

Gilbert & Sullivan on the record

an illustrated talk by Richard Baker

Those of us who, like me, have been fans of Richard Baker over the years recognised at once his infectious and wide-ranging enthusiasm for music, his impeccable delivery and the sense of true empathy with the audience. In Baker there is depth of knowledge behind the professionalism and the ability to popularise without the need to patronise. The props - fireside chair, small round table with lamp and vase of flowers and low Victorian lectern - may have helped, but I think I would have been spell-bound if he had simply faced us on a bare kitchen chair. Particular praise is due to his sound-system accomplice for an immaculately prepared and seamless blend of words and sound, with none of the "can we have the next extract please" of many amateur (and dare one say academic?) lecturers. Hearing Baker again, I was reminded with renewed force of the contrast between the generation of Baker, Patricia Hughes and (the other) Anthony Hopkins (representatives, one might say, of the golden age of Radio 3) and the contrived facetiousness (and in extreme cases actual ignorance, if only of how to pronounce foreign words) of some of the presenters of today.

Apart from playing the clarinet in my school's production of *The Pirates of Penzance*, in about 1957, and in a concert performance of extracts from *The Yeomen of the Guard* a couple of years ago, I cannot pretend to be very knowledgeable (or indeed particularly keen) on Gilbert & Sullivan. Bad amateur and fossilised D'Oyly Carte productions fomented in me a youthful musical snobbery; the sheer skill and virtuosity of Gilbert's verses was blighted by a sadistic English master who made us memorise lengthy passages for recital in



Samantha Ambrose and Richard Baker after the event.

front of the class; all in all G & S symbolised a bygone, public-school-dominated culture which yearned after the days of *Three Men in a Boat* and seemed less and less relevant to the sixties and seventies. So a re-appraisal was long overdue. Baker took us through the fascinating story of Sullivan, Gilbert and Richard D'Oyly Carte, with their quarrels, jealousies and conflicting ambitions, and demonstrated how the Savoy Operas were as much a mirror of late Victorian politics and mores as the novels of Trollope. I had not realised that the operas had been so successful (perhaps surprisingly) in America, with New York premièrès following close on the heels of the Savoy Theatre. Nor did I know that Oscar Wilde was one of Carte's clients and was sent on a lecture tour of the States concurrently with a touring production of *Patience* - provoking a comment that Carte could have employed sandwich-

board men with even longer hair for half the money. Baker gave us other priceless vignettes. The French supplier of stage armour for *Princess Ida* in 1884 found Gilbert in the green room coolly reading a newspaper: "Mais vous êtes si calme, Monsieur". Gilbert commented afterwards: "What did he think I should have been doing? Kissing all the carpenters?" Or the origins of *The Yeomen of the Guard* - the idea came from an advertisement by the Tower Furnishing Co which depicted a beefeater. There were musical insights too - not least the fact that the D'Oyly Carte company actually employed some rather good singers; Richard Baker (who grew up in Kensal Rise) used to go and hear them at the Golders Green Hippodrome as a boy. I have often been struck by the similarity between certain passages in Verdi, Rossini, Donizetti and ones from the Savoy Operas - for instance the Duke's aria ("Questa o quella") at the beginning of *Rigoletto*. On a more elevated plane, my wife even detected shades of Schubert's Erlkönig in one of Baker's extracts, from *Ruddigore*. Was Sullivan subconsciously plagiarising, was he simply giving the audience the kind of music they liked (given the Victorians' craze for Italian opera), or was he (like Offenbach) poking fun? I have never been quite sure. Perhaps it was mixture of all three. I have yet to hear any music from *Ivanhoe* - Sullivan's late foray into the world of grand opera - for which Carte specially created the Royal English Opera in its brand new theatre on Cambridge Circus. I imagine it would remind me of Gounod more than anything else. Altogether a most stimulating and enlightening evening.

THOMAS RADICE

An accidental MP



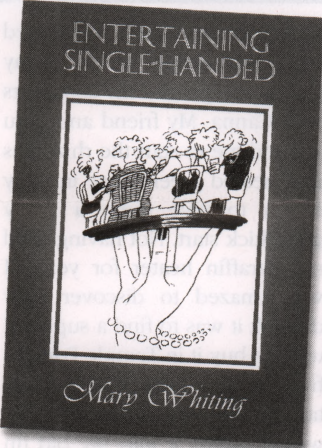
In *An Accidental MP*, the account by Martin Bell (a Suburb resident) of his extraordinary arrival in Parliament as an independent member, almost every line carries a well-aimed punch. But the book is written with a light touch and a fine irony that disarm; and some of the punches are directed against himself. Disaffected with the way things had been going in the world of television news reporting ('I hate my ex-profession for its lies and distortions'), he was surprised but ready to respond when asked to stand in Tatton (Cheshire) against the sitting MP, the now notorious Neil Hamilton, who had for years enjoyed a cosy majority of some 20,000 votes. Martin Bell had a landslide victory. 'As the first elected independent for 47 years. I felt like a Mariner without compass or chart,' he writes early in the book. But towards its end, having found his role, he then likens the independent function to that of a canary in a coal mine - to detect anti-democratic toxins and sound the alarm, which those party hacks who are controlled by their party whips dare not do. His book gives chapter and verse about why scepticism is the only sound approach to what politicians

(and the media) try to tell us, for in government today democracy is just the outer casing and within it lie the elements of an autocratic party regime. Martin Bell believes one person can make a difference in certain circumstances, and has shown this in the House in such varied fields as landmines and the Bernie Ecclestone affair. A realist who is suspicious of grand plans, he believes in pursuing what is achievable - amelioration. That is, aiming for modest but significant improvements because the best can be the enemy of the good. He has taken unfashionable stands whenever this is what his conscience has dictated: for instance, on fox-hunting and on the homosexual age of consent. But he is probably at his best outside the rarefied House of Commons and in the real world: he must be one of the most conscientious of constituency MPs, and Tatton voters, of whatever persuasion, will have been lucky to have had his services for three years. For three years only. Martin Bell made a rash promise to Tatton to serve there for no more than one parliamentary term, and he is unlikely to be persuaded to break a promise. This opens up the chance for any other

constituency where voters are independent-minded (and these are now multiplying) to secure him at the next election - or may we see an influx of other independent candidates coming forward now? The book does not tell us what he will do next. Nor whether his example will indeed inspire others to stand as independents. (Nor how many white suits he has!) ELIZABETH COCKBURN

Cooking for friends

Mary Whiting, well known Suburb gourmet, has produced a book for the festive season to help people who entertain on their own. Giving a dinner party single handed has all the problems of throwing any kind of party - plus a few more. If you've ever wondered how you can talk to your guests in the sitting room, pour them drinks and answer the door bell when you're supposed to be cooking their dinner, this book will tell you how it's done. *Entertaining Single-handed* is available at £9.95 post-free for Suburb News readers directly from the author at 12 Hutchings Walk, NW11 6LT, tel 8458 1238.



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