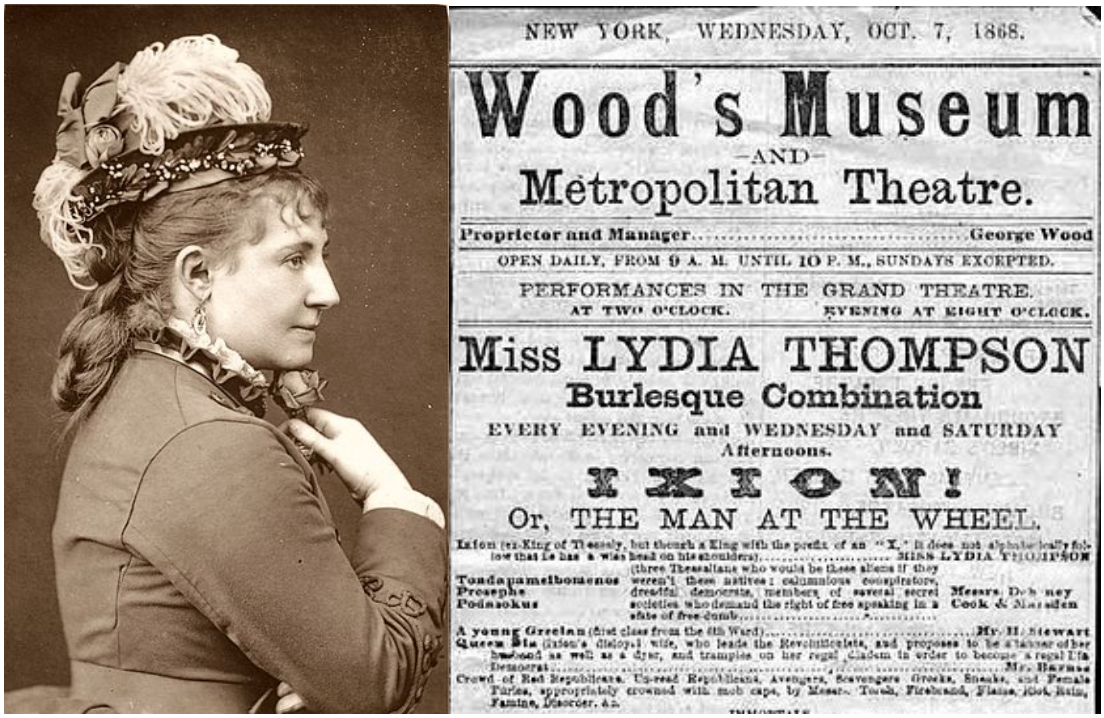
Transfer of comic opera from England to America was not solely the achievement of Gilbert and Sullivan, since in 1886 the comic opera *Erminie* by English composer Edward Jacobowski,, libretto by Harry Paulton and lyrics by Claxon Bellamy based upon a French melodrama, successfully transferred from London, where it had been moderately well received but not a sensational success, to New York playing 154 performances at the Casino Theatre. Jacobowski, (1856-1929) was born in London to parents of Vienesse and Polish extraction, but moved to Vienna at the age of 6 where he received a musical education, later honed in Paris, before returning to England in 1881, thereafter writing music for around a dozen Victorian burlesques (paradies) and comic operas of which *Erminie* was the most successful. In addition to its initial success, *Erminie* was revived in New York in 1893, 1899, 1903 and 1921. It also played successfully in Australia in 1889.

With more than 21 songs in *Erminie,* including an opening *'Around in a whirl we skip, dance and twirl, let each boy and girl be merry', 'Ah When Love Is Young, All The World Seems Gay', and 'All for glory the soldier's life',* there is more than a whiff of Gilbert and Sullivan in Jacobowski's work, but it nevertheless cemented the developing art of the musical play with storyline, 'plot' songs and extravagant costume and lavish scenery.

Married and divorced twice he died in a north London infirmary in 1929 and declared bankrupt with an estate of only £47.00.

A measure of the significance of *Erminie* is that the name *Erminia* was given to minor planet 705, a planet in the orbit of the sun discovered in 1910.

Lydia Thompson



NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, OCT. 7, 1868.

Wood's Museum

—AND—

Metropolitan Theatre.

Proprietor and Manager.....George Wood

OPEN DAILY, FROM 9 A. M. UNTIL 10 P. M., SUNDAYS EXCEPTED.

PERFORMANCES IN THE GRAND THEATRE.

AT TWO O'CLOCK. EVENING AT EIGHT O'CLOCK.

Miss LYDIA THOMPSON

Burlesque Combination

EVERY EVENING and WEDNESDAY and SATURDAY Afternoons.

I X I O N!

Or, THE MAN AT THE WHEEL.

Ixion (ex-King of Thessaly, but though a King with the prefix of an "X," it does not signify he ever was head on his shoulders).....Miss LYDIA THOMPSON

Tondapamelbonsenos, Prosepha, Podsnokus (three Thessalians who would be there shere if they weren't there natives: calumnious conspirators, dreadful democrats, members of several secret societies who demand the right of free speaking in a state of free dumb).....Messrs. Dobbs ney Cook & Marsden

A young Grecian (first class from the 6th Ward).....Mr. H. Stewart

Queen Dia (Ixion's disloyal wife, who leads the Revolutionists, and proposes to be a tanner of her husband as well as a dyer, and tramples on her regal Diadem in order to become a regal Ida Democrat).....Mrs. Barnes

Crowd of Red Republicans, Up-road Republicans, Avengers, Scavengers Greeks, Snakes, and Female Furies, appropriately crowned with mob caps, by Messrs. Torch, Firebrand, Flame, Hot Rain, Famine, Disorder, &c.

