

For GST Read: Young Vic

by Titus J. Mulbo

The Gilman Summer Theater is over. After seven consecutive seasons at the Gilman Auditorium, during which fifteen different productions were mounted, the Gilman Summer Theater has closed its doors in favor of a new theatre group to which it has given birth — the Young Victorian Theatre Company.

Not surprisingly, there will be many familiar faces from the old GST at the new Young Vic; in fact, one might say that the Young Vic is the result of all its endeavours on behalf of summer musical theatre in Baltimore. Those efforts have earned the support and praise of many members of the Roland Park and greater Baltimore community; familiar names from the GST's playbills abound: Charles B. Duff, Jr., Harry B. Turner, William Rich, John and Steven Hargrove, Joshua Shoemaker, Chip Manekin. The GST has precipitated many young artists on to later careers — Broadway performer Pippa Pearthree, well-known local soprano Rhonda Jarrell, Harford Opera tenor Edward Randall.

The Gilman Summer Theater even has had its big star: Bess Armstrong, who created the first two soprano leads of the Summer Theater, the title role in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* and the role of Phyllis in G. & S.'s *Iolanthe*, is now known locally for her starring role in Center Stage's *Knock Knock*, and nationally as the star of the CBS sitcom *On Our Own*.

The Gilman Summer Theater was created by a lucky series of circumstances. For reasons no one has been able to explain adequately, there erupted from the Roland Park community in the early 1970's a torrent of talent and theatrical interest that culminated in a Gilman-Bryn Mawr production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* in February of 1971. The astonishing artistic *and* financial success of this production (on the latter score, three SRO houses, an unparalleled event theretofore at a Gilman senior play) seemed too good to be ended after only one week end. But there was no place to go — the school could, and can, take only so much dramatics.

So it was that the directors of *Mikado*, Bryn Mawr's John Barry Talley and Gilman's A. J. Downs, decided to attempt to extend its success into the summer months. The Gilman auditorium was vacant (albeit unairconditioned), and

student interest was high. After a certain finagling with the powers, a Gilman Summer Theater was announced to the community.

Original plans called for this new summer theater to open with a reprise of *The Mikado* in June, and then a new production, G. & S.'s *Iolanthe* in July. But cast attrition from *Mikado* was high, and the reprise began to look too much like a new production for the very limited rehearsal time (one week) allotted to it: six cast changes and a generally new chorus in a small show was a scary proposition. At a vote, the company decided to scrap this revival and to undertake *Iolanthe* only.

Although no one consciously realized it, this decision had a definite effect on the company — the company was launching the Gilman Summer Theater as a separate theatrical entity. The group did start its life as a strictly high school company, but only out of current membership, not definite design. Indeed, *Iolanthe*'s cast included students and graduates of Boys' Latin, St. Paul's, Garrison Forest, and Roland Park Country School, as well as of Gilman and Bryn Mawr. There was even a rudimentary effort at a sort of audition (real auditions were not insisted upon until several years later; up to then, and sometimes after, parts were simply assigned by the directors to available members of the previous summer's shows).



After this bright beginning (a successful four-performance run of *Iolanthe* and an obvious groundswell for the next year), the Gilman Summer Theater was off. The early years of the theater group might best be described in biological terms as a sort of natural selection process, featuring desultory growth and a certain timidity of leadership, after which a "viable functioning organism" was reached. The only linking from summer to summer was a general consistency of company members (for a while), and the "habit" of doing primarily Gilbert and Sullivan.

The nature of the company's development can easily be illustrated. In the company's first five seasons, it had three musical directors, nine or ten stage directors (depending on who is being quoted), four or five technical directors, and four "general managers." The number of productions each summer ranged from one in 1971 and 1975, to as many as three in 1973 and 1974 (although the latter year featured two of them on a single bill). Of these ten shows, eight were Gilbert and Sullivan: (in order) *Iolanthe*, *Patience*, *Ruddigore*, *Pirates of Penzance*, *Gondoliers*, *Trial by Jury*, *Pinafore*, and *Mikado* (revived in 1975). The only departures from this series were two Broadway musicals, *Funny Forum* and *Kiss Me Kate*, in 1973 and 1974.

The composition of the company also was varied at times. The announced "age limit," at first unnecessary, was set in 1973 at 16–22. But that year the actual age range was 15–25, and in 1974, it was 14–33!

The productions themselves were usually quite good during this period, being especially carried by the youth and the energy of the choruses; accompaniment which varied in quality, always by a full pit orchestra. The hall was air-conditioned in 1972. The tiny stage was enlarged in 1973 by the addition of two ramps thrust out from stage right and left.

