

# ***Creating A Gilbertian Sensation (Novel) in Rochester, New York***

David Raymond

Off-Monroe Players Present

*A Sensation At The Zoo!*

*A Sensation Novel*

By W.S. Gilbert



*The Zoo*

By Arthur Sullivan and Bolton Rowe

March, 2023

10th and 11th at 7:30 pm

12th at 2:00pm

All performances at:

MuCCC - Multi-Use Community Cultural Center

142 Atlantic Ave.

Rochester, NY 14607





*The Sensation Novel characters:  
Rockalda (Liz Ferderbar), Herbert (Tristan Berlet),  
Alice Grey (Amanda Kish), Sir Ruthven Glenaloon (Larry Ploscowe).*

*All photographs by Ben Hale.*

The Off-Monroe Players began performing Gilbert and Sullivan for Rochester (NY) audiences in 1977, and are now in their 46<sup>th</sup> year. More recently they have expanded their performing repertoire to include several of W. S. Gilbert's plays. A report on their 2016 production of *Foggerty's Fairy* appeared in a previous issue of this journal, and we have also produced *Eyes and No Eyes*, *Sweethearts*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, *The Hooligan*, *A Medical Man*, *Ages Ago*, *Creatures of Impulse*, and *Happy Arcadia*.

These have been a welcome addition to our regular G&S repertoire. It gives opportunities to actors in our group who enjoy performing but may not have strong singing voices, to actors in the community not interested in performing G&S, and to revive worthy plays that are seldom, if ever, performed in the United States.

From March 9 through 11, 2023, the Off-Monroe Players gave their first production of Gilbert's 1871 play *A Sensation Novel*, on a double bill with *The Zoo*, a one-act operetta with

music by Sullivan, performed by a completely different cast. These equally zany shows made a very satisfying pairing, which was advertised as “A Sensation at the Zoo!” and “Gilbert without Sullivan, Sullivan without Gilbert.”

First performed on January 30, 1871 at German Reed’s Gallery of Illustration, *A Sensation Novel* was a full “musical entertainment” in three acts (“volumes”) with songs and “melodramas” (underscored speeches and dialogue). In the year 1871 the industrious Gilbert produced eight plays, including adaptations of Dickens’ novel *Great Expectations* and Offenbach’s operetta *Les Brigands*, winding up the year with his first collaboration with Arthur Sullivan, *Thespis*.

The object of Gilbert’s satire is what Victorians called a “sensation novel” and what we might call now “pulp fiction”: novels, often printed serially in three volumes, with melodramatic stories, murder mysteries, overheated romance, wildly coincidental meetings, children switched at birth, and much more. Most of these novels are forgotten, except for a few literary exceptions like Charles Dickens’ *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*.

Sensation novels were also populated with an array of stock characters. Gilbert has fun with all these clichés, and adds a topsy-turvy twist of his own: when the characters don’t like the turn the story has taken, they call out the Author (and the Author’s muse, the Spirit of Romance) and insist on a rewrite.

Here are the characters and the actors who played them in our production:

*The Author:* ... .. Kathy Coughenour

*The Spirit of Romance:* ... .. Lory Love Restivo

*Lady Rockalda, a femme fatale  
described by Gilbert as “a yellow-haired,  
panther-like friend”:* ... .. Liz Ferderbar

*Sir Ruthven Glenaloon,  
a “bad baronet”:* ... .. Larry Ploscowe

*Herbert de Browne,  
an unemployed Sunday School teacher  
and “a bashful noodle”:* ... .. Tristan Berlet

*Miss Alice Grey,*  
*a mousy young schoolteacher:* ... Amanda Kish  
*Gripper, a "sensation detective":* ... Suzanne Bell

The play was directed by myself and Charles Palella.

In Gilbert's setup, these characters are played by deceased persons who in their previous lives were guilty of "positive or negative crime", and whose personalities are directly opposite to their *Sensation Novel* personae. Rockalda was actually a loving and indulgent mother, Alice a spirited and lusty young woman, and so on. In the novel, Rockalda and Ruthven, and Alice and Herbert, are in love; out of it, none of them can stand each other. Gripper is a detective addicted to odd disguises, who always arrives on the scene just too late to catch a crime being committed.

The action of the play (as opposed to the sensation novel) occurs during the characters' nightly one-hour break from their novelistic labors, a time in which they are free to be themselves and discuss the absurdities they are acting out. (As someone pointed out during rehearsals, the play could be said to take place in Purgatory.)

To quote a later Gilbert script, *A Sensation Novel* is a pretty kettle of fish! And as you may have guessed, it is easier to read in the original than to try to summarise. The original is readily available in Jane W. Stedman's *Gilbert Without Sullivan* (University of Chicago Press, 1967) and on the Gilbert and Sullivan Archive website, [gsarchive.net](http://gsarchive.net).

An initial reading of the script of *A Sensation Novel* revealed that the satirical scenes dealing with the Author, the Spirit of Romance, and the novel's characters remain very funny – at times hilarious – and extremely playable. However, as Charles and I discussed the play, it became obvious that numerous other changes were needed for practical and other reasons, which we will describe in random order here.

Our most important decision was to cut the songs and almost all of the lyrics except a line here and there. Very little of German Reed's original music for the show survives, and Gilbert's lyrics are very repetitive and, dare we say, not especially inspired. A more modern replacement score has been composed but it did not seem very appealing; we also had practical considerations of not wanting to hire a musical

director (or being able to afford one) and needing the play to be short enough for a double bill (it ended as about an hour and twenty-five minutes long).

