8 : Whitechapel & West End

A. Content and Context

1. Class title 1 (map of London)

I like the alliteration of my title, "Whitechapel and West End," but it might not mean much to a non-Londoner. The West End, of course, is the theatre-district, London's Broadway. Whitechapel is one of the working-class areas East of the City. My intent, for the first hour today, is to give a bird's-eye view of the widest possible range of musical and theatrical activity in Victorian London. Let's start with a verse or two of a couple of songs. I'll explain more later, but first I'd like you to compare them. The singers are **Valerie Masterson** in the first and **Jenny Coulston** in the second.

2. Sullivan: *The Mikado*, "The sun whose rays" (verse 1)
3. Ware: "The boy I love is up in the gallery" (2 verses)
4. — posters/covers for the above.

What did you hear? Both are rather simple ballads, with a verse and quite memorable chorus; we heard one verse of the first and two of the second. Both are about youthful innocence. The first singer was in character throughout, framed by her setting, costume, and make-up. The second appeared to be little more than she claimed to be, a simple young girl (though that too is acting). She came forward and sang frankly to the audience, and waved when she pointed to her boy in the gallery. And once they got the tune, the audience began to sing along with her. The second song belongs in a Whitehapel music hall; the first in a West End theatre. And I was tickled by the coincidence that both are the same date. **George Ware** (1825–95) published "The boy I love" in 1885, the same year that **WS Gilbert** (1836–1911) and **Arthur Sullivan** (1842–1900) premiered *The Mikado*, arguably their most popular opera. My second hour with consist entirely of *The Mikado,* showing you numerous clips; call that the featured **content** of the class. In the first hour, though, I hope to give you a sense of the **context**: all the other things that were going in in London at about the same time; I will play what I can, but inevitably this part is going to have more *tell* than *show*.

B. The Classical Scene

5. Section title B (London orchestra posters)

London today has the well-deserved reputation of being the music capital of the world. There are five permanent orchestras, and numerous more specialized groups. There are two permanent opera houses. But this was not the case in the Victorian era. The five permanent orchestras are all 20th-century creations: the LSO was founded in 1904, the BBC orchestra in 1930, the LPO in 1932, the Philharmonia in 1945, and the RPO in 1946—though there were others with similar names that one way or another dropped by the wayside. The **Covent Garden** theatre became the **Royal Italian Opera** at the beginning of Victoria's reign, and all productions were given in that language, but it was occupied by a series of managements each of relatively short duration and the present Royal Opera was not founded until 1946. The forerunner of the present **English National Opera**, the **Sadler's Wells Opera**, was founded before that, in 1931, but it performed in a theatre miles from the West End, and only in English.

6. The Royal Albert Hall, opened in 1871

Anyone who has been to my classes before will have seen some videos from the **Promenade Concerts** held in the **Royal Albert Hall**: a summer festival of around 100 daily concerts by orchestras and soloists from around the world, all broadcast live by the BBC. But this was not the case at the beginning. The Albert Hall was dedicated on March 29, 1871, as *The Royal Albert Hall of Arts and Sciences,* and 131 of the featured events in that year were scientific talks or guided tours of the exhibitions. The opening ceremony did include music, it was true, a piece of nationalistic puffery called *On Shore and Sea* by **Arthur Seymour Sullivan**, the future composer of *The Mikado.* Forty seconds of a video I made for another class should be enough to give you an idea of it.

7. Sullivan: *On Shore and Sea,* brief excerpt
8. — record sleeve for the above

It is not irrelevant that this should have been a choral work. There were 30 concerts of one kind and another at the Royal Albert Hall in the year of its opening—half miscellaneous orchestral selections or opera excerpts—but another half were **oratorio concerts**, including 5 performances of the *Messiah.* This attests to a fact that can get buried when you look only at professional activity: ***from at least the Victorian era onwards, Britain has always been an intensely musical country on the amateur level***. Musical events in London may have been increasingly professionalized from mid-century onwards, but the provinces saw intense involvement in music-making by civic choral societies, and in industrial towns in the North, brass bands. One of the oldest musical associations in the country—founded in 1836 and long predating any of the orchestras—is the **Huddersfield Choral Society**. Huddersfield is an industrial city in Yorkshire, a quarter of the size of Baltimore. Yet it was its chorus, rather than any paid group, that was the instrument of choice for record companies bringing out their first complete *Messiahs* after the Second World War. Let me play you a brief newsreel clip from a performance in Vienna in 1958, then a flashmob performance in 2020. This last is taking me well out of period, but I want you to look carefully

