



The Patter Post

*The newsletter of Lyric Theatre,
the performing arm of
the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of San José*

December 2020

Quarantine Update

The President's Tuppence

BY LARRY TOM

Time Will Tell

or

A Path from Holidays to Success

AS I AM writing this in November, 2020, I think back to the same time of year one hundred and forty-nine years ago. The holidays were drawing near, and John Hollingshead had approached W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan to write an operatic extravaganza to be performed in his Gaiety Theatre in London. This first collaboration of Gilbert & Sullivan was, of course, *Thespis* and was the forerunner of the subsequent and successful operettas that we all know and love.

But in 1871, around this same time about five weeks prior to the opening of the show on December 26, there was much uncertainty. Both Gilbert and Sullivan recounted later that the timeline was very compressed and that things were quite stressful. Most likely there was no idea how the show would be received and certainly no way of knowing about their future success together. As it turns out, *Thespis* opened to good reviews and had a run of 63 performances, which was unusual for holiday seasonal shows of that time.

Why, you may ask, am I thinking about this anecdote today? Because, as I write this, I am under a compressed timeline to get this completed. Because, as I write this, things within the theater world are very stressful. And because I am hoping that, as W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan would discover, success will be waiting in the future for the Gilbert & Sullivan Society of San José.

This pandemic has been hard on a lot of our communities and businesses. The theater community is no exception. Seasons have been cancelled and theaters have been closed, some forever. The prospects for staging live performances look dreary, with the most optimistic predictions calling for a reopening in summer or fall of

2021. And even when theaters do reopen, how long will it take before things really return to normal?

Lyric Theatre, as many of the other local companies have done, has sought to fill this uncertainty with entertainment presented digitally. By using technologies such as Zoom, YouTube, and social media, we have sought to bring the special magic of Lyric Theatre into your homes and onto your TVs and computer monitors. We have presented many of our past performances on YouTube, including *The Merry Widow*, which successfully ushered in our Digital Mainstage+ productions. We have given you online discussions, sing-alongs, and even a libretto bookclub. And coming up we will be presenting our next Digital Mainstage+ production, Michael Taylor's *A Truce of Carols*, as well as some new, virtual performances with our Victorian Carolers and a distanced rendition of *Trial By Jury*. These events have allowed us to stay in touch with our local patrons and, as an unexpected bonus, have given us visibility to an audience across the country and wherever the internet reaches.

Although these current productions have been well received, will they lead us to future success when the pandemic crisis is over? Will Lyric Theatre be able to continue and grow in its quest to fill a significant arts need in Silicon Valley for classic musical theater?

The answer is that we are trying to do just that. To help us be successful financially, we are taking measures to significantly reduce our expenses until we can begin once again offering on-stage performances. We are continuing to explore the digital world to bring you our unique repertoire while we remain in our social bubbles. And, most importantly, we have a reopening strategy that will transition us from digital through outdoor to indoor performances.

Will these steps be successful? Will our strategy lead us from our current dark theaters to vibrant, exciting live shows? The obvious cliché is, "Time will tell." But even more than that, our success depends on you. Yes, that's right. But what can you do to help us reach our goals?

First of all, you can participate in our events and encourage your friends to do so as well. Follow us on

FaceBook, Twitter, emails, the PATER POST, and find out about what is coming next. Tune in to our discussions and performances. By staying engaged you will both enjoy our productions and give us the energy that we miss from a live audience. You can find links and information about our upcoming events on our homepage at <https://www.lyrictheatre.org>.

Obviously, you can also support us financially. Many of you already have been very generous with your donations during this pandemic, and I sincerely appreciate that. But the loss of income from live shows can take its toll. Many of our digital events these past few months have been given to you free of charge, and we will continue to do so as a way of saying thanks for your past and future support. If you have the means to send in a donation, it will be a further step toward our success. You can also support Lyric Theatre when you shop on Amazon.com using their amazonsmile program. Visit our homepage <https://www.lyrictheatre.org> for a link.

We know now, one hundred and forty-nine years later, that W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan were on the cusp of a new and successful collaboration. After all that time their operettas continue to entertain us. In looking forward past our own holiday season, I hope that Lyric Theatre will also find a time of prolonged success and continue to entertain you far into the future.