With the songs deleted, incidental music was still helpful. Inspired by the many indications of “Melodrama”, we chose recordings of brief musical excerpts from music by Sullivan: incidental music for three Shakespeare plays; the slow movement of the Cello Concerto, and for the ending and bows, the *Overture di Ballo*. We also pilfered music from a couple of other Victorian-era composers, including the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* Wedding March by Sullivan’s revered Mendelssohn. The single exception was a brief movement from a suite by the twentieth-century French composer Jacques Ibert, whose “exotic” oboe solo was a perfect background for Herbert’s “desert” story in the third volume.

We made many changes to location and character names in the dialogue to make them “G&S-specific.” True, “G&S” did not exist as a team in January 1871, *but ...* as with many of Gilbert’s early plays, the script contains many “previews” of characters, situations, and phrases used in the familiar, later operas, especially *Ruddigore* (the “bad baronet” is even named Sir Ruthven) and *The Mikado* (Sir Ruthven succeeds in cutting his own head off, and his head has a few last words). These references are very familiar to our loyal Gilbert-and-Sullivan-loving audiences as well, so once we determined that the script required some changes for other reasons – we went with it! The references included lines from *Patience*, *Pirates*, *Yeomen*, *Gondoliers*, *Iolanthe*, and even *Thespis*.

In keeping with recent practice, we decided that the roles of The Author, The Spirit of Romance and Gripper did not need to be gender-specific; and in fact, in our cast they were all played by women. This also reflected reality: many more women auditioned for *A Sensation Novel* than men.

In the third volume, Herbert’s story of wandering in the African desert contained several racial epithets and some embarrassing minstrel-show dialect that definitely would not please a contemporary audience, and so required considerable rewriting. We did, however, keep the most important part: the dreadful pun with which it ends. Alice’s reference to the “dirty children” she teaches in Barbary also had to go.

Charles Paella collaborated with the actors playing the Author and the Spirit in devising short pantomimes showing

their difficulties in writing the sensation novel. These were placed between the “volumes” (accompanied by incidental music) to provide time for costume changes for the four characters in the novel; and they gave some additional stage time to the Actor and Spirit.

Gripper’s costume changes, one per act, include “A Red Indian,” an offensive term (and concept) in 2023 America. We eventually decided to change all of Gripper’s ineffectual disguises to those of Gilbert and Sullivan characters: a pirate, a gondolier, a fairy queen. We are confident these disguises were just as ridiculous as the originals.

At the end of the play, Sir Ruthven, supposedly beheaded, is revived as a bus conductor named Tom Sittybank. The idea of a bus conductor makes no sense to a contemporary American audience, and the name “Sittybank” would be heard by us as “Citibank,” adding to the confusion. We jettisoned this last-minute plot development (and song); Ruthven simply entered with his head reattached, as announced by the Author, and we gave the last word (the Mikado’s words, actually) to the Spirit of Romance: “Nothing could possibly be more satisfactory!”

Gilbert wrote *A Sensation Novel* for a specific ensemble of actors, and we had our group in mind as well when making adjustments in the original script. They found memorisation of the dense but precise dialogue challenging, but they had a great time in rehearsals (as did the directors), bringing imagination and creative flair to their characters. Our actors definitely conveyed the fun of the play to our audiences.

Several of our *Sensation Novel* actors commented on their experience for this article:

**Suzanne Bell (Gripper):** It seemed to me that it worked perfectly simply as a play rather than an operetta-sort-of-thing (frankly, it was confusing enough with spoken dialogue: if it had been sung my guess is the audience would have been frustrated and confused indeed).

I felt so lucky to be cast as Gripper! To me it’s a dream role: brief and funny; appearing just in time to wind up each act.

The whole endeavour was just enormous fun from beginning to end; I would encourage other groups to try our version of it for something new and just as delightfully silly as the operettas.

**Tristan Berlet (Herbert):** It was fascinating to see Gilbert, a writer who is already a fan of long, prosy dialogue, trying to be *deliberately* long and prosy as he writes the lines of this awful novel. I think the satire of the show still works today, though, as the nonsensical plots of sensation novels have fed into soap operas (and increasingly nowadays, “popular” drama).

One of the challenges I had was that the dichotomy between my in-novel and out-of-novel characters isn’t as clear as for the other three main characters. I am a prudish but noble failed Sunday School teacher in the novel, but out of it I am rather pompous, instead of overly lustful (as much as I do clearly want to be with my “yellow-haired panther”). I did not read the original script, but I really liked how our version flowed.



*Herbert (Tristan Berlet) and Alice (Amanda Kish).*

**Lory Love Restivo (The Spirit of Romance):** It was just so silly – I loved it! The only challenges I found were first reading and understanding the play, then knowing each character and what parts they each played. Once I understood that, I understood the part I played in knowing who they were as the characters in the novel, and who they were in their “mortal conditions.” I had a lot of fun with this role – I played it very seriously, which made it real but humorous. I had to make her big – overacting was fun!



*Lory Love Restivo as the Spirit of Romance.*

**Larry Ploscowe (Sir Ruthven Glenaloon):** This show was great fun and I enjoyed being silly on the stage with everyone in the cast. Gilbert has a flair for language, which can be quite challenging to memorise.

My only gripe was the confusing turn my character took in the Second Volume, where he appeared to have a hard time differentiating between his two realities. It didn't make much sense to me to have Ruthven getting sad about being Alice's grandfather in the novel, when he knew he wasn't her grandfather out of it. But in the end, I just accepted it as "it is what it is."

[As indeed one sometimes must with Gilbertian logic!]





*Kathy Coughenour as the Author, with one of the sources of her inspiration (which we nicknamed Schwenck).*



*Liz Ferderbar as the Yellow-haired Panther Lady Rockalda.*



*Sir Ruthven (Larry Ploscowe) woos Alice (Amanda Kish).*