at the people singing: other than the conductor and trumpeter, they are ordinary people of different statuses and stages of life; this is a tradition that continues to this day.

9. Handel: *The Messiah,* Huddersfield Choral Society in Vienna (newsreel, 1958)
10. Handel: *The Messiah,* Huddersfield Choral Society in Leeds (flashmob, 2020)
11. *Maritana* and *The Bohemian Girl*

What about opera? By the mid-Victorian period, it had become a status-symbol. Ticket prices were set high so as to keep out the riff-raff; audiences coming through the front door were expected to wear white tie and tails; and everything was sung in Italian—even including Wagner and such British composers who dared try to elbow in! It was not always so. But the situation was a little better in the earlier part of the century. Two of the most popular operas—internationally, not merely in Britain—were by Irish composers: *Maritana* (1845) by **Vincent Wallace** (1812–65) and *The Bohemian Girl* (1843, no connection to *La Bohème*) by **Michael Balfe** (1808–70); the book of *Piano Selections from the Great Operas* that my mother gave me as a child contains potpourris of both of them, alongside works by Verdi and Wagner. I very much doubt, however, that either would work on the opera stage today; they are known exclusively for one or two solos that have broken out of context to become parlor songs in their own right. One such is "I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls" from *The Bohemian Girl*. Many illustrious singers tackle it on YouTube, but I have chosen a very simple performance with just a few instruments in a rural church hall in the part of Ireland where I was born. The singer is **Claudia Boyle**.

12. Balfe: *The Bohemian Girl* (1843), "I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls"
13. Carl Rosa playbill, Belfast, 1953

Did you feel a certain kinship between this and the two songs I played at the beginning of the class? It may be high art—in fact, I think it is—but it certainly does not parade the fact. Which brings me to the playbill you see on screen now, advertising a season by the **Carl Rosa Opera Company** at the Grand Opera House, Belfast. I was 12 at the time, and I know I went up to see their *Don Giovanni*; it may have been my first live opera. It was high quality, approachable, and in English. I didn't know it at the time, but the group had been founded by a German conductor who married a Scottish soprano, and started a company to perform opera in English, touring all through the British Isles. And this was back in 1880, cutting right through the snobbery of the "Royal Italian Opera." They took risks, also, performing new works, reviving forgotten masterpieces, and performing virtually everything by Wagner—all in English.

C. Theatre, High and Low

14. Section title C (Drury Lane and *Old Time Music Hall*)
15. — stills from the above

In terms of period, that video was cheating quite a bit. The upper print is of the **Theatre Royal, Drury Lane**, from around the beginning of the century; the lower one is from the long-running BBC television series in the 1970s, *The Good Old Days,* recapturing the feel of **Victorian and Edwardian music hall**. But

together they make a point about theatre in the Victorian era, and introduce a paradox. When the theatres re-opened in 1660, after the Puritan interregnum, only the **Drury Lane** and **Covent Garden** theatres were permitted to show straight plays—I guess because drama was recognized as a dangerous force that needed to be kept under government control. A third theatre was added to this group of **Patent Theatres** in the 18th century, and the restriction was dropped around the start of Victoria's reign, but for a long time the many other theatres in London could only produce musical shows (including opera) and variety. Maybe this is why straight plays are still referred to as "legitimate theatre." The paradox is that the two theatres now most associated with musicals and opera, Covent Garden and Drury Lane, were once the only theatres that did not *have* to show them!

16. Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, then and now

I said that this provision expired at the beginning of the Victorian era, so why mention it now? Two reasons. It showed that Britain had a long-established taste for musical and variety shows, which I'll get onto in a minute, and that there was also a tradition of presenting straight plays in very large spaces.

17. Sir Henry Irving and Ellen Terry in *Much Ado About Nothing*
18. Sir Henry Irving in *Romeo and Juliet*

I apologize for the condition of this picture and the watermarks all over it, but it is the only copy I can find of an essential piece of evidence. It shows **Sir Henry Irving**, the great Shakespearean actor of the 1880s and the first actor to receive a knighthood, performing with his business (and possibly romantic) partner **Ellen Terry** as Beatrice and Benedict in *Much Ado About Nothing.* But look at that set: a complete cathedral recreated on the stage peopled with dozens of extras in period costume! Nor was the scenery just paint and canvas. The black and white pictures show Irving in *Romeo and Juliet.* The staircase in both scenes is practical and real; he had it built so that he could make his final entrance coming down 47 steps from top to bottom. Nor was Irving unique in this; **Charles Kean's** 1847 production of *The Tempest* required 140 stagehands.

19. Sir Alexander Mackenzie, with Irving as Coriolanus

All these huge productions were accompanied by live music, and that alone gives us a sense of how huge they must have been. Incidental music in the 19th century was scored for full symphony orchestras, not mere pit bands. Here is the Scottish composer **Sir Alexander Mackenzie** (1847–1935), Principal of the Royal Academy of Music, friend of Irving's, and composer for several of his productions. The one we have recorded is *Coriolanus* (1890), not his most successful run, probably because it not one of the best-known Shakespeare plays. I am going to play you the first three minutes of a seven-minute *entr'acte* from the production, representing the gathering voice of the Roman people. Alas, it is audio only, but I have thrown in some pictures of the production and other Irving/Terry momorabilia to give you something to look at.

20. Mackenzie: Entr'acte from *Coriolanus*
21. Augustin Daly poster (1886), and scene from *Under the Gaslight*

So what was playing at Irving's theatre, the Lyceum, when Shakespeare was not on the menu? Here is one possibility: **melodrama** by the foremost practitioner of the craft, New Yorker **Augustin Daly** (1838–99), whose 1867 play *Under the Gaslight* virtually defines what melodrama is. Calling for the utmost realism in scenery, and special effects such as a steam train crossing the stage where the dastardly villain has tied the hero to the tracks, it obviously required the stagecraft of a high-budget theatre, such as the Lyceum clearly was. But the clip I am going to show you in fact comes from an utterly *low*-budget production. I think it shows the effect pretty well—but it is also good for a laugh.

22. Daly: scene from *Under the Gaslight*
23. Poster for *The Black-and-White Minstrel Show*

Other American imports, I'm sorry to say, were not so innocuous. The tradition of **blackface minstrel shows** hit it big in Britain, and lasted longer than in the United States, probably because Britain at the time did not have the experience of former slaves in the population, and so were less sensitive to the demeaning insult. Believe it or not, the BBC television program, *The Black-and-White Minstrel Show,* and its various live-stage spin-offs, lasted until 1976. Variety shows consisting of snippets of melodrama, plus comedy, songs, skits, and turns of all kinds flourished in the working-class East End of London in improvised spaces known as **Penny Gaffs**. I like the tone of outrage in this video, whose beginning I shall show, even though it is sloppily put-together; at one point it talks about working-class audiences of barrow-boys and costermongers (street vendors), but the accompanying picture shows a bunch of rich toffs. Anyway, here it is:

24. Penny Gaffs, documentary
25. Drury Lane pantomime posters

Variety shows were not merely fare for the working classes. Even when I was in college, many of the West End theatres that will now be filled with Broadway musicals, would have featured mixed programs, whether fankly called **Variety** or dolled up as **Revues**. And at least one theatre in every British city, town, or even village—plus several in the West End—would put on that peculiarly British institution, the **Christmas Pantomime**, which is so-to-speak the godmother of variety. Here are two at Drury Lane. The poster on the left is for a production from 1886, just one year after *The Mikado* and "The boy in the Gallery." **Sir Augustus Harris** (1852–96), the impresario, used the profits from these to fund opera seasons. He presented, for instance, the British premiere of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, and the first production outside of Germany of *Tristan und Isolde.*