A Truce of Carols: A Forgotten Story of a Christmas of Hope

BY MICHAEL TAYLOR

SOMETIME DURING the Christmas season in the 1990s, I was listening to KGO radio while I was driving. KGO used to carry Paul Harvey's "The Rest of the Story." It was usually entertaining, even if Paul didn't always get all the facts correct.

The story he was telling was titled *The Christmas Truce*. This mysterious story featured peace breaking out between the trenches in "no man's land," with enemies on all sides singing Christmas carols and playing soccer. All of this was in direct opposition to orders forbidding a ceasefire and fraternization on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in the early part of the Great War in 1914.

Even while taking Paul Harvey's stories with a grain of salt, I was immediately drawn to this arcane footnote of history from World War I.

Decades earlier, similar behavior may have taken place during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Here it was rumored that on Christmas Eve, a Frenchman leaped out of his foxhole and began singing "O Holy Night."

The rest of the troops on all sides soon joined in, singing their favorite Christmas carols. (On a quick side note, "O Holy Night" was eschewed by the Catholic church back then and even into the 20th century, so one of the most beautiful pieces of Christmas music was quite unknown to those outside of France during WW I.)

The Great War was in many ways a war nearly forgotten. Overshadowed by stories of WW II and the fact that my father was in the US Army Air Force as a musician in Italy in 1945, I hadn't given WW I much thought. I knew about Woodrow Wilson, the League of Nations, and other various facts one must learn in American History class, but not much else. Still, the idea of a truce in the middle of no man's land, in what I knew was a horribly violent war, sparked my curiosity.

Over the years I kept finding small tidbits of information that kept the story alive. (What did we ever do before Google Search?) In 2005, a movie about the Christmas Eve truce came out. It was called *Joyeux Noel*, or Merry Christmas in French. Though I didn't see it when it first came out, I was pleased that the story of the truce was gaining some present-day attention. However, in the back of my mind, I was always thinking this might make a good opera. Up to that point, none had been written. Then in 2007, the History Channel released an interesting and informative documentary about the truce. This one I did see.

In 2008, I was the music director for a local opera company, Mission City Opera. We had just finished a rehearsal of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, a beloved operatic Christmas classic by Gian Carlo Menotti. I was informally chatting with Sharon Kaye, the General Director of MCO, when a thought occurred to me. I impulsively pitched composing a one-act opera based on the Christmas Eve spontaneous ceasefire of 1914 during the Great War. I briefly explained the story to her, with which she seemed familiar. Not missing a beat, she said, "Write it! We'll do it next year in 2009." And so the journey began.

The working title for the opera was *A Truce of Carols* and it stuck. Most of the research for the libretto was based on Stanley Weintraub's book on the Christmas Truce, *Silent Night*. One of the first things I did, after reading and re-reading Weintraub's book, was to see the movie *Joyeux Noel*. Though the outline of the story for the opera was in development, I had yet to start the libretto. I wanted to see how the film treated the topic. It was somewhat disappointing. The history of the truce had many rich stories all along the trenches that are the stuff of legends; they lived up to the adage that truth is stranger than fiction. Yet, the movie created its own fiction and an unlikely plot that seemed to ignore so many of the real human stories the truce inspired.

I resolved that the plot depicted in *A Truce of Carols* would be based on real events and the legends that came out of those events. However, like the movie, I chose to have the characters use their native language whenever possible. I also decided that the soldiers in the opposing trenches be English and German, though there were countless other nationalities in the trenches nearby.

The goal was to create a narrative around the events that reflected what might have been in the hearts and minds of the soldiers and their loved ones at home. With social remnants from the struggles of war still very much in our midst, the soldiers and families who lived through the Great War share much in common with us today.

Both sides thought World War I would last no more than a few months, much like past wars. However, no one had ever fought a war with the new weapons of mass destruction, so the carnage continued for four terrible years. It was supposed to be “the war to end all wars.” World War II came about just over two decades later. Some historians even speculate that WW I was a precursor to WW II and laid the foundation for its origins.

