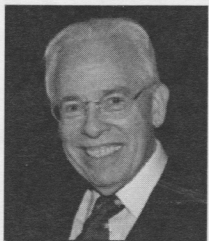


Audition Notes on *Ruddigore*

by Ralph MacPhail, Jr.



Ruddigore; or, *The Witch's Curse* (1887) is one of the mature Gilbert & Sullivan operas and one of their most popular works with Savoyards who love them all; its première followed the international success of *The Mikado* in 1885. Something of the “black

sheep” of the Savoy Opera family, it makes fun of a Victorian melodrama, a form that was passé by the time *Ruddigore* was written, something of which contemporary critics and audiences knew, but that doesn't affect its stage worthiness today. Theatre has been making fun of melodrama for over a century.

Ruddigore was written for the actor-singers at the Savoy, most of whom had created roles in earlier Gilbert & Sullivan productions. So there are roles for tenor and soprano, mezzo and baritone, heavy baritone and contralto. But Gilbert, as usual, brought new wrinkles to character types, as I hope will be seen below.

Set on the coast of Cornwall in the village of Rederring (Act I) and in the picture-gallery of Ruddigore Castle (Act II), the story moves from a sunny exterior to a spooky interior, telling the tale of a family curse placed on an ancestor in the Murgatroyd family:

Each lord of Ruddigore,
Despite his best endeavour,
Shall do one crime, or more,
Once, every day, forever!²

In Act I, Dame Hannah relates the story of this curse to a chorus of professional bridesmaids. We meet her foundling charge, Rose Maybud, who must marry before the other girls in the village do; her shy suitor Robin Oakapple (really the elder, titled Murgatroyd in disguise); his foster-brother Dick Dauntless, able seaman; Mad Margaret, the village lunatic; and finally, in this act, Sir Despard Murgatroyd, Baronet of Ruddigore, current victim of the curse because his elder brother is hiding to escape his title and its curse.

Complications are many and humorous, and Gilbert turns his topsyturvy lens on each melodramatic character, exposing a heroine who is self-centered, a true villain who is meek and cowardly, a madwoman who is not so mad, a jolly jack-tar who is really a rogue, and a fake villain who is aspires to goodness.

And of course there are the magnificent choruses, beautiful solos, lovely duets and trios, and funny ensembles with sometimes quirky little dances that are hallmarks of Gilbert & Sullivan productions. The “madrigal” in the Act I finale is worth the price of admission.

And there are more musical and comic delights in Act II *plus* a supernatural ghost scene in which the Murgatroyd ancestors come to life to threaten agony to the “real” Baronet of Ruddigore, who's so meek he can't bring himself to commit his daily crime—all supported by Sullivan's marvelous score.

My purpose below is to provide information for performers concerning the auditions and the characters in *Ruddigore*. If you're planning to audition, please read this in its entirety. And even if you're *not*, please read it anyway: I hope you will find it interesting—and that it will give you a foretaste of the delights coming in June!

Auditions will be held on Saturday and Sunday, February 24 and 25. See further information on page 1. If *Ruddigore* is not in your library, you can read or download the libretto from Gilbert & Sullivan Austin's website (www.gilbertsullivan.org; click on “Summer Production”). The Gilbert & Sullivan Archive has additional material; call on www.gsarchive.net, where you will be able to read a plot synopsis, see vintage images, or download audio files. Go to GSOpera (www.gsopera.com/opera/57/lexicon) for other good information on the work.

Ruddigore is filled with roles that are fun to play and sing; much of the delight of the work is in its frequent send-up of melodramatic posturing and declamation. In addition, the male chorus of city playboys in Act I change costumes to become ghosts-come-to-life in Act II—and then revert to city gentlemen for the Finale.

THE CHORUS is composed of the men collectively known as **Bucks and Blades** or “dandies” (10 gentlemen, of various ages, dressed fashionably; they are gentlemen of the town visiting the country to flirt with the pretty girls). As noted above, in Act II, those same choristers become ghosts who step from their picture frames to threaten dire consequences on Sir Ruthven Murgatroyd unless he commits his daily crime. Seven of these choristers have “names” in the program and a number have a few speaking lines.