26. So What Is Pantomime?

I will put more information on the website, but here is a brief summary of what pantomime—or **panto**, as it is always called—traditionally is. I should know; I have written two of them. I also know that this traditional element is getting harder and harder to find, but still. It is family entertainment based on a fairy story, containing original songs and dance sequences, slapstick and lots of special effects. Most importantly, *it involves audience participation* of all kinds. Although the characters vary from show to

show, there are always certain stock types, at least two of which involve cross-dressing. The **Principal Boy** is traditionally a woman in tights; the older woman, or **Dame** is always the lead comedian, who appears in outrageous drag. All good characters enter from audience left in a pink spotlight, the wicked characters from audience right in green. I'll tell you more about the Dame's monologue in a moment. You can see several of these aspects in this clip from a modern version of *Jack and the Beanstalk*. It begins with a disco-styled number, but when the other characters leave the stage, you are left with the two cross-dressed characters: Jack played by a young woman, and his Mother played by a man. You will then get an example of audience interaction between Jack and the kids in the audience. Finally, the villain will enter from the right in his green spot, and the children (as instructed) will all boo!

27. *Jack and the Beanstalk*, excerpt
28. So What Is Pantomime? (repeat)

This will be strange to many of you, so I'll stop for comments and questions.

29. The Good Old Days (repeat)

Which takes me back to the slide a showed earlier, of a **Victorian Music Hall**. Not the real thing, though; it comes from a BBC television series called *The Good Old Days* that ran from 1953 to 1983. They work rather hard to reproduce what they thought the Victorian experience must have been like, but it's all a bit overkill—I'm sure the original audiences didn't come in costume—and perhaps sanitized a bit. But one thing that is *not* sanitized is the comic monologue, performed in this case by **John Inman** of *Are You Being Served?* After a brief introductory clip I made for another course, I'll give you two sections of his act, back to back. I'm sure that Inman's skill at working his audience, and making just about everything he says into a *double entendre,* must have been honed in countless Christmas seasons as pantomime Dame. Note the way he gets the audience to sing along, and serenades a real girl in the audience with "Twenty-one today."

30. *The Good Old Days*, trapeze artist
31. *The Good Old Days*, John Inman 1
32. *The Good Old Days*, John Inman 2
33. Class title 2 (John Inman)

D. Gentlemen of Japan

34. Section title D (*Mikado* poster reveal)

Remember my two songs from 1885 at the beginning? “Thy boy I love is up in the gallery” definitely belonged in the music halls, towards the lower end of the social scale. “The moon whose rays are all ablaze” from *The Mikado* belonged near the top: definitely West End and audiences in white tie, but lighter and more popular than the seasons of Italian Opera that brought in the upper crust.

35. D’Oyly Carte, Gilbert, and Sullivan

Not that the impresario, **Richard D’Oyly Carte** (1844–1901) was uninterested in Grand Opera. He built a theatre called The Royal English Opera, but it did not thrive. His real talent was for bringing the composer **Arthur Seymour Sullivan** (1842–1900) together with librettist **William Schwenk Gilbert** (1836–1911), serving as midwife to the often difficult births of the 14 light operas collectively known as the **Savoy Operas**. “Savoy” after the Savoy Theatre which D’Oyly Carte built in 1881 to house them; he went on to build the Savoy Hotel next door, which is still going strong. “Opera” is perhaps a misnomer; being plays with spoken dialogue, they were closer to German or French comic opera, although Sullivan managed to write music of some complexity for the act-finales and a few other scenes.

