



Berwick Educational Association
' Secret Subversives: The truth about Gilbert and Sullivan'
A lecture by Dr Richard Moore
Friday 2nd February 2018 10am -1.00pm Berwick Voluntary Centre,
Tweed St, Berwick

Those who believe Gilbert and Sullivan to be conformist and 'twee' may revise their opinion in the wake of this study session. Gilbert, after all, was the man who dared to present the Prime Minister and top Cabinet figures on stage in a vaudeville burlesque, causing the Lord Chamberlain (the "Lord High Disinfectant") to put a ban on the production. In this session we shall look at the wit and wisdom of Gilbert and Sullivan but also discuss and see extracts from some lesser known works associated with one or other of the collaborators. Tom Stoppard acknowledges Gilbert as an influence, as did W.H. Auden. Samuel Beckett was an unapologetic fan. So why are these creative geniuses sometimes seen as staid and conventional? What can we learn from them about human nature both timelessly and in their own particular period?

In Mike Leigh's view Gilbert was a natural subversive. As he puts it, 'His merciless lampooning of the heartless constraints of laws and etiquette 'reveal him, underneath it all, to have been a genuine free spirit and a true anarchist'. This suggests that the Savoy Operas should not be seen as operetta – implying something rather frothy and glitzy – but as more in the mode of dry gin or (if you prefer it) an apparently bland dish that actually has a lot of bite. Naturally there were certain areas which Gilbert was prevented from exploring but often he is surprisingly daring. In one of his early extravaganzas people change sex behind a tree. In another a devil-figure facilitates a swapping of souls. Sometimes he is teasingly provocative even in sexual matters, as in the Fairy Queen's song in *Iolanthe* sung directly to the Leader of the Fire Brigade (who was in the first night audience) and referring to his notable hose. He – Captain Shaw – was a well-known ladies' man later involved in a scandalous adultery case – so Gilbert is here hardly innocent in writing a song about him.

Sullivan was in his own lifetime probably more honoured than Gilbert. When he studied at Leipzig he was regarded as more fully gifted with genius than Brahms and he was highly respected by composers such as the older but still living Rossini and (more surprisingly) by Stravinsky. In the comedy operas he sometimes felt that he was having to suppress his capacity for expressing genuine human emotion but some of the songs do manage this while others are remarkable for

their wit, their cosmopolitan range, their clever word-setting and their melodic fluency. In *The Grand Duke* – one of his lesser-known works – he exploits Viennese Waltz, Polish polonaise, the Spanish habañera and the Wagnerian march, proving himself a master of all of them. He also contributes a magnificent Greek chorus, a ‘gallope’ and a can-can, proving that he is nothing if not versatile and resourceful.

It is worth stressing that the Savoy Operas are only a small part of each of the collaborators’ work. Sullivan wrote a symphony, numerous choral works, many lieder and at least one significant oratorio. Gilbert wrote straight plays, sketches, and ‘scenes’, his last piece being about a man in the condemned cell awaiting execution for murder. His influences meanwhile go back to 18th century pantomime (very different from modern forms) and his legacy looks forward to Ayckbourn, Pinter, N.F. Simpson and even Joe Orton.

In this study morning we shall discover something of the range and variety of both creative artists and see excerpts from some of their lesser known – as well as more familiar – work. It is quite wrong to see them as passé and merely of their time. Come to the session and see why they are still valued, while also discovering what a wealth of hidden satire – including the dark and the esoteric - lies beneath a surface of innocent merriment.

The cost of the study morning is £9 including refreshments. All are welcome and no previous knowledge is assumed.

To book online, please click here <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/secret-subversives-the-truth-about-gilbert-sullivan-tickets-39837785890>

To book by mail, please fill in the booking form below, and mail to BEA, 7 Ravensdowne, Berwick-upon-Tweed TD15 1HX along with a cheque in favour of Berwick Educational Association.

If you have any queries, please email berwickea@gmail.com or phone Cian McHugh on 01289 303254

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(Secret Subversives)