

# *H.M.S. Pinafore*

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*H.M.S. Pinafore; or, The Lass That Loved a Sailor* is a [comic opera](#) in two acts, with music by [Arthur Sullivan](#) and a [libretto](#) by [W. S. Gilbert](#). It opened at the [Opera Comique](#) in London, on 25 May 1878 and ran for 571 performances, which was the second-longest run of any [musical theatre](#) piece up to that time. *H.M.S. Pinafore* was [Gilbert and Sullivan](#)'s fourth operatic collaboration and their first international sensation.

The story takes place aboard the [Royal Navy](#) ship [HMS Pinafore](#). The [captain](#)'s daughter, Josephine, is in love with a lower-class [sailor](#), Ralph Rackstraw, although her father intends her to marry Sir Joseph Porter, the [First Lord of the Admiralty](#). She abides by her father's wishes at first, but Sir Joseph's advocacy of the equality of humankind encourages Ralph and Josephine to overturn conventional social order. They declare their love for each other and eventually plan to elope. The Captain discovers this plan, but, as in many of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas, a surprise disclosure changes things dramatically near the end of the story.

Drawing on several of his earlier "[Bab Ballad](#)" poems, Gilbert imbued this plot with mirth and silliness. The opera's humour focuses on love between members of different [social classes](#) and lampoons the British class system in general. *Pinafore* also pokes good-natured fun at [patriotism](#), party politics, the Royal Navy, and the rise of unqualified people to positions of authority. The title of the piece comically applies the name of a garment for girls and women, a [pinafore](#), to the fearsome symbol of a warship.

*Pinafore*'s extraordinary popularity in Britain, America and elsewhere was followed by the similar success of a series of Gilbert and Sullivan works, including [The Pirates of Penzance](#) and [The Mikado](#). Their works, later known as the [Savoy operas](#), dominated the musical stage on both sides of the Atlantic for more than a decade and continue to be performed today. The structure and style of these operas, particularly *Pinafore*, were much copied and contributed significantly to the [development of modern musical theatre](#).

## Background<sup>[[edit](#)]</sup>

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In 1875, [Richard D'Oyly Carte](#), who was then managing the [Royalty Theatre](#) for [Selina Dolaro](#), brought [Gilbert and Sullivan](#) together to write their second show, a one-act opera entitled [Trial by Jury](#).<sup>[1]</sup> This proved a success, and in 1876 D'Oyly Carte assembled a group of [financial backers](#) to establish the Comedy Opera Company, which was devoted to the production and promotion of family-friendly English comic opera.<sup>[2]</sup> With this theatre company, Carte finally had the financial resources, after many failed attempts, to produce a new full-length Gilbert and Sullivan opera.<sup>[3]</sup> This next opera was [The Sorcerer](#), which opened in November 1877. It too was successful, running for 178 performances.<sup>[4]</sup> Sheet music from the show sold well, and [street musicians](#) played the melodies.<sup>[5]</sup>

Instead of writing a piece for production by a theatre proprietor, as was usual in [Victorian](#) theatres, Gilbert, Sullivan and Carte produced the show with their own financial support. They were therefore able to choose their own cast of performers, rather than being obliged to use the actors already engaged at the theatre. They chose talented actors, most of whom were not well-known stars and did not command high fees, and to whom they could teach a more [naturalistic](#) style of performance than was commonly used at the time. They then tailored their work to the particular abilities of these performers.<sup>[6]</sup> The skill with which Gilbert and Sullivan used their performers had an effect on the audience; as critic [Herman Klein](#) wrote: "we secretly marvelled at the naturalness and ease with which [the Gilbertian quips and absurdities] were said and done. For until then no living soul had seen upon the stage such weird, eccentric, yet intensely human beings. ... [They] conjured into existence a hitherto unknown comic world of sheer delight."<sup>[7]</sup>



*Punch* cartoon, 1877, portraying [First Lord of the Admiralty W. H. Smith](#) as a [land-lubber](#), saying: "I think I'll now go below." In *Pinafore*, Sir Joseph similarly sings: "When the breezes blow / I generally go below".

The success of *The Sorcerer* paved the way for another collaboration by Gilbert and Sullivan. Carte agreed on terms for a new opera with the Comedy Opera Company, and Gilbert began work on *H.M.S. Pinafore* before the end of 1877.<sup>[8]</sup> Gilbert's father had been a [naval surgeon](#), and the nautical theme of the opera appealed to him.<sup>[9]</sup> He drew on several of his earlier "[Bab Ballad](#)" poems (many of which also have nautical themes), including "Captain Reece" (1868) and "General John" (1867).<sup>[10]</sup> Some of the characters also have prototypes in the ballads: Dick Deadeye is based on a character in "Woman's Gratitude" (1869); an early version of Ralph Rackstraw can be seen in "Joe Go-Lightly" (1867), with its sailor madly in love with the daughter of someone who far outranks him; and Little Buttercup is taken almost wholesale from "The Bumboat Woman's Story" (1870).<sup>[11][12]</sup> On 27 December 1877, while Sullivan was on holiday on the [French Riviera](#), Gilbert sent him a plot sketch accompanied by the following note:<sup>[13]</sup>