36. Savoy opera posters

These posters by **John Hassall** are for the D’Oyly Carte Company, but from the 1920s rather than the original dates; I chose them simply because the work well together. They show *The Mikado* with two of the better-known shows on either side of it. I want to make a couple of points: each Gilbert and Sullivan opera occupies a distinct and highly colorful visual world—a man o’war, a rocky coastline, and imaginary Japan, the Tower of London, and picture-postcard Venice—and most of them take off from some existing popular genre: sea story, pirate tale, Gothic thriller (*Ruddigore,* not shown), or historical romance. Most also contain political satire: *The Gondoliers*, for example, demonstrates the absurdity of republicanism as opposed to monarchy. *The Mikado* is equally political, as you shall see, but it is based upon an artistic fad rather than a literary genre.

37. Japanese prints
38. Whistler: *The Peacock Room* (1877)

The fad in question was already twenty years old. In the 1860s, Japan opened its ports to overseas trade, and a flood of porcelain and other exotic items flooded the market; these were often wrapped in prints which opened the eyes of Van Gogh, Gauguin, and others to new ways of seeing; it was a significant influence on Post-Impressionism. But more significant for our purposes is the grip that Japanese fashions exerted on home decor. **James McNeill Whistler** (1834–1903) did an entire dining-room on the theme (now in the Freer Gallery, Washington), and the department stores stocked up. Gilbert’s great idea was to ask “*What happens if we take all this obviously stylized art as real, and imagine people actually living these highly colored two-dimensional lives*?” He was not entirely

consistent about this idea, as we shall see, but in terms of costume and set design it was a most attractive one. The 1999 film *Topsy Turvy* by **Mike Leigh** shows the genesis of *The Mikado*. Richard D'Oyly Carte suddenly finds himself with a hole in his schedule; a new opera is needed fast, but Gilbert and Sullivan cannot agree. Then Gilbert's wife persuades him, much against his will, to visit a Japanese exhibition in town. **Jim Broadbent** is Gilbert.

39. *Topsy Turvy*, clip 1: visit to the exhibition

Gilbert is intrigued, but doesn't connect it with his present predicament just yet. Then a Japanese sword that he has bought suddenly falls from the wall, and a lightbulb goes off in his mind.

40. *Topsy Turvy*, clip 2: Gilbert's vision

That was the entrance of the principal comic character, **Ko-Ko**, in Gilbert's own staging and with the music that Sullivan would eagerly write for it. Afterwards we heard him read the opening number—I'll show it in a few minutes—**Broadbent's** delivery shows just how witty Gilbert's texts could be.

41. *Mikado* poster, 1885 (Three Little Maids)

Here is the poster I showed you at the start of class. We now go to a third and final clip from the film: rehearsals for the entrance of the three principal female characters, "Three little maids from school." You will see that Gilbert rejects the work of the choreographer, wanting something "more natural, more Japanese." But here's the question I want us to discuss: is it?

42. *Topsy Turvy*, clip 3: ladies' rehearsal
43. — still from the above

What did you think? It seemed to me that though Gilbert rejected the choreographer's absurdities, what he asked for was equally artificial, although the performers did pick up some gestures used by the Japanese guests, not to mention all that technical fan work. This is one kind of authenticity—**truth to the Japanese originals**; we'll compare three versions of the opening scene to discuss it further.

44. Performers in the original cast

But there is another kind of authenticity that you will see in the first of them. For 75 years, the D'Oyly Carte Company maintained **strict copyright** over the operas. They were performed by both professional and amateur groups all over the country, but you couldn't open until a representative from the company had come to your dress rehearsal and confirmed that you were doing all the staging devised by Gilbert—including the many bits of traditional shtick, even though these had been improvised by the original performers. So with the first clip, a 1966 staging by the D'Oyly Carte, I am doing something I have not managed with anything else in the course so far: *show you a relatively modern video of a production that has some claim to be exactly like the original from a different century*. Against that, I'll show you the opening scene from two videos made after the copyright expired: a 1983 production shown on PBS, and the 2015 revival of a production originally mounted for the English National Opera by **Jonathan Miller** in 1987. After that, we'll discuss two questions: what is the meaning of "authentic" in each of the three, and how much does the Japanese aspect actually matter?