Perhaps the reason the First World War was pushed back from memories when compared to WW II is that the reasons for the fighting and the outcomes of the victories were ambiguous. While the effects of the war were epic, the price was certainly unjustified.

This was a creative struggle as I contemplated the real message behind this short-lived but incredible footnote in the history of the war. At the heart of the truce is the very essence of hope or *Hoffnung*, as Lt. Gottlieb refers to it in German. The Truce moves us today, as it is a beacon of what, against all odds, we can hold in our hearts as we look toward the promise of a better tomorrow for mankind and the world.

The Christmas Truce of 1914 reflects images of our better selves. It is a story of extreme contrasts where sworn enemies find a way to come together and celebrate their shared humanity. Just hours earlier a major battle had taken place. Yet these soldiers found a way to reach across the horrors in no man’s land and against all orders, to sing, to bury their dead, to care for the wounded, share a meal, exchange gifts and yes, even play a game of soccer. What they shared in common overrode the nationalist propaganda being spread to inspire the troops to a war not of their making.

This is a story worth telling. This is a footnote that has come out from the shadows. A groundswell of peace that rose up from the ranks on both sides is indeed a legendary tale. The Christmas Truce echoes a message of peace and reconciliation. Then, as now, it continues to echo as an aspiration that longs to be fulfilled.

About the Truce

BY MICHAEL TAYLOR

FROM A historical perspective, World War I was a turning point for warfare, both from a technological and a global standpoint. Old World tactics were used against new technologies in weaponry. Employing new lethal machine guns, new cannons with greater and more accurate ranges and destructive power, airplanes, and eventually chemical warfare, a war of this scale and destruction had never been waged.

When war was declared in late July 1914 from a domino effect of poorly written treaties between waning empires, no one understood what truly lay ahead. Most thought that earlier wars between France and Germany just a few decades in the past would serve as the model for more saber rattling than actual death and destruction. Both sides believed the war wouldn’t last until Christmas.

Perhaps the greatest irony is that peace and cross-border relationships between much of Western Europe’s new middle class was in flower. Stories of Germans driving cabs in England and English upper-middle class making pilgrimages to the temperate climes of Italy abounded. The masses were enjoying a peace and prosperity foreshadowing today’s European Union.

It was in this setting that the common folk were soon to be subject to the ravages of a war never seen before. Though WW I fatalities were less than WW II, the toll taken on the smaller number nations involved must be considered in the scale. Asian countries suffered little in the conflict, unlike in WW II. A generation of Europeans would be lost all the same.

Early in WW I, the warring nations began a program of propaganda demonizing the other side. The difficulty, at least early on, is that many had either traveled to the countries they were enlisted to fight against or had acquaintances with many of their new enemies before the war began.

Fighting became bloody very quickly, and old tactics were maintained regardless of the loss of life and the stalemate that led to trench warfare. Large groups of soldiers were sent over the top into the clutches of devastating machine gun fire and cannon shelling. Commanders seemed to have very little regard for the lives of the common soldier in the trench.

The trenches themselves were wretched and waterlogged, filled with disease and the detritus of war. As in most wars, the soldier’s allegiances soon turned to saving oneself and one’s closest comrades, not the vague vision and misplaced honor of the leaders of waning and bloated empires who declared the war.

The miracle of peace

After creating six hundred miles of trench, an area evolved between the trenches called “no man’s land.” It was a battleground between the trenches and soon filled up with the casualties of war. No man’s land was filled with bodies, barbed wire and water-filled craters; a veritable hell on earth. At an officer’s command a soldier was expected to go over the top and try and overrun the enemy’s trench. What took place was usually a slaughter with few survivors. Needless to say, most men had no desire to “go over the top.” One British song joked, “*Send out my mother, My sister and my brother, But for Gawd’s sake don’t send me.*”*

No man’s land in some places was somewhat narrow, and the soldiers from opposite sides could speak with each other. Sometimes insults, sometimes jokes, and even the occasional trade of food or souvenirs ensued. When the war was quiet, the boredom could become extreme and endless. Any diversion was better than none.