I have very little doubt whatever but that you will be pleased with it. ... there is a good deal of fun in it which I haven't set down on paper. Among other things a song (a kind of '[Judge's Song](#)') for the First Lord – tracing his career as office-boy ... clerk, traveller, junior partner and First Lord of Britain's Navy. ... Of course there will be no *personality* in this – the fact that the First Lord in the Opera is a [Radical](#) of the most pronounced type will do away with any suspicion that [W. H. Smith](#) is intended.<sup>[13][14]</sup>

Despite Gilbert's disclaimer, audiences, critics and even the Prime Minister, [Benjamin Disraeli](#), identified Sir Joseph Porter with W. H. Smith, a politician who had recently been appointed [First Lord of the Admiralty](#) despite having neither military nor nautical experience.<sup>[15]</sup> Sullivan was delighted with the sketch, and Gilbert read a first draft of the plot to Carte in mid-January.<sup>[16]</sup>

Following the example of his mentor, [T. W. Robertson](#), Gilbert strove to ensure that the costumes and sets were as realistic as possible.<sup>[17]</sup> When preparing the sets for *H.M.S. Pinafore*, Gilbert and Sullivan visited [Portsmouth](#) in April 1878 to inspect ships. Gilbert made sketches of *H.M.S. Victory* and *H.M.S. St Vincent* and created a model set for the carpenters to work from.<sup>[18]</sup> This was far from standard procedure in Victorian drama, in which naturalism was still a relatively new concept, and in which most authors had very little influence on how their plays and libretti were staged.<sup>[19]</sup> This attention to detail was typical of Gilbert's [stage management](#) and would be repeated in all of his [Savoy operas](#).<sup>[20]</sup> Gilbert's focus on visual accuracy provided a "right-side-up for topsy-turvydom", that is, a realistic point of reference that serves to heighten the whimsicality and absurdity of the situations.<sup>[21]</sup> Sullivan was "in the full swing" of work on the piece by the middle of April 1878.<sup>[22]</sup> The bright and cheerful music of *Pinafore* was composed during a

time when Sullivan suffered from excruciating pain from a kidney stone.<sup>[23][24]</sup> The cast began music rehearsals on 24 April, and at the beginning of May 1878, the two collaborators worked closely together at Sullivan's flat to finalise the piece.<sup>[25][26]</sup>

In *Pinafore*, Gilbert, Sullivan and Carte used several of the principal cast members whom they had assembled for *The Sorcerer*. As Gilbert had suggested to Sullivan in December 1877, "Mrs. Cripps [Little Buttercup] will be a capital part for [Everard](#) ... [Barrington](#) will be a capital captain, and [Grossmith](#) a first-rate First Lord."<sup>[13]</sup> However, [Mrs Howard Paul](#),<sup>[n 1]</sup> who had played Lady Sangazure in *The Sorcerer*, was declining vocally. She was under contract to play the role of Cousin Hebe in *Pinafore*. Gilbert made an effort to write an amusing part for her despite Sullivan's reluctance to use her, but by mid-May 1878, both Gilbert and Sullivan wanted her out of the cast; unhappy with the role, she left. With only a week to go before opening night, Carte hired a concert singer, [Jessie Bond](#), to play Cousin Hebe.<sup>[28][29]</sup> Since Bond had little experience as an actress, Gilbert and Sullivan cut the dialogue out of the role, except for a few lines in the last scene, which they turned into [recitative](#).<sup>[n 2]</sup> Other new cast members were [Emma Howson](#) and [George Power](#) in the romantic roles, who were improvements on the romantic [soprano](#) and [tenor](#) in *The Sorcerer*.<sup>[12]</sup>

Gilbert acted as stage director for his own plays and operas. He sought realism in acting, just as he strove for realistic visual elements. He deprecated self-conscious interaction with the audience and insisted on a style of portrayal in which the characters were never aware of their own absurdity but were coherent internal wholes.<sup>[30]</sup> Sullivan conducted the music rehearsals. As was to be his usual practice in his later operas, Sullivan left the [overture](#) for the last moment, sketching it out and entrusting it to the company's music director, in this case [Alfred Cellier](#), to complete.<sup>[4]</sup> *Pinafore* opened on 25 May 1878 at the [Opera Comique](#).

## Roles<sup>[edit]</sup>

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- The Rt. Hon. Sir Joseph Porter, [KCB](#), [First Lord of the Admiralty](#) (comic [baritone](#))
- Captain Corcoran, Commander of H.M.S. *Pinafore* (lyric [baritone](#))
- Ralph<sup>[n 3]</sup> Rackstraw, [Able Seaman](#) ([tenor](#))
- Dick Deadeye, Able Seaman ([bass-baritone](#))
- Bill Bobstay, [Boatswain's Mate](#) ([baritone](#))
- Bob Becket, Carpenter's Mate ([bass](#))
- Josephine, The Captain's Daughter ([soprano](#))
- Cousin Hebe, Sir Joseph's First Cousin ([mezzo-soprano](#))
- Mrs. Cripps (Little Buttercup), A Portsmouth [Bumboat](#) Woman ([contralto](#))
- Chorus of First Lord's Sisters, His Cousins, His Aunts, Sailors, Marines, etc.