

Thespis, or The Gods Grown Old

Grotesque opera

Gaiety Theatre, 26 December 1871

Thespis doesn't, really, have an awful lot to do with the rest of the Gilbert and Sullivan opus. It was written and composed by our two gentlemen, to order, as a Christmas entertainment for the Gaiety Theatre, a new house for which Gilbert had already written a successful pasticcio burlesque. However, following the Gaiety's small triumph with *Aladdin II*, a real, original very comic opera—especially composed for the theater's previous year's festive season, by none less than Hervé, the French “father of the opéra-bouffe”—the theater's manager, John Hollingshead, wanted another original work, to follow in that French “father's” footsteps. O-rig-i-nal.

Gilbert, however, didn't take another traditional pantomime story for his subject matter. Instead he went to the European theater, and to the tale treated in the 1825 Josefstädter-Theater Posse *Die Schauspieler-Gesellschaft in Olymp*. I have no idea whether its topsy-godsy plot—replacing the Olympian Gods, gone on “holiday” with a bunch of ancient Greek actors—originated here or whether this was a version of an earlier piece; I rather suspect it was. And Gilbert, I ween, was not around the Josefstadt (where he might have met my ancestors) in 1825. So, maybe, this quirky idea had been, at some stage, nicked by an English playwright. Anyway, it was a plot that allowed the author to indulge in a version of what has been since christened “the lozenge plot,” the reversal or placing in an abnormal context of a piece's character(s). It was a plot element that had been popular as musico-dramatic fodder as far back as Charles Coffey's splendid *The Devil to Pay* (1731), and which had been

utilized, more recently, in such joyous French musical theater pieces as *Ba-ta-clan*, *La Chatte metamorphosée en femme*, and many others.

One constraint for Gilbert was that he needed to fit the musico-comical stars of the Gaiety, and most especially those of *Aladdin II*, with prominent roles. Well, the overwhelming stars of *Aladdin II*—the Gaiety’s biggest success to date—had been the house’s star comedian, Johnnie Toole, as the magician Ko-kil-ko, and breeches-playing Nellie Farren as the titular Aladdin. But they had been superbly supported by J. D. Stoye as King Ozokerit the lightheaded (a Victorian joke; “Ozokerit” was a brand of safety matches); the incomparable tenor-actor Charles Lyall as a hilarious Remembrancer; Annie Tremaine as a perky maid with a song; rich-voiced Connie Loseby from the music halls as the Princess in the affair; tall, buxom, royal mistress Lardy Wilson in a “thinking” role that enabled her to stroll gape-worthily across the stage; and the delicious Parisian takeover of the part of the genie, “Mdlle. Clary.”

Our author filled his brief pretty well. Toole was cast as the titular Thespis, leader of the dramatic troupe, and the other principals—around twenty of them—played the actors and actresses of his troupe, and the gods and goddesses for whom they deputized, during their disastrous stint on the mythological Mountain.

There was only one major problem. By the time everyone had done his or her thing, the two acts of *Thespis* ran for three hours. I suspect—and this is not fact, just a feeling—that author and composer had not worked together. Gilbert had written an entire fairy-tale play, while, separately, Sullivan had written a full score of music. But we don’t know for certain, because almost all of Sullivan’s music to *Thespis* is lost. It is said that parts of it were reused by the composer in later life, so maybe it was purposely “lost.”

We know, from the reviews, about the most popular numbers, particularly the ballad “Little Maid of Arcadee,” which, in later times, was interpolated into an American performance of *HMS Pinafore*, to give poor Hebe a number. One chorus was recycled into *The Pirates of Penzance*, and there was “ballet music” that would have no future use, as ballet did not become part of the G&S method. The rest is left to the imagination. Anyhow, the score of *Thespis* has become rather like the Holy Grail to G&S enthusiasts. Something to be eternally, and hopelessly, searched and striven for . . .