A Christmas truce was discussed on both sides, but discarded as untenable and counterproductive. To bolster the men’s spirits, the generals had gifts shipped to the front lines. The English command provided a tin from Princess Mary filled with gifts of tobacco and chocolate; the German recruits were sent thousands of small *Tannenbäume* and kegs of beer along with tobacco. Some of the soldiers even complained that items necessary for their survival such as munitions and foodstuffs were held up so that these tokens of the holidays could be distributed.

Along most of the front on Christmas Eve, a frost set in, solidifying much of the mud. This was a welcome development to the soldiers, many of whom had spent months rarely being able to lie down or dry out. One can see from the photographs that most of the soldiers were ill-prepared for winter and were wrapped in anything they could find.

The Germans at that time were a mix of undertrained Saxon, Bavarian, Westphalian, Hessian and Prussian troops, many of whom were reservists and far from enthusiastic about the war. The Germans have a rich tradition of celebrating Christmas; therefore, it didn’t take long before Christmas carols began wafting over no man’s land and the small glimmering, candle-strewn *Tannenbäume* were appearing on the German parapets.

To the amazement of all, small bands of soldiers began, tentatively at first, to communicate and even agree to meet in no man’s land to share a smoke or trade food or souvenirs. Soon, all along the front, large groups of soldiers from all armies were “fraternizing” in the name of Christmas. Some of the older veterans remembered the war before this one, between France and Germany, where a similar event occurred.

Comrades struck down in no man’s land were buried, services were held, food and stories were shared. Even soccer matches took place. If a ball wasn’t available, one was fashioned. There were instruments to be found, and one could often hear a string quartet or other instruments playing traditional Christmas music.

A tenor from the Paris opera made his frontline debut singing “Cantique de Noël.” O Holy Night, its English title from a translation by Unitarian minister John Sullivan Dwight, was written by Adolphe Adam (famous for his ballet *Giselle*), with words by Placide Cappeau, a Voltairean free thinker. Controversial from the start in the original French, it was written in the first half of the nineteenth century and was suppressed by the church, thus largely unknown at the time.

News of the spontaneous cease-fire hit the press with the same speed that the Generals learned of the gross insubordination. To the chagrin of the leaders, it gave everyone hope that the war might come to a speedy end. This was not the outcome any of the controlling players had in mind. Commanders in the field were too late to prevent the fraternization and were often ignored as they berated the noncoms.

The impossible miracle of peace did come to an end after several days, and some of those who participated were either shipped out or shamed into continuing to fight. Not a single officer was successfully court-martialed for the blatant disobedience. To the men in the trenches that survived the war, the truce was a seminal event of their lives. Many friendships developed that lasted beyond both world wars, and the veterans would go on to speak and write about the truce for the rest of their lives.

The Merry Widow presented as Digital Mainstage +

BY DENNIS GAUSHELL

BECAUSE OF the pandemic, Lyric Theatre was forced to cancel its usual lineup of live main stage shows in 2020, including *HMS Pinafore* and a planned summer light opera festival, as well as our live shows for the first part of 2021.

In order to continue to provide our patrons with quality entertainment, we thought about ways to provide an experience as close to live theatre as possible. For the past few years at our main stage shows, we’ve been providing a pre-show talk by the director and conductor. And after the final curtain, we’ve had a cast meet-and-greet outside the theater. These gave us the idea of offering Digital MainStage +, which features:

- Brand-new *pre-show talk*, recorded with the director, conductor, and other members of the creative team, to give our patrons tips for better enjoyment of the show
- Recording of one of our *finest productions*, with new subtitles
- New *intermission interviews* of principal cast members
- Live *post-show party* for cast and patrons on Zoom
- Copy of the original program with cast, company bios, and show synopsis
- *Flexibility of viewing* the event in parts over multiple days
- Ticket prices to fit one's ability to pay

Our first Digital MainStage+ event on November 7–8, 2020, was based on our lavish 2002 production of *The Merry Widow* by Franz Lehár, which featured Don Tull as Director and Michael Taylor as Conductor, both of whom have done many fine Lyric Theatre productions. This production featured 43 singers and dancers, with multiple costume changes, and was performed at the Mayer Theater at Santa Clara University. Dancing included a ballet number as well as can-can style and folk dancing.