The ladies of the chorus are **Professional Bridesmaids** (10 females, idealized Victorian maidens in lovely bridal attire). They cannot marry until Rose Maybud does because “every young man in the village is in love with”² Rose. One of the recurring jokes is a chorus which bursts forth from them whenever it is suggested that a wedding is imminent.

THE PRINCIPALS: Here are brief character sketches, with a nod of gratitude to the writings of William Cox-Ife, W. S. Gilbert, and Peter Kline*:

Sir Roderic Murgatroyd (Bass): “*the twenty-first Baronet.*” Sir Roderic appears only in Act II, after the ghostly chorus “Painted emblems of a race,” and launches into a magnificent solo, “When the night wind howls.” He is intimidating and powerful, threatening Sir Ruthven with agonies unless he “commit his daily crime,” but wilts into a loving swain toward the end of the act when he meets his old flame Dame Hannah and with her sings a lovely duet. “He should have a bass voice of almost operatic quality, and the charisma of his acting should transcend the irritability of his character.”³

Sir Ruthven Murgatroyd (Light Baritone): “*dressed as Robin Oakapple—a Young Farmer.*” Robin in Act I is an innocent and shy farmer, hiding his true identity and enlisting his foster-brother Dick Dauntless to woo Rose Maybud on his behalf. Not a good idea: not only does Dick fall in love with Rose himself, but he betrays Robin's true identity to Sir Despard, Robin's younger brother who had assumed the family baronetcy and curse, thinking Ruthven dead. So by the end of Act I, mild and meek Robin must become the wicked and threatening Ruthven. Much of Act II is concerned with this uneasy transformation—but all ends happily. This is a challenging role—a “red-meat” opportunity for the actor-singer.

Richard Dauntless (Tenor): “*his [Ruthven's] Foster-Brother—a Man-o'-War's Man*” (a sailor). Handsome, virile, possessing a good sense of humor, and a good dancer (his hornpipe is a highlight of Act I), his sunny disposition masks his self-interested guile. He's a loveable rogue, with a twinkle in his eye, and his “hornpipe is the talk of the fleet.”² “He is light-footed, light-headed, and lighthearted.”³

Sir Despard Murgatroyd of Ruddigore (Baritone) “*a Wicked Baronet*.” Sir Despard is an ancestor of Snidely Whiplash of “Bullwinkle” fame—and the very model of the Victorian villain, however reluctantly. He has assumed his baronetcy and the family curse thinking that his elder brother is dead. In Act II, when released from his position (and curse), he becomes mild-mannered, conservative (and hilarious) “district visitor”—“a sanctimonious ‘do-gooder’”¹ in partnership with his old love Margaret. “Ferocity is the keynote in the first act, and the same ferocity is enlisted in the cause of virtue in the second act.”³

Old Adam Goodheart (Bass-Baritone): “*Robin’s Faithful Servant*.” Clearly an ancestor of many an Igor in horror flicks, Old Adam serves Sir Ruthven when he’s disguised as Robin Oakapple in Act I and becomes his henchman when Robin reverts to the baronetcy in Act II, going so far as to carry off a maiden—any maiden—at his now-evil master’s behest. “He is old and decrepit, but not exaggeratedly so.”³

Rose Maybud (Lyric Soprano): “*a Village Maiden*.” Rose lets it be known that she is “sweet Rose Maybud”² though some of her charitable actions show either cruelty or cluelessness (take your pick). She’s the romantic interest, in love with Robin, then Dick, then—well, back and forth through most of the rest of the opera. “A simple village maiden, until it comes to choosing the man with the most money.”¹ “Vocally this role lies a little lower than most [G&S] leading soprano roles.”³

