

*Martha Swisher*†

As a child, David Currie immersed himself in the patter and wit of W.S. Gilbert and what he considered to be the beautiful music of Sir Arthur Sullivan. He loved the fanciful topsy-turvy world of these collaborators that ended invariably in logical conclusions. He once told me that by age seven he had memorized “When you’re lying awake with a dismal headache.” This is truly remarkable, considering that *Iolanthe*’s Lord Chancellor’s tale is the most challenging of all patter songs in the G&S repertoire. But that doesn’t surprise you, does it? We all know of his superior memory.

The Gilbert and Sullivan Opera Company of Chicago benefited immeasurably from the talents and contributions of David Currie. In 1962, two years after the organization of the company, David auditioned and was first cast in the ensemble of *HMS Pinafore* and then as a juror in *Trial by Jury*. One year later, he made his principal debut as Old Adam in the company’s production of *Ruddigore*. He went on to play leading roles in thirteen productions and then changed hats by becoming the company’s longest running stage director at the helm of twenty productions. When David had to take a two-year hiatus from directing in 1966–1967, his wife Barbara assumed the role of producer. David’s involvement has been constant ever since.

David had every role of the repertoire memorized. He could step in at a moment’s notice and assume any role in any production. We often joked he only needed Barbara’s high heels and there would be no need for understudies at all. Poo Bah in *The Mikado*, in *The Sorcerer*, he was the sorcerer, the Major General in *The Pirates of Penzance*, *Patience*’s Bunthorne, *Iolanthe*’s Lord Chancellor, as well as Old Adam in *Ruddigore*. He was most proud of his portrayal of the judge in *Trial by Jury*, a concert version staged here at The Law School with Judge Currie presiding over the production. It played to a sellout crowd. He was magnificent. His authoritative understanding of the genre continues to remain a guiding light in the direction of all productions of the company.

His skill and understanding of language became more and more an asset to the company as he coached diction for all the principal roles. Among our most treasured memories are the hours spent alongside David, hearing him coach inflection, dialect, and details of diction,

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and demonstrating carefully crafted cockney or lightly articulated upper class Oxford. That was David's gift to us all. He found the beauty and heart in every phrase. He never mocked or overstated with melodrama. His brand of gentle sentimentality was real. This approach is the hallmark of our company; none could demonstrate it better. David attached simplicity and elegance to the works of Gilbert and Sullivan and that's what sets us apart from other companies.

He could show tenderness, haughtiness, indignation and absent-minded confusion when the role called for it. It was always touching to hear him recite a love scene as he assumed both characters involved.

He knew the importance of pause and silence, and in general held a firm grasp on the subject of pacing. Of course this meant that he had to understand musical line and phrase, rise and fall, "form and figure," and how they intermingle together with the intricacies of the stage.

There were scores of fine professional singers who had the opportunity to work with David and carry those skills over to their ensuing careers. Developing talent is a great skill, and, as a master teacher, David knew well how to recognize talent and nurture it.

My husband Michael Swisher has performed leading roles in eighteen productions of the company. Michael is a talented singer, but his dialect needed lots of attention. David would spend hours with him, coaching pacing and nuance of lines. Michael relates, "David always seemed to know what we were capable of even when we didn't know it ourselves." He will be forever grateful to David for that.

David also enjoyed the art of casting, an area in which he took great pride. Being able to understand a dimension of a character and match it with a personality (and talent) was another of his tremendous gifts.

When David Currie thinks you're special—somehow because it is someone who you admire so much—it makes it so. You find a way to rise to his expectation. It certainly changed me.

This March, when the house lights dim and the curtain rises on the Gilbert and Sullivan Opera Company's forty-ninth annual production, our sixth production of *Iolanthe*, many of us will privately visualize the nimble steps and impish smile of a Lord Chancellor wearing a long stocking cap and a dressing gown, bare feet in scuff slippers, and holding a candlestick, whose voice could be heard at the back of the hall and whose charm and wit captured the hearts of the actors, production crews, orchestra members, audiences, and countless others who loved and admired the unforgettable and irreplaceable David Currie.