Board member Asha Kelly is the kind of person who watches the special features on a DVD as many times as the movie. She was the driving force behind the pre-show talk and intermission interview “featurettes.” She assembled an hour-long Zoom call with the production leads to discuss the creative decisions and problem-solving that went into the production. As it turned out, the panelists had so many interesting things to say that it was a real challenge to edit the discussions down to 30 minutes for the pre-show talk.

That video, moderated by Asha, included Don and Michael, plus Costume Designer Barbara Murray, Stage Manager Sara Lamnin, Orchestra Manager Ann Byler, Videographer Larry Byler, and Musical Historian Bruce Herman. During the talk, we discovered that Don Tull wrote the dialogue from a French translation, as no other version of the dialogue was available. He included topical references to Gilbert & Sullivan for our discerning audience members to recognize. In addition, Don inserted a scene for three lesser characters to give life to their roles in subsequent scenes. Michael had never conducted *The Merry Widow* before and thought it would be fairly straightforward—he was surprised to learn of the complexity of the score and the richness of it. He said of the operettas he’s conducted, only *Die Fledermaus* is more complex. Michael had never worked

with Don before, but he and Don agreed immediately on every casting decision.

The 17-minute “Backstage Pass Featurette” included interviews with several cast members: the Merry Widow, Susanna Jimenez; Danilo, Chris Fernandez; Njegus, Barry Hayes; Manon, Mrigendra (“Meb”) Steiner; Praskowia, Beverly Hansberry; and Ensemble and Costume Construction Volunteer, Elinor Gates. Fortunately, all of these cast members are still in the Bay Area. Due to the pandemic, these videos were recorded at separate appointments in a safe outdoor setting. Filming outdoors was a challenge; it was crucial to select a neutral, easy-to-access location. Asha settled on the Municipal Rose Garden in San José. This provided a lovely setting, but introduced the complication of an uncontrolled environment. Still, it provided a learning experience that will no doubt be used in future efforts. Asha then combined and edited the interviews with clips from the show to produce a lively video.

Susanna was delighted to sing this role, as it was her first after returning to the Bay Area from the East Coast. Chris had wanted to play this role for several years and was very happy to play Danilo. Barry was at first disappointed to land a speaking-only role, but was very happy after he got into it to see how important a role it was. Meb told a funny story about how she had rehearsed with small feather fans, but when the actual fans arrived, they were much bigger, so initially she was hitting other cast members with them.

Finally, our post-show Zoom party on Nov. 8 had over 30 participants and provided an hour and a half of lively conversation. *The Merry Widow* was discussed in detail, as well as many other prior shows stretching back over the past 30 years.

Our first on-line Digital MainStage+ event was a success at the box office and received many fine compliments from our patrons. In addition, our performers and directors were delighted to revive these precious memories, so we plan to continue this format.

We are making our next Digital Mainstage+ a holiday event, running Dec. 21–27. This will be *A Truce of Carols*, an original one-act opera written by Michael Taylor, one of our frequent conductors. The opera dramatizes the heart-warming story of the spontaneous truce between British and German troops during World War I. You can find more information by reading Michael’s articles elsewhere in this issue. In the spirit of the holidays and to help those struggling due to the pandemic, this event will be free. Michael will be featured in an interview along with cast members. In addition, he will be available at the post-show party for audience questions.

Thank You!

We are truly grateful to all who contribute to Lyric Theatre in any way. Donations above ticket sales provide us with the income needed to sustain our productions, as well as our outreach and educational programs. The following donations were received between September 8 and December 10, 2020:

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Contact Us

Tickets and General Information:

(408) 986-1455
www.lyrictheatre.org
info@lyrictheatre.org

Postal mail:

PO Box 6741
San José, CA 95150

Topical e-mail addresses:

(all addresses @lyrictheatre.org)
auditions • carolers • donorsupport •
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Editor: Bruce Herman

Contributing Editors: Larry Byler,
Chris Frye, Linda Jansen, Neil Midkiff

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