

Tale of two companies

This was the original document from which an article was taken for the Surrey Mirror.



In the early years of the 20th century, a group of friends gathered together in the ballroom of a large house called Batts Hill. They sang songs from contemporary musicals and decided, in 1907, to put on a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* in the Market Hall in Redhill. Although the first run of the original D'Oyly Carte production of *The Mikado* had just been between March 1885 and January 1887, the operettas, including *The Pirates of Penzance*, were frequently revived and revivals were in production under the watchful eye of W S Gilbert at the Savoy Theatre from 1906 to 1909. What were the early ESOS productions like? Sadly, the only evidence is a small collection of contemporary photographs

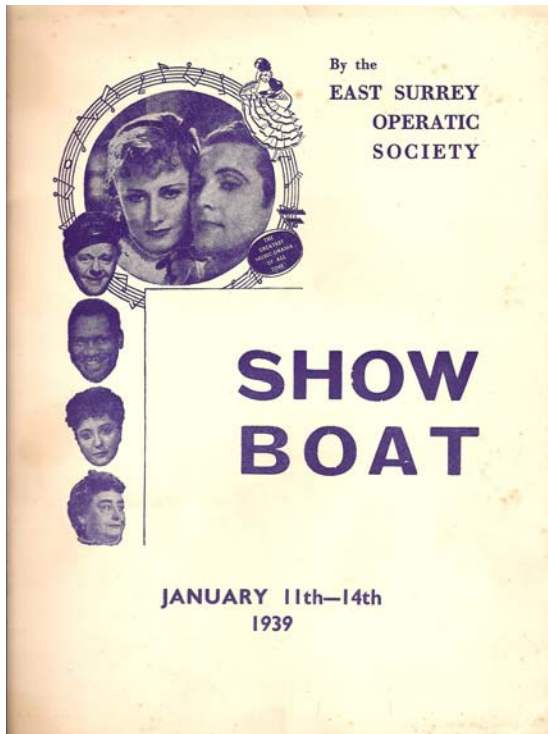
(which can be viewed elsewhere on the ESOS website) but they would have been relatively easy productions to direct because the D'Oyly Carte Company provided everything that was needed including full production notes based on Gilbert's book. This so-called Red Book was a boon for early directors; the formidable Miss Jessie Dukes was not only Conductor and Stage Manager but undoubtedly filled the present roles of Director and Choreographer as well. In later years the Red Book was considered to be a stifling restriction on the creativity of director and company. We cannot even be sure of the stage. It seems that the original layout of the old Market Hall had a stage at the western end where, later, some raised seating was installed and a balcony built.



Miss Jessie Dukes

The first review that we do have is for a special production in 1921 to raise money for "Warrior's Week", presumably the wounded soldiers of The Great War. "That brilliant band of amateur performers, the East Surrey Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society" put on not only G&S *Trial by Jury* but also two plays, *A Rest Cure* and *The Monkey's Paw*. "An additional feature which added to the success was the magnificent singing of Dr. Milner during the interval, who finely contributed songs, among which were selections from Elgar's *Fringes of the Fleet*." It is clear from the review that everyone had a great evening's entertainment. Unlike modern reviews, every participant is listed, including cast, stage crew and orchestra, the latter containing numerous members of the Gritton family who played the double bass, 'clarinet' and timpani and composed the incidental music to *The Monkey's Paw*. The society frequently put on straight plays as well as musical for some years including, in 1910, *The Bishop's Candlesticks*

based on an episode from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Both ESOS and The Opera Club have had extra concerts over the years, either to support a charity or to raise funds to finance productions. *A Musical Twist* is part of this tradition.



ESOS produced a number of G&S operas until *The Yeomen of the Guard* in 1931 but was always ready to try other musicals including new imports from America. In many of the early shows, the costume suppliers also provided numerous notes that were included in the programmes. The first production of *Show Boat* opened on Broadway in 1927 and could be seen at the Drury Lane Theatre the following year. ESOS was ready to tackle the show just before war broke out in 1939 and then again in 1962. Apart from a splendid programme, we have no information about the 1939 production but we do have a review for 1962. Both productions were

directed by the amazing Elsie Rendall who “proved ... her unwaning gift for bringing a mixed bunch of amateurs to a near-professional standard of accomplishment” for many years before and after the war. Continuing the tradition recorded in the 1921 review the Musical Director was Eric Gritton. When the old Market Hall was demolished to be replaced by the Harlequin, many people looked back with nostalgia at the ‘dear old Market Hall’ but many of the reviewers of this period make comments such as “one bears strongly in mind the extreme difficulty of staging what is at its professional best a highly spectacular play under the limitations the Redhill Market Hall imposes.”

Of all the ‘modern American’ shows, ESOS has found a special home in *Oklahoma!* The first performance was in 1958 with the special partnership of Andrew Glass as Curley and Molly Greaves as Laurey who gave “faultless performances and captured the hearts as the perfect young lovers”. All the cast “gave outstanding interpretations and made it difficult to realise that they were only amateurs”. ESOS went on to revisit *Oklahoma!* in 1973, 1987, 1992 and most





recently with a NODA Award winning performance in 2007 with a cast exclusively of young members.

