

The Operetta by John Duffy - Published by Sutton Beauty & Heritage

Now that I am of an age to reminisce down those long perspectives that throw up such striking light and shadow, I find myself harking back more and more to the very early days when life was more homespun and entertainment was not machine made but hand-made as it were, by family groups or friends or schoolchildren.

I was thinking the other day of that annual event perpetrated by the local infant school and referred to by proud parents and anxious teachers as "THE OPERETTA" - prepared for months in advance and insidiously invading those parts of the curriculum that could be of use to its insatiable maw - such as - the SEWING LESSON for making costumes, the ENGLISH LESSON for learning parts, the ART LESSON for painting scenery and not least to the delight of the children, the sudden metamorphosis into a DANCING LESSON of the old DRILL LESSON which was full of - "HIPS FIRM!" and "ARMS UPWARD STRETCH!" and "FEET ASTRIDE - JUMP!"

And so in direct ratio to the passage of time, excitement mounted like the rising crescendoes of Wagner. In school there was a bright flurry of movement everywhere. At home harrassed mothers were presented with inert pieces of material to transform their offspring into shy fairies, or inquisitive elves or bold gnomes - leaving the grander "dramatis personae" to the more practised "haute couture" of Sister Kevin and Miss Willgoose.

As the count-down approached the fever of excitement would have done justice not only to Christmas preparations but to the launching of the first Rocket from Cape Canaveral.

In the classroom the star performers were now regarded with a certain amount of awe - as someone set apart by Sister Kevin or God - which was tantamount to the same thing in the children's eyes. The playground routine was also different. The "STARS" tended to foregather in a hallowed corner near the litter basket to gabble to one another about their nervousness, their lack of ability to learn their lines and their intention to drop dead when the curtain went up.

Meanwhile the fairies, free from the shattering worry of line-learning, hopped, skipped and zoomed round the playground with arms beating the air, convinced of their ability to fly. Occasionally they took a jump from the top of the wall which explained why most of the fairies on the night of the play had scarred knees. On the other hand, the elves and gnomes kept to themselves and bashed merry hell out of one another as they dashed from opposite ends of the playground in the style of the old tournaments.

And one day - the penultimate day of preparation, it seemed that the end of the world was at hand - for instead of Miss Millgoose coming out with the bell to march them back into school, out strode Sister Kevin, unwittingly looking like Boadecea, with a swathe of crimson material slung across her shoulder and eyes blazing to match.

Silence descended without the tocsin sounding at all. "And whose bright idea was it to tie the girls to the railings with skipping ropes?" bellowed Sister Kevin. Two bright spots of colour blazed on her cheeks. To the children this sign was like the releasing of the safety catch on a revolver. She spoke slowly and lethally. "Now for the last time, if you don't come forward, there will be no play at all!" Consternation shivered through the group followed by a sigh of relief as three small dare-devils (future Commando material no doubt) advanced towards the wrath to come and were marched off to Sister's room which, if the children had been older they would have called "THE INQUISITION". Instead they merely referred to it as "THE DUNGEON". The three lads were treated to a loud harangue which could be heard in every classroom - then silence as a drawer was opened followed by three whacks of "THE STICK". But magically everything unpleasant dissolved into oblivion as the great day dawned.

At last it was here! Zero hour! One could also say "We have lift-off!" because no feet were conscious of touching the ground that day. Sister Kevin, like Elizabeth I, reviewed her troops and gave forth in no uncertain terms that come flood, fire, or pestilence, everyone must be back at school at 5.30 to be ready for the performance at 7.30.