So, when we speak of *Thespis*, we speak of something of which we cannot know much, except secondhand, via what was written about it in the contemporary press. And, of course, from what survives as the text.

That text was taken up by the G&S guru of a former generation, Terry Rees. He published a version of it, in the years when it was difficult to get at the censorship copies, for which we were all hugely grateful (*Thespis: A Gilbert & Sullivan Enigma*, Dillon's University Bookshop, London, 1964). But that version was more like one hour than three . . . Well, one hour of *Thespis* is better than no Gilbert at all. And one song (and a few questionable fragments) is better than no Sullivan at all. And an evening with a cast such as the one with which Hollingshead served his writers must have been a treat.

So, whom am I going to feature from the cast of *Thespis*? No, not Johnnie Toole (b. St. Mary Axe, London, 12 March 1830; d. London, 30 January 1906); he wrote his own memoirs: *Reminiscences of J L Toole Related by Himself* (Hurst and Blackett, London, 1889). Nor Nellie Farren (b. Brighton, 16 April 1848; d. London, 28 April 1904), whose famous career has been biographized more recently (G. W. Hilton, *Nellie Farren*, Arthur Sullivan Society, 1997). Fred Sullivan, brother of Arthur? Later. The fine comedians J. G. Taylor and John Maclean? Robert Soutar, who married Nellie Farren for a while? Lardy Wilson, who became the mother of the Duke of Edinburgh's child (whose name was never revealed) and left the stage for . . . what? The really celebrated pantomimists Fred and Harry Payne (nés Schofield), newsworthy features of the original London *La Grande-Duchesse* cancan, and their father's partner, the still undeciphered "Mademoiselle Esta"? The outstanding Annie Tremaine (née Crilman) (b. Woolwich, 27 January 1848; d. Paddington, 12 December 1934), who became Ada Beaumont burlesque star, then Madame Amadi of the grand opera stage and later of the West End musical? Ah! Wonderful woman! She was one of my hundred select *Victorian Vocalists*. Connie Loseby (b. Nottingham, 11 September 1842; d. Red Lion Hotel, Milford, 13 October 1906), originally teamed in a music-hall act with her mother, and here, spotted by Hollingshead, at the beginning of a long stint as a leading singing lady in the British theater.

Yes, it was one heck of a lineup . . . even though a few of these performers had not yet reached the fame that was to be theirs. Mr. Hollingshead was one hell of a casting director, which was and still is not a small part of the reason for any producer's success. So, as a result, many of these folks have been written up (not least by me!) elsewhere. But not all. And that's what I'm here for. I would love to identify "Mdllle. Esta" for you. I have tried for twenty years (and haven't stopped trying!) . . . but let's have "Mdllle. Clary" instead. Unlike Esther, she was a genuine mademoiselle . . . until she became "Sparkeion of Croydon." Hark, ye . . .

“Mdlle. Clary”: A Disappearing Act?

For a century and more, one of the puzzles that has troubled folk interested in nineteenth-century musical theater—and Gilbert and Sullivan in particular—is who in tarnation was this “Mdlle. Clary” who was such a success on the London stage in the early 1870s, as star in opéra-bouffe and the creator of leading trouser roles in two interesting musicals? None of us had the faintest idea. She came from Belgium (maybe?), made her hit, and vanished—back to Europe, we supposed.



8. Madeleine Clary: Sparkeion of Croydon.

There was simply nowhere to start, so we didn't really try. When it came to writing a little note on her for my *Encyclopaedia of the Musical Theatre*, I simply grouped her in with some of the other myriad "Mdlle. Clarys" of the nineteenth century—from the Opéra to the Comédie Française—and wrote,