'……life and soul of the scene while onstage'.

The Gilbert and Sullivan comic operas and *Erminie* were not alone in complementing the English influence on the range of musical entertainment available in New York in the last quarter of the 19th century. Lydia (Eliza) Thompson, dancer, comedian, actor and producer, born in Covent Garden, London in 1838, and leaving home at the age of 14 and touring Russia, Germany, Austria, France and the Nordic countries, was to prove a sensation when in 1868 she appeared with *The British Blondes* in a Victorian Burlesque in New York named *Ixion* (Greek, meaning; strong native)– a six-month tour ultimately extended to 6 years, during which time she became the highest paid female entertainer in America. Though burlesque was primarily centred around humorous and sometimes risqué jokes and saucy costumes, it had not then developed into striptease, and would not do so until the turn of the 20th century. Audiences loved Lydia and her troupe's shows which also included wit, parody, song, dance,

music, cross-dressing and spectacle, the saucy costumes portraying a level of sexuality not witnessed before.

However, such presentation ultimately attracted anti-burlesque hysteria, particularly in New York, resulting in *Ixion* closing there in 1869 after 120 performances though grossing $370,000, prematurely going on a national tour over the next 4 years. The distaste of burlesque however continued to grow in the press and with the middle classes, the New York Times announcing it was time to "Exit British Burlesque", though Lydia was to return to America in 1886 and 1891 and 1894.

Back in England in 1874 she had resumed her successful career in burlesque but also in comic opera such as Alfred Cellier's *The Sultan of Mocha* and the French operetta *Babette.* She made her final performances in London in 1904 as the Duchesse du Albuquerque in *A Queen's Romance,* ending her career with a rhymed farewell address written for her by none other than W S Gilbert in whose play, *The Wedding March,* she had appeared during 1899 written under Gilbert's pseudonym of F Latour Tomline. She died in London in 1908, aged 70. She remains an important figure in the historical origins of the musical stage and especially for establishing the female at the centre of its future appeal. She also has the distinction of a US mail ship bearing the name of *SS Lydia Thompson* being brought into service in ??, surviving a grounding on Shag Rock, Orcas Island, WA in December 1898 and continuing into service until 1936, latterly as the tug *Monitor.*

Picture?

Vesta Tilley

"England's greatest recruiting sergeant"

By the 1870's the English Music Hall, originating from the London taverns of the 16th and 17th centuries, was in its heyday, and as the name suggests, music was at the core of this 'man in the street' entertainment, though frequently accompanied with non-musical speciality novelty acts. 1874 saw the first London appearance of Matilda Alice Powles, born Worcester 1864. She was the second of thirteen children, her father Henry, (but known as Harry Ball), being a musician and master of ceremonies at the Theatre Royal, Gloucester, and she had begun her theatrical career appearing onstage at her father's theatre at the age six. At the age of 13 she played Robinson Crusoe as Portsmouth's New Theatre Royal and she was to become famous for her role at various times as Dick Whittington, though also playing female roles. Her father became her manager and by 1878 she had adopted the stage name of Vesta Tilley, Tilley being a shortform of her first given name, and Swan Vesta being a popular make of British made matches, (as well as the Latin name for a virgin). By 1890 she was England's highest paid woman and known as the 'London Idol'.

Early on in her career she began to impersonate famous male celebrities, her first character being *Pocket Sims Reeves,* impersonating Sims Reeves, a famous opera singer of the age. Her popularity grew into the 1880's playing other male roles such as policemen, clergymen and

servicemen, singing such songs as Burlington Bertie, having admitted that she felt she could express herself better when dressed as a male. In 1890 she married Walter de Freece, owner of music halls around Great Britain and he succeeded her father as her manager as well as writing songs for her.

Vesta Tilley toured the USA on six occasions appearing on the vaudeville circuit at a weekly salary of $600.

By 1914 and the start of World War One she and her husband undertook military recruitment drives with patriotic songs written by de Freece such as *Your King and Country Want You*, sometimes known by its first line, *We Don't Want to Lose You But We Think You Ought to Go,* and she earned the label as 'England's greatest recruitment sergeant' as she walked through her male audience touching the shoulders of the young men who could hardly refuse her plea to sign up for the King's Shilling. Her husband was knighed in 1919 thus making her Lady de Freece, and how later entered Parliament, serving as an MP until 1931. Vesta made her final appearance at London's Coliseum Theatre on 5th June 1920 at the age of 56. She and her husband retired to Monte Carlo in 1931 where Vesta continued to live after his death. She died in London in 1952 aged 88 and she was buried at Putney alongside her husband.

Her autobiography *Recollections of Vesta Tilley* was published in 1934 and her life was celebrated in the 1957 film *After the Ball.* Like Lydia Thompson, Vesta Tilley cemented the appeal of the female entertainer in theatrical musical entertainment, ensuring that into the future it would be largely female entertainers who headed the list of performers with star qualities.

J W Stebbings
October 2023