The stage at the far end of the big schoolroom boasted a canvas roll-down curtain of a Venetian scene, unfortunately punctured with holes all over the Grand Canal and through these holes little fingers would poke and wriggle or sometimes a disembodied eye looking for its Mum. These escapades were inevitably followed by a resounding slap and an angry "Come away from there!" by a harrassed teacher. A member of the audience sitting in the front row soon realised that listening to the back-stage goings-on was as good as the official performance. Sister could be heard "No you can't Tommy - you should have gone before you came. Now quiet everyone! Where's the Demon King? Oh put down the Fairy Queen for heaven's sake - I'll see to it that you're not the INK MONITOR next week. Now come here the ELVES - yes you'll do - those ears look nice and perky - except yours Billy - you've what? What? You've pulled the wire out? Well just get over there and stay there. Now where are the fairies? Oh! that's lovely - now turn around and show me your wings - Glory be to God! Didn't I tell you not to lean back against the wall? Dear God there are enough bent people in the world without having bent fairies. Go and ask Miss Willgoose to straighten them out. If I ever do another Operetta I'll have my head examined. Now are we ready? Where's the King? Has anyone seen the King - He's what? Well go and get him - he's no business to be sitting in the lavatory singing "God save the King". Now get into your places quickly the curtain's going up."

The curtain makes three attempts to rise. At the first two efforts, the left side ascends with the speed of light, while the right side lies like lead. Then amid cheers it staggers up evenly and stops half way and a series of little legs appear and are shoved away again. At last a couple of male parents dash to the rescue and the curtain shoots skywards to a roar of applause. A small child advances to the middle of the stage, folds his arms across his stomach, bows and shouts "Act I the Palace".

The King wearing a slippery crown and staring at a distant cupboard speaks - in a heavy local accent -

"On this our daughter's natal day  
Our subjects all must merry make  
The fairies at her birth did say  
They'd call today for a piece of cake".

The Queen replies -

"Oh husband dear I am full glad  
That on this day  
Our daughter Ju-Jitsu  
Will cast off forever  
The power of the demon        STALINGRAD.  
But soft! Here comes Ju-Jitsu".

Ju-Jitsu advances somewhat awkwardly as she seems to be hitching up her knickers. She speaks -

"Oh mother dear and father dear  
This is my natal day (SNIFF)  
And as I came by the woodland mere  
I saw some fairies on my way.  
But soft! They have followed me.

Come dear fairies

Let us dance and sing

In merry roundelay."

- Tra - la - la - la

Tra - la - la - la - la

Tra - la - la - la - la - la 2, 3, 4,

Tra - la - la - la etc:

The dance seems interminable but it is amusingly relieved by fairies hopping at the wrong time, tripping over the feet in front and giving a scowl that couldn't have been bettered by a Russian diplomat.

This ethereal scene is shattered by the Demon STALINGRAD who suddenly swoops forward and dashes off with Ju-Jitsu to screams which had to be started by Sister in the wings as the fairies were busy looking at Mum waving in the audience.

Act II was always a forest glade and sundry gnomes and elves advanced with elephantine tread to the tune of "The Teddy Bears' Picnic" and much thumping as they search for clues to find their beloved Princess, but fits of giggles and a few kicks not too surreptitious make it resemble a rugby scrum. Suddenly a frog is found. One of the elves strokes it as he moves into the wings and suddenly there is a handsome Prince who confides that he has come to rescue the Princess with the help of the elves.

After a chorus of - (TUNE - KEEP RIGHT ON TO THE END OF THE ROAD)

"We always try to do a good deed every day

Yes we always do.

And though it's hard and tough we say

Let's not ever be blue.

So try and try again

And when we all are men

We'll <sup>All</sup> be pleased

That we've always done

Our good deed every day".

EXEUNT OMNES to the tune of the ubiquitous "Teddy Bears' Picnic".

Act III is Stalingrad's cave and there is the Princess chained to a rock which unfortunately moves easily as she strains at her fetters. The Prince dashes in, punches Stalingrad who starts to giggle hysterically, and then kisses the Princess - to a Greek chorus of strident whistles.

The curtain descends for the Finale. On stage there is a thunderous rushing of feet, banging of chairs, crashing of benches, much pushing and shoving, shouts of "Gerroff" and "Stop it" and then as if the Red Sea had parted, a sudden silence as the curtain staggers up heroically for the last time and there in serried ranks displayed from floor to ceiling - a heterogeneous mass of elves, fairies, courtiers, demon king, fairy queen, King and Queen, Prince and Princess all of whom chant vociferously without any real musical concensus -

"All hail all hail

All hail all hail

All hail all hail

All hail all hail

To our own Princess Ju-Jitsu."

- amid rapturous applause from the delighted parents, whose eyes are curiously moist.