Between 1964 and 1986 we have another source of information about the nature of ESOS productions due to a collection of 8mm films recorded by Jack Brough during 17 shows including *Kismet* (1972), *The Merry Widow* (1975) and *Pink Champagne* (1979), a version of *Die Fledermaus*. Sadly, there is no sound but two things are clear. Firstly, there is a steady improvement in the quality of the productions over this period. This is particularly marked by the two versions of *Brigadoon*. Compared with the rather formal 1964 version, the production in 1986 was much more lively and realistic. Secondly, it is evident that, at that time, the dancers were considered almost to be a different breed. Whenever there was a dancing number most of the chorus withdrew to the fringes of the admittedly miniscule Market Hall stage only to return when the dancing girls, often led by former Royal Ballet dancer Shirley Knight, had done their piece. In more recent years the distinction between principals, chorus and



dancers has become blurred. It is virtually impossible to be in the male chorus for *Guys and Dolls* (1991) and not be able to dance in 'Luck be a Lady Tonight', or for the whole cast to do the Lambeth walk in *Me and my Girl* (1997) to tap their hearts out in *Anything Goes!* (1995 and 1996).

ESOS has always tried to involve younger members, performing as the children in

The King & I (1971), *Carousel* (1959 and 1985), *Annie* (2006) and *The Sound of Music* (1989). Lately, special arrangements have been made to run summer workshops for younger members to have an exclusive production of *Honk!* in 2004 and then *Oklahoma!* in 2007.



Meanwhile, a number of members felt that they would rather perform works with a more operatic quality and a

proposal was put to the committee to revive a production by Gilbert and Sullivan. This was refused and so a rival group called *The Opera Club* was formed who put on their first production of *The Pirates of Penzance* with Elsie Short as Producer and Musical Director Joyce Hooper. Although the works of Gilbert and Sullivan were their first love the founder did not rule out performing other works including *The Beggar's Opera*. Elsie Short and Joyce Hooper provided a formidable team until 1958, when C. William (Billy) Morgan took over the production. He had been with the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company and sadly died just after the 1962 production of



The Yeomen of the Guard, after which Leonard Osborn took over production in 1963. He had been principal tenor with the D'Oyly Carte for fifteen years, and commanded loyalty, respect and affection from Opera Club performers with his ability to act any part better than any member of the society. Sadly we have no photos or reviews of the

first few performances but productions were strictly according to the Red Book which gave a reassurance that the production was as Gilbert intended. In fact, a study of engravings of original productions indicates that there were considerable deviations from the originals. The few reviews that we have testify to the high standard of performance from the start, at least with regards to the principals. Members of the chorus rarely got a mention. However, personal experience of the productions and comparisons with other contemporary amateur dramatic societies do indicate a very high standard. In a conversation with Leonard Osborn, he indicated that performances compared favourably, particularly in enthusiasm, with those of the professional D'Oyly Carte Company. When, finally, the copyright on G&S expired in 1980 new interpretations provided a fresh approach particularly when directed by



Alison Cooper. *Ruddigore* was transformed by 1920s flappers in 1988 and transferred to a wax works museum (1989) and *The Sorcerer* (1990) to a hospital for wounded soldiers during World War II complete with a royal visit. Since that time, we have enjoyed the combined talents of Alison Cooper and Angela Barker at Redhill and Polesden Lacey, and The Opera Club have added shows other than those of Gilbert and Sullivan to the repertoire, such as *The Beggars Opera* (1996 after waiting for 44 years!), *The Merry Widow* (1992, 1998), *Brigadoon*

(1999 with Clive Bowden as Director) and *Orpheus in the Underworld* directed by Nigel Wood. The most recent productions have included *Chess* (2003), a return to *Yeomen of the Guard* (2004), *Sweet Charity* (2005), *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (2006), *Children of Eden* (2007) and *The Music Man* (2008).

Meanwhile, ESOS produced a number of more operatic pieces including *The Count of Luxembourg* (1970), *La Belle Helene* (1984 and 1987) and *Orpheus in the Underworld* (1977 and 1992). *The Merry Widow* (1969) had a “delightful and excellently timed performance” by Molly Greaves although the male chorus “were by no means as clear in their diction or as powerful in their projection as the ladies”. By 1975 with Alison Cooper in the title role, the “men’s chorus was convincing, if a little animal, in its herd-like clamouring for Anna’s attentions in Act I, and its reactions to the various situations almost assumed the character and flavouring of a Walt Disney cartoon!” indicating a steady improvement in the quality of the staging. As one looks at the reviews one feature, apart from the evident improvement in the qualities of the productions, is the steady shortening of the articles. Some early reviews exhort residents of Reigate and Redhill to get the remaining tickets “later this week” proving that the reviewer was able to get his comments on the first night performance into that Thursday’s *Surrey Mirror*. Nowadays, despite more sophisticated technology, reviews tend to appear some weeks later.

Both societies have had the dream of putting on rather more of *Les Misérables* than *The Bishop’s Candlesticks* some time in the future. Meanwhile, until that becomes possible, both societies are coming together for a production of *Scrooge* between November 24th and 29th. So, let us put our hands together to say ‘Thank you very much’ for over 100 years of excellent performances as we look forward to a long and successful future from two superb societies.

Helier Dreux