One Mdlle Clary (née Poirel-Tardieu), equipped with "a remarkably graceful figure, easy movements, a nice soprano voice and a very handsome face" and billed as being "of Saint-Petersburg," went to Britain as a member of Eugène Humbert's Théâtre des Fantaisies-Parisiennes company, which played at the Gaiety Theatre in 1871 (Hélène in *La Belle Hélène*, Roland in *Les Bavards*, etc.). She stayed on, pleading in court, when Humbert tried to force her to return to continue her contract in Belgium, that she suffered too heavily from sea-sickness to make the crossing. Her court performance must have been convincing, for she did remain in Britain, and there she created the rôles of the Grand Duke in Jonas's *Cinderella the Younger* (1871) and Sparkeion in Sullivan and Gilbert's *Thespis*, and played Naphtha in a revival of Hervé's *Aladdin II*, all at the Gaiety, as well appearing as Alexandrivoire in London's *L'Oeil crevé* (1872), Méphisto in *Le Petit Faust* at Holborn, and as La Belle Adrienne in Offenbach's *The Bohemians (Le Roman comique*, 1873) at the Opéra-Comique. She then vanished from London and, as far as can be seen, from theatrical annals.

But my friend Sam Silvers more or less challenged me, in response to my articles on Miss Tremaine and Miss Jolly of the *Thespis* cast, to sort out "Mdlle. Clary," so I thought, well, I may as well have a shot. I dived into the musty French records, and—bull's-eye!

Madeleine (yes, she was called Madeleine) was born in about 1846, in France, the daughter of Pierre-Étienne-Émile Poirel and Jeanne-Marguerite-Adelaïde Tardieu. Maybe the parents weren't married, or maybe the hyphenation was just an affectation: anyway, Madeleine was officially plain Jeanne-Marie-Madeleine Poirel. She made what was called her debut on the Paris stage in the hit comedy *Mille francs et ma fille* at the Théâtre Déjazet in April 1868 ("[Elle] joue avec aisance et naturel la piquante Césarine. Elle est jolie et possède une voix agréable, qu'elle sait

conduire”) and then, I suppose, came the Russian bit, the Belgian bit, the British bit, and the disappearing act. Well, Madeline disappeared for the most common of reasons. No, not death; marriage. On 24 January 1875, she became the wife of Pierre-Marie-Augustin (aka Auguste) Filon. The marriage took place at Rosière-les-Salines in the Meurthe-et-Moselle area of France, so I imagine that either his family or hers hailed from there.

Their son, Louis-Napoléon-George Filon, was born in France, but they later moved, in comfortable circumstances, back to Britain and settled in Croydon. In the 1901 census they can be found at Godwin House, 68 St. Augustine’s Avenue. The elders are living on their own means, and Louis is a math teacher. They have a cook and a housemaid. By 1911, Louis has married a Swiss lady, has two children, Madeleine and Sydney (and two servants), of his own and is professor of mathematics at London University. The Croydon dynasty continued, because the grandchildren wed . . . and, well, Sophia Florsted Filon, if you are still in Croydon, in 2021, you are twenty years younger than my Croydon colleague Andrew Lamb, and you could have bumped into him on the railway station or in the supermarket . . . if only we had known!

So, there we are. All these decades we’ve been thinking “Mdlle. Clary” had disappeared into the darkest Moselle, or a mausoleum, and she was, until her death on 30 December 1930, just down the road, at Godwin House; a short career, but a delicious and memorable one. And now, at last, we know!

Miss Elizabeth Jolly: A Regular “Venus”

Let’s go further down the cast list: “Miss Jolly” as Venus. Well, usually when you had “Venus” in a show, you cast the role with the most stunning lady in the company, such as the *pulpeuse* Amy Sheridan. Why, with the “5ft 10 all in proportion” Lardy Wilson in the troupe would you cast Lardy as a boy (in, of course, leg-revealing rompers), and give the part of Venus to “Miss Jolly,” mezzo-soprano? Was she another stunner? No one ever indicated it; the critics described her as “graceful and womanly,” not quite the Lardy level of beauty, perhaps a plump burlesque. Ah! just so! Venus is described as “an aged deity”! A contralto’s fate.