45. *The Mikado,* opening scene (D'Oyly Carte, 1966)
46. *The Mikado,* opening scene (PBS, 1983)
47. *The Mikado,* opening scene (ENO, 1987/2015)
48. — stills from the above

What did you think? I find the middle one extremely bizarre: the combination of mostly stylized choreography together with set, costumes, and walk-ons made to look as though this were a real street in Japan. But that kind of reality is totally unimportant. What matters is the stylization. If you are going to be "Japanese" at all, the only important thing is to make it consistent in style. But **is** *The Mikado* about Japan, and if not, what?

49. Original poster for *HMS Pinafore*

Rgardless of ostensible subject, Gilbert's Savoy Operas are all satires on contemporary society, usually achieved by taking a commonly-accepted principle and carrying it to absurdity. Chaos ensues in *HMS Pinafore,* for example, when the First Lord of the Admiralty—a political appointee with no necessary naval experience whatsoever—applies drawing-room standards to a Man o'War, and insists that all orders must be followed by "If you please." *The Mikado,* among other targets, satirizes the zero-tolerance approach to law and order; the Mikado has recently established the death penalty for flirting:

50. *Topsy Turvy*, the Mikado's decree

GK Chesterton wrote: "I doubt if there is a single joke in the whole play that fits the Japanese. But all the jokes in the play fit the English." All the same, it can be hard for non-Victorian audiences to understand the contemporary references. When we learn that the character **Pooh-Bah** has appointed himself to every possible political office at the same time, we laugh at the absurdity, but we can only speculate about Gilbert's precise target. **John Reed** plays Ko-Ko to **Kenneth Sandford's** Poo-Bah.

51. *The Mikado* (D'Oyly Carte), Ko-Ko/Pooh-Bah dialogue

Another even more detailed level of social or political satire is to be found in the **list songs** that Gilbert loved including. *The Mikado* has one of the most famous. Ko-Ko, as you may have gathered, is **Lord High Executioner**, but he is a meek little man, reluctant to carry out his duties, Meanwhile, he amuses himself by compiling a list of the people whom he *might* execute if he were ever compelled to act. This again is **John Reed**, last of an illustrious line of G&S comic baritones. His diction is so good that I doubt we'll need titles. So I assume you'll catch the words—but will you catch the references?

52. *The Mikado* (D'Oyly Carte), Ko-Ko's little list

How did you find it? That was the original text, more or less. Most of Gilbert's victims are types rather than individuals, but very few resonate today, do they? And a few, such as "That *nisi prius* nuisance, the judicial humourist," require footnoting to be understood at all. But I think he was rather smart to write a third verse almost entirely of blanks which the audience must fill in—though perhaps the censors would not have permitted anything more precise.

53. Eric Idle as Ko-Ko (DVD cover of original ENO production)

Jonathan Miller's original ENO production in 1987 featured Monty Python **Eric Idle** as Ko-Ko. Not surprisingly, he is very good indeed, but his little-list song is interesting only as an historical document. As is usual nowadays, its text was completely rewritten to make it more topical—but topical in 1987 is ancient history in 2024. Even **Richard Suart's** 2015 version is hit and miss; you'll get a few of the jokes, I know, but the rest not—either because they are no longer topical, or because you're not British.

54. *The Mikado* (ENO), Ko-Ko's little list

One other thing you mau have noticed. John Reed's song in the D'Oyly Carte version rattles along at a fine clip. But both the Eric Idle one (which I'll put on the website) and the Richard Suart performance have to slow down the tempo and lengthen the pauses, to make time for you to hear and react. So rather than ending with a difficult-to-follow song sung under tempo, let me give you an upbeat number that shows you exactly what Sullivan does best: the **Quartet** in which the Three Little Maids eventually break down Pooh-Bah's stuffiness with their infectious gaiety. He is played by **Graeme Danby**.

55. *The Mikado* (ENO), "So please you, sir, we much regret"
56. Class title 3 (still from the above)