Mad Margaret (Mezzo-Soprano): This village maiden has been jilted by Sir Despard Murgatroyd after he inherited the title and curse, and her grief has led her to madness (another typical character-type in Victorian melodrama). In her madness, she sings one of the most beautiful songs Gilbert & Sullivan ever wrote. In Act II her love, Despard, is restored to her (having relinquished the curse to his elder brother), and her insanity is on the wane. She fights mad impulses while trying to be good, but it is a constant challenge to Despard to keep her “in line.” “A part calling for an exceptionally good actress as well as a good singer.”¹

Dame Hannah (Mezzo-Soprano/Contralto): *Rose’s Aunt*. This is one of Gilbert’s mysteries—or slips: Rose describes herself as a foundling. If this is true, Dame Hannah is more a guardian than aunt. No matter—Hannah is one of the librettist’s more dignified elder women. She mourns the death of her old flame, Sir Roderic Murgatroyd, and stays true to her love. She is rewarded by a reunion with him toward the end of Act II after her abduction by Old Adam at Sir Ruthven’s behest. As for how this can be—Dame Hannah is alive and Sir Roderic is dead—it’s best not to ask! And let’s not worry about it, for they sing a lovely duet!

Zorah and Ruth: *Professional Bridesmaids*. **Zorah** (Soprano/Mezzo) has a lovely solo in the opening chorus; **Ruth** has no solo singing. Each of these two supporting principals has several speaking lines of dialogue and always sings ensemble with the female chorus.

I’ve said perhaps too often that there’s only one G&S activity more fun than seeing one of their operas—and that’s actually working on one. If you need a little push to encourage you to audition, please consider this it. Jeffrey and I do all we can to make the auditions fun and relaxed.

If you have questions, please send an email to RafeMacPhail@Yahoo.com.

On page 1 of this newsletter are details on how you can sign up for an audition slot, so please do it today, and then please encourage a friend or two to audition so that even more can share the delight of Gilbert & Sullivan. While *Ruddigore* is not as well-known as several of the others, it’s been a one of my favorites for decades, so I eagerly anticipate working on it and hope you will want to be a part of the fun.

*Bibliography

- ¹ William Cox-Ife, *How to Sing Both Gilbert and Sullivan* (London: Chappell & Co. Ltd., 1961).
- ² W. S. Gilbert, *The Savoy Operas: II* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).
- ³ Peter Kline, *Gilbert & Sullivan Production* (The Theatre Student Series) (New York: Richards Rosen Press, Inc., 1972).

A Unique Gilbert Lyric

by **Ralph MacPhail, Jr.**

In my “Audition Notes on *Ruddigore*” (above) I noted that in the opera *Mad Margaret* sings one of the most beautiful songs Gilbert & Sullivan ever wrote.

The lyric for this song is, I think, unique in Savoy opera history. We know of course that W. S. Gilbert recycled ideas from his early published verse in constructing a number of his plots for the Savoy operas. But *Mad Margaret’s* song is unusual in that Gilbert published the entire lyric about five years before he constructed his libretto in 1887. It appeared in the December 10, 1881, issue of *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*:

“Only Roses”

by W. S. Gilbert

In a garden full of posies
Cometh one to gather flowers—
And he wanders through its bowers
Toying with the wanton roses,
Who, uprising from their beds,
Hold on high their little heads.
With their pretty lips a-pouting,
Never doubting—never doubting
That for Cytherean posies
He would gather aught but roses.

In a nest of weeds and nettles
Lay a violet, half hidden—
Hoping that his glance unbidden,
Yet might fall upon her petals.
Though she lived alone, apart,
Hope lay nestling at her heart:
But, alas! the cruel awaking
Set her little heart a-breaking,
For he gathered for his posies
Only roses—only roses!

Alert Savoyards will note that Gilbert only changed two words when adding the lyric to his *Ruddigore* libretto (the initial “In” became “To”; and “little” heads became “shameless”), altered several punctuation marks, and adjusted his always-interesting scheme of indentations (from the earlier, published version).

Clearly Gilbert liked this most “un-Gilbertian” of lyrics, and of course it reached its maximum potential when Sullivan recognized its merit and embraced it with his lovely and sympathetic music.