

## THE SYDNEY MUSICAL SOCIETY

\* by Harris S. Morris, B.A., B.Sc.

The Sydney Musical Society was formed in 1935 through the enthusiasm and driving force of Joel Joseph, a