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On Producing Gilbert and Sullivan in a Small Town

(Presented at Opera Forum,
Winston-Salem, N. C.)

By Rebecca H. Smith

It was suggested that we bring a report on our opera efforts in Mt. Airy to give others some idea of the problems and how they were solved. (I might warn you to begin with that we came out with several problems still unsolved, though it was not terribly obvious to the audience.) There is no doubt that the undertaking was an outward success judging by the practically full house each of the two nights, and the sum of \$500 which was cleared and presented to the Mt. Airy Community Center Fund. There must have been more than a thousand people who saw the performances which coincided with the hottest week-end of the summer, and according to reports many people went twice, and after three weeks individuals are still expressing their pleasure in it. No one was more surprised than we, that things went well—it was both amazing and gratifying that at least one-seventh of the population of Mt. Airy saw and heard the Gilbert and Sullivan "Trial by Jury". Of course the performances were not perfect by any means, but they evidently provided something that the public wanted. Now we are asked when we plan to begin another which throws us into a panic because we worry all over again about our difficulties in the past. Without a doubt, only determination not to quit carried us through. We knew that if this effort failed it would be a long time before anyone would have the nerve to initiate another such project. At two different times practically everyone was saying, "We'll have to give it up. It can't be done!"—one of those times was two weeks before the date set.

The fact that we were dealing with all types of people and were attempting something which had not been done in Mt. Airy, also something for which it had not realized the need, made the going hard from the first. We expected to draw talent from the surrounding villages in addition to Mt. Airy, and to encourage young people to become interested in this

sort of thing. Knowing that we would have to approach people carefully we were cautious in arranging for organization. Mrs. Robert Smith and I, with encouragement from Mrs. Sparger Robertson, chose a steering committee which met and made definite arrangements for getting under way—ordering music, writing about costumes, finding places for rehearsal and discussing a possible cast. At the second meeting we discussed ways of securing financial backing, decided what job each would have and selected the principals. From the first we were worried about making expenses, but were relieved to find that the three civic clubs would sponsor us. The idea was to create rivalry between the clubs to promote ticket sales, though that angle was actually neglected. As things got under way someone suggested that we ask the textile mills to give money for expenses, which they did—so then each ticket sale became profit! Because we were anxious to encourage everyone to come we decided to charge only slightly more than the price of a movie ticket—50c. The newspapers were kind enough to run anything we gave them, even printing the story of "Trial by Jury" and obliging with an editorial after the performance.

As it developed the cast was mostly well-chosen and the audience and the cast acquired real enthusiasm for Gilbert and Sullivan, which I hope they will keep and foster.

But we did buck up against some real problems which are yet unsolved—and for which we must be prepared before beginning work on another opera. We had an awful time getting enough men even though our first contact with them was favorable. Two of the steering committee appeared before the men's chorus group which was organized less than a year ago and has about thirty men on roll. We presented the idea of producing "Trial by Jury", telling the story, giving a bit of the music, with much emphasis on comedy and the easy tuneful airs. When we left the group voted to participate, learning their music during their regular rehearsals. We hoped everything was set. Somehow, though, the men were slow in getting started and when the whole chorus came together for the first time the director spent most of the time on the hardest chorus which really is much more difficult than anything else, and the men gave up. Word went round that the music was too hard and they were also furious with the director, because she was disgusted with them. Even the ones on whom we depended most were upset and had to be pacified. All over again we had to round up men and two weeks before the scheduled date we still did not have twelve men for the jury, though we had long since been tracking down men and following up every clue, even to any man who dared join in on the hymn at church! But finally thirteen (instead of twelve) men sat on the jury for both performances.

I suppose in every town there is a tendency towards jealousy and criticism. But from the very first one of our biggest problems was the personal relationship

with the group and instead of working together and pooling suggestions individuals were pulling at cross purposes ready to take offense at the slightest suggestion. In short, there was little teamwork. Perhaps now that they see what can be done, it will be easier for them to pull together.

As you can imagine, the fact that the jury was still learning its music when staging had to begin caused a good bit of confusion and some criticism that the stage directors were interfering, which criticism was unavoidable owing to the fact that a few individuals could not conceive of an organization in which the musical director works with the stage director when he begins making suggestions. That attitude is understandable because the church choir director or the play director is their criterion. Before another production I hope it will be possible for the group to make a study of Gilbert and Sullivan operas and the necessary organization for producing them, as a few of us did for this one.

There were several happenings which were upsetting but not fatal—the costume and properties manager was quarantined with scarlet fever, the stage manager had to be out of town part of the time when most needed and the business manager also in charge of publicity could not find time to do much of his work. But we were lucky in one respect—not a principal had to drop out at the last minute!

A few lessons which we learned we might emphasize for your benefit as well as ours:

Psychology plays a most important part in working on such a project. With people who are doubtful of their musical ability, give them lots of encouragement but feed them the music gradually.

At the beginning, give the cast an idea of the organization so that it will know what it is all about.

Organize rehearsals so that everything clicks fast and no one is kept twiddling his thumbs long.

So much for the opera.

A little more than a week later, the cast and staff had a grand picnic at the summer cabin of one member, and during the course of the evening decided to organize. Most of them have already expressed a desire to begin on something in the fall. Also, another picnic is planned for the last Monday in August for further planning and organizing. We need a lot of advice before that, on the following problems:

1. It is going to be very hard for them to realize that all can't be principals in every production. How shall we choose the cast?

2. They must necessarily have a director whom they respect and in whom they have confidence. Where shall we find that person?

We shall appreciate any advice.