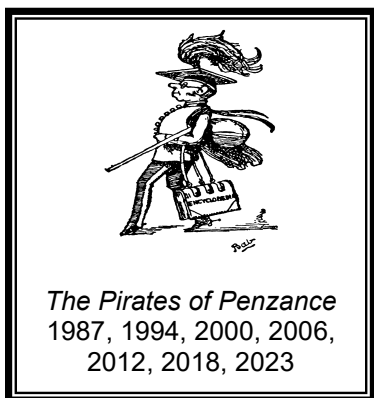
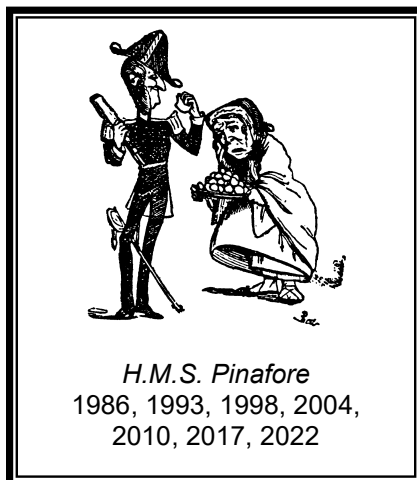


## 39 Years of MYPT

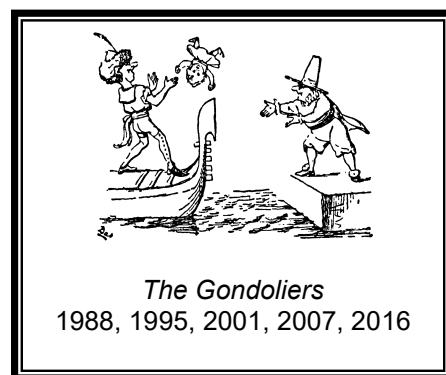
With *Iolanthe*, the Methuen Young People's Theatre in 2024 celebrates our 39<sup>th</sup> season. What began as an experiment in a Gilbert & Sullivan program for young people, with an original cast of 13 performing *H.M.S. Pinafore*, has grown to a summer program with from 40 to 60 boys and girls participating each year. We are proud to have been able to continue to make this program available to the youth of our communities, and would like to share with you some of the history of MYPT.

The Methuen Young People's Theatre was founded in 1985 by three trustees of the Methuen Memorial Music Hall, sisters Hilda Wagner and Ellen Stahle and Ellen's daughter, Ellen Meuse. Joining them as the founding director was a talented voice and music teacher, Margot Warner. Their purpose was to stimulate the interest of young people from the Merrimack Valley in fine music and to give them an opportunity to perform for the community. To do so, they thought to put on a children's production of a Gilbert & Sullivan show, with rehearsals to be held and the show to be performed at the Music Hall.



A number of factors combined to make a children's Gilbert & Sullivan production at the Methuen Memorial Music Hall seem feasible. Public schools then had little or no music education programs. Some start-up funding appeared to be available from the National Endowment for the Arts. The corporate charter of the Music Hall indicated that one of the Music Hall's purposes was to give something to the children of the community. And, two of the founders, Miss Warner and Mrs. Stahle, had put on many shows together, with Miss Warner directing and Mrs. Stahle accompanying.

Still, there remained one very large question mark – would children be attracted to a Gilbert & Sullivan show? The show was to be an opportunity for any youngster, with or without prior training, to experience the joy of being part of a musical performance. Gilbert & Sullivan shows have wonderful language, complicated plots and enjoyable comedy, coupled with music that offers huge variety and challenges. What could be better for a young person's experience? The shows also provide a setting in which older children with more training can help the younger ones just starting out in the chorus – a unique aspect of the program which continues to be very much part of the MYPT experience. Gilbert & Sullivan was, though, a new type of musical fare for the area's youth, leaving uncertain how it would be received.

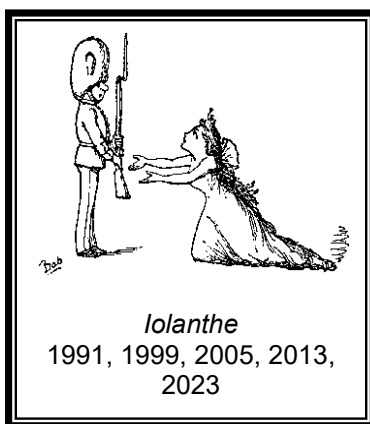
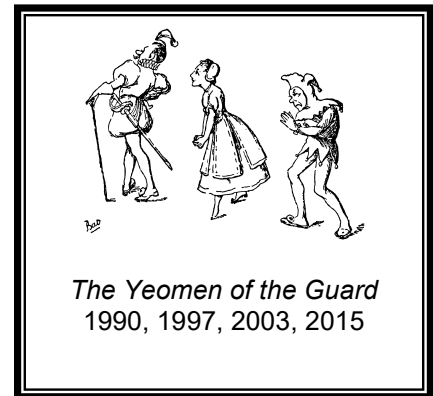