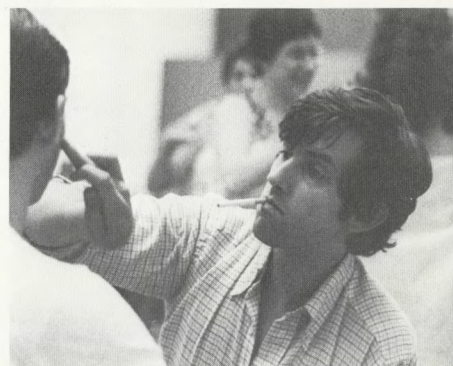
As with all fundamental changes, these two occurrences were not considered major events at the time. The leadership of the company and its relation with its host school

had always been vague; faculty member A. J. Downs had directed both these areas in 1971, but after his departure there had been no consistency. The "general manager" was first the company's business manager (a student), then its "artistic director," then a company member, all with unclear responsibility, while Gilman relied on an "advisory representative" with no apparent authority. There also had been an attempt to form an "advisory board," composed of interested community members, but this approach was eventually abandoned.

Gilman, then in default of the Gilman Summer Theater, declared in the spring of 1976 that the leader of the company would be General Manager affiliated strongly with the school itself (ideally, a faculty member) who would have ultimate authority over the company and who would be responsible to the parent school for the solvency, organization, and consistency of the theater group. William W. Rich, 1971, a Summer Theater star from 1971–1973, who had recently joined the Gilman School English department, was selected.

As for stage direction, Harry B. Turner had, just before this event, been tentatively appointed by manager William Harwood to fill a complete vacuum in that area. Under the aegis of Rich, Turner forged a new concept of the Gilman Summer Theater; he, with musical director/conductor Michael Blum, embarked upon authentic and highly polished productions of GST's most consistent success, the Gilbert and Sullivan repertoire.

The Gilman Summer Theater, now billed as an amateur repertory company of actors, singers, and dancers



of high school, college, and pre-professional calibre, began for the first time to feature trained performers from across the city as well as from Roland Park; coordination and direction was rejuvenated and professionalized, and critical approval was garnered from diverse sources such as Cal Lampley of *The Critic's Place* and John Lehmeyer of the Baltimore Opera Co. Under Turner's direction and Blum's baton, the Gilman Summer Theater performed interesting and varied new productions of *The Sorcerer*, *Princess Ida*, and Burnand & Sullivan's *Cox and Box*, as well as revivals of past-produced *Pirates of Penzance* and *Iolanthe*.

But again, there was a decision to make. The company had finally reached a stable and dynamic level — but one out of touch with its previous image. In too many minds, the picture of "Gilmanites and sub-debs" remained indelibly fixed to "Gilman Summer Theater" while a totally different ensemble, featuring highly polished homogeneous casts from across the community as well as from Roland Park, and a bright new orchestra, found it difficult to gain faith in its own back yard. After much soul searching, it was decided, with the approval of the school, to rename the group The Young Victorian Theatre Company.

The Young Victorian Theatre Company is dedicated to the best amateur performances of works from the great age of Europe and of the British Empire, and in particular to the works of Gilbert and Sullivan. The Company sees an unbroken line from its incarnation as the Gilman Summer Theater: director Harry B. Turner was a founding member, a company member from 1971–1974, and a stage director in 1974; musical director Michael Blum was a founding member and company member from 1971–1973, and was a musical director in 1973. Costume designer Jane Stoiko Turner has been with the company since 1972; production manager John H. Purnell was house and concessions manager in 1977. General manager Brian S. Goodman, who has taken over the responsibility and authority from William Rich upon the latter's departure to Divinity School, performed with the group in 1976 before becoming the Company's business manager in 1977.

The Young Vic (as it is called) hopes to attract audiences from Roland Park, Towson, Northwest Baltimore, and indeed from the entire metropolitan area to as far away as Alexandria. It will create, at the Gilman School, a unique theatrical experience for the aficionado and for the casual theatergoer alike, as well as remain an educational experience for the performers and crew. This summer's inaugural offerings include a revival of *HMS Pinafore* in a gala production on July 7, 8, 9, and 14, 15, and 16 in honour of that operetta's centenary, and of *Patience* and *Trial by Jury* on a double bill in early August. There will also be several new

thrills — an authentic production of Oscar Wilde's famous comedy of manners, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, directed by Robert Rayne, and, in keeping with the Young Vic's dedication to the 19th century cultural scene, a weekend of Victorian Pops Concerts and lectures on the period.

Gilman School welcomes to its halls Baltimore's newest theatre group, The Young Victorian Theatre Company.



1978 SEASON

H.M.S. Pinafore

July 7, 8, 9, 14, 15, 16

The Importance of Being Earnest

July 21, 22, 23

Evenings of Victorian Music
with lectures on Victorian Theatre

July 28, 29

Trial by Jury

AND

Patience

August 4, 5, 6, 11, 12, 13