The fashion for duet singing in the 1850s produced some outstanding pairs of singing sisters, topped by the Misses Williams and the Misses Wells, followed by the Broughams, the McAlpines, the Mascalls. Each

of these families had the genealogical and musical talent to produce one soprano and one contralto. Mr. and Mrs. Jolly gave birth (among a volley of other babes) to two contraltos.

John Marks Jolly (b. London, 5 December 1790; d. West Square, Southwark, 1 July 1864) was a well-known musician in the London theaters and concert rooms. In his time, he played at most of the principal London theaters, and was conductor at and composed music for several, notably the Sans Pareil as early as 1815, and for a long stint at the Surrey “in its palmiest days.” His music was even played before Their Majesties at Buckingham Palace. Mr. Jolly married Sarah Ann Macklan, and fathered a brood, of whom, seemingly, the last two were Elizabeth (b. Somerstown, baptized 1827) and Cecilia (b. York Road, Lambeth, baptized 7 October 1832, d. Peckham Workhouse, 1904), who became “singing sisters.”

I first see them out as a pair in June 1849, at Mr. J. Wild’s concert, but they got under way and gained wider notice the following year. In November, they were purveying duets of their father’s manufacture at the National Hall, Holborn. The *Era* commented that “two sister voices, similar also in timbre, is a circumstance somewhat rare. The enunciation of both ladies is extraordinarily good, their notes have a full clear bell-like resonance.” In January 1851, they were at the London Mechanics Institute (singing “The Lost Heart”), after which they went on the road for music publisher Charles Jefferys, as a support act to the boy pianist Heinrich Werner. “They possess voices with remarkably deep tone and very clear intonation which combined [well] with their simple and expressive style of singing,” applauded Liverpool, while Manchester opined, “The elder one has a fine organ and they sing well together.” Thereafter I spot them at the Strand Music Hall and at various city concerts, and in January 1852 in Glasgow singing at Julian Adams’s concerts. In June, they started a season at the Vauxhall Gardens.

In 1853, they were hired by the writer and entertainer Joseph Edwards Carpenter (b. St. George’s With East, London, 2 November 1813; d. 20 Norland Square, Bayswater, 6 May 1885), “the distinguished author of up to a thousand songs,” to vocally illustrate his scenes and songs from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the most enduring of the mass of Uncle Tom shows that followed the fashion for Mrs. Stowe’s book. Carpenter lectured about the authoress and her work, and the girls sang songs, with lyrics by Carpenter and music by Henry Bishop, Edward Land, Ernest Perring, Henry Farmer, Bianchi Taylor, Edward Loder, E. L. Hime, and,

of course, J. M. Jolly. The pianist was W. S. Rooke, once of *Amilie* fame. The entertainment opened with three straight weeks at the Cabinet Theatre, King's Cross, and progressed to the Manor House, Hackney, and to Crosby Hall, and on 7 February set out from Hastings for a lengthy tour.

When Carpenter's season finished, the Jolly sisters returned to concert singing. I note them at "Signor Borini's concerts à la Jullien" in Dublin on 3 October 1853, duetting Jolly's "The Gipsy Sisters" and performing a duet arrangement of "The Minstrel Boy." Elizabeth sang "The Old Chimney Corner" and "The Last Rose of Summer," while Cecilia offered Lover's "The Land of the West" and Farmer's "The Little Evangelist." The following month they were given their chance, in the footsteps of the Misses Wells, at the prestigious London Wednesday Concerts (9 November, "The Twin Sisters") at Exeter Hall, but this appears to have been a single engagement.