Mrs. Meuse placed two ads for the casting call for *H.M.S. Pinafore* in the *Lawrence Eagle-Tribune*. The response was not exactly overwhelming – the entire cast turned out to number just 13 children! Still, those cast members were enthusiastic, and the founders forged ahead with the show. Miss Warner and Mrs. Stahle worked with the cast members in rehearsals. Ellen Meuse’s mother-in-law, Edith Meuse, made all of the costumes for the general cast, with some costumes being rented for the principal roles. To give the kids a better grasp of Gilbert & Sullivan, they were taken to an adult performance in a neighboring

town – with several of the kids making friends with the adults in that show, who in turn attended MYPT’s show. A friend donated 1” x 3” strapping and unbleached muslin, which Ellen and her husband, Paul Meuse, used to build frames for the sets, with instructions from Miss Warner. The materials were spread out all over the downstairs area of the Music Hall for assembly and painting. Finally, all was ready, and the original 13 cast members performed the first MYPT show, *H.M.S. Pinafore*, in 1986.

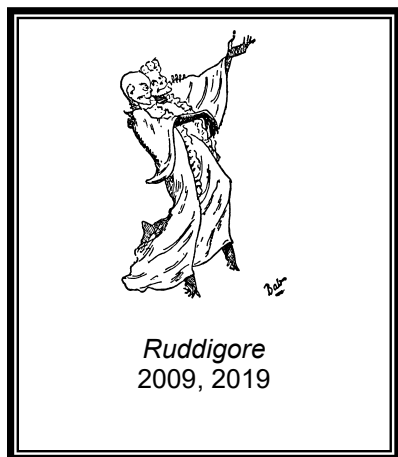
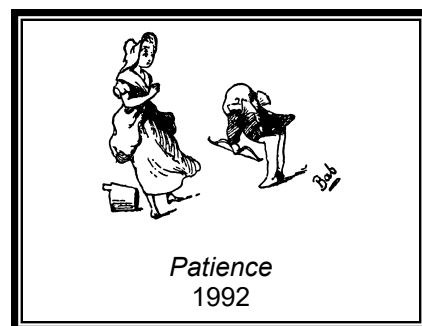
The first show succeeded, but with a cast of just 13, was there enough interest to make MYPT an ongoing program? The kids answered this question. As soon as *Pinafore* was over, all of the kids wanted to know, “What show are we doing next year?” So the founders got together and decided to give it another try. Difficulties arose. The National Endowment funding ended. Some members of the Music Hall’s board of trustees at the time expressed concern over supporting the Gilbert & Sullivan program – this was, after all, not traditional organ repertoire! A promise was made to devote any excess income the program might produce to the Music Hall’s continuing restoration efforts. This won over the board of trustees, and made the kids in the cast very proud to be able to help support the Music Hall and the Great Organ.



A second show did follow the next year – *The Pirates of Penzance*, and the year after that – *The Gondoliers*. Each year, the program has continued, with more children hearing about it and participating in each show. In addition to *Pinafore*, *Pirates* and *Gondoliers*, the shows performed have included *The Mikado*, *Iolanthe*, *The Yeomen of the Guard*, *Patience*, *Ruddigore* and *The Sorcerer*. When MYPT began, Miss Warner and Mrs. Stahle brought musical and dramatic expertise to MYPT, offering the cast an exciting and educational theatrical experience, but they brought also warmth and enthusiasm for working with children. MYPT has been fortunate to find talented, energetic directors to continue this tradition over the years. MYPT has become

integrated into the Music Hall’s organization and operations, with strong, unanimous support for the program among the Music Hall’s trustees. From 40 to 60 children from Methuen and neighboring communities now participate in MYPT each summer.

Changes have occurred in MYPT over these past 39 years, but one thing has stayed the same. Throughout MYPT's history, no children have been turned away. MYPT has always been open to all children who want to learn about music and acting and to share in the thrill of performing in a Gilbert & Sullivan show. The chorus has sometimes threatened to become unwieldy, but we have always found a place for every child who wants to participate.



Our 2020 production faced a new challenge with the coronavirus emergency. Unable to rehearse and perform live, MYPT turned to a virtual show! The cast rehearsed and performed remotely over Zoom. They met the challenge well and produced a first-time virtual performance of the one act operetta, *Trial By Jury*. Unfortunately, the COVID emergency continued into 2021, with restrictions on singing in indoor performance venues preventing the program from planning a Gilbert & Sullivan musical show. MYPT pivoted instead to another English author's delightful (albeit non-musical) comedy – William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*!



We are very proud to be continuing this wonderful program for the youth of our communities again in 2024, and to be resuming our Gilbert & Sullivan repertoire, in MYPT's 39<sup>th</sup> year.