In 1854, they returned to Carpenter for his new entertainment, *The Road, the River and the Rail*, which had been playing since November at the Polytechnic with a Miss Blanche Younge as its musical part. The piece toured till the end of 1855, after which the Misses Jolly took to the music halls—Holder's in Birmingham, the Philharmonic in Glasgow, the Surrey in Sheffield—and to a season at the Surrey Gardens. However, their career as a duo had its last flourish in the halls, and they became a fixture, in the early 1860s, in the choir at the Oxford and Cambridge Music Halls, led by their father. In 1863–64, they are at the Regent Music Hall, but quite what happened next, I am not sure. What careers the girls had thereafter, they, in any case, pursued separately. I see "Miss Cecilia Jolly" on the bill at the Imperial Music Hall at Easter 1864. "Miss Jolly," who, I presume, is Elizabeth, appears at the Regent, at Cremorne Gardens ("a fine contralto") and as principal resident contralto at the Alhambra till 1867.

Next thing, Miss Jolly pops up on the cast lists at the new Gaiety Theatre, playing supporting parts in everything from plays to operas (*Robert the Devil*, *Columbus*, Mrs. Mingle in *Dearer than Life*, Trusty in *The Clandestine Marriage*, Venus in *Thespis*, Sheelagh in *The Lily of Killarney*, Dolores in *Les Cent Vierges*, *Ganymede and Galatea*, etc.), between 1871 and 1874, and as Cogia in *Ali Baba* at the Crystal Palace at Christmas 1871 with W. H. Payne, Annie Tremaine, and J. T. Dalton. It is this Miss Jolly, undoubtedly, who is on the road in 1876 and 1877, as a member of the Cornélie d'Anka and Alice May *La Grande-Duchesse* companies, and this Miss Jolly who is at the Prince of Wales Theatre, Liverpool, later

in 1877 playing Clémentine in *Barbe-bleue* with R. W. South. And, just maybe, in 1878 appearing at the Steam Clock Music Hall, Birmingham. She'd be over fifty, now. An aged deity, indeed.

I can't be totally sure, for I now lose Elizabeth, but not Cecilia. Cecilia had a mishap in 1868, and gave birth to an illegitimate daughter, Cecilia Amy King Jolly (1868–1925)—presumably fathered by a Mr. King. Mishaps were to be her lot, it seems, for—still calling herself a “vocalist”—she can be seen in the 1881 and 1891 censi living in the Peckham workhouse. She is still there in 1901, now a “retired vocalist,” and she died there three years later.

The family historians say that Elizabeth died in 1916, at the age of eighty-nine. They also say she married one George Green Fenn in 1863. Don't believe a word of it. The Eliza Jolly who married farmer Fenn of Streatham in 1861 was thirty-two, and the daughter of John William Jolly, merchant. So there's yet more searching to do. Venus is still missing.

Thespis: A G&S Mystery

While *Thespis* was playing on the Gaiety bill, a good few of the show's cast were also doing matinées in another seasonal show, produced by Hollingshead, down at Sydenham's Crystal Palace. This one, *Ali Baba*, was a more traditional burlesque-pantomime than Gilbert's “entirely original grotesque opera” (entirely?). Annie Tremaine was leading lady this time, and she and the Paynes, Dalton, Maclean, Miss Jolly, Lizzie Wright, Marie Smithers, Lardy's legs, and Nellie Farren's sister Florence of the *Thespis* cast had to scamper from Sydenham back to the Strand to play in Gilbert and Sullivan's piece in the evening. They played it sixty-three times. And, apart from a performance the following April at Madeleine Clary's Benefit, that was it.

Thespis hadn't equaled *Aladdin II* in popularity. It hadn't followed its predecessor out to the British provinces and into a second Gaiety season; it wasn't to follow the Gaiety's other original musical of 1871, *Cinderella the Younger* (music by Émile Jonas), to productions on the Continent. *Thespis* had simply done the job for which it was created, and then it was put away to make place for the next bit of extravaganza on the Gaiety programs. And it would have stayed away, along with the myriad others of its kind, in spite of the odd murmur of a revival,

had it not been the work of Messrs. Gilbert and Sullivan. As such, it has remained an object of interest and curiosity to those who love and study the G&S opus, although, thanks to Dr. Rees and his splendidly scholarly reconstruction of Gilbert's text, we can read, if not hear, what *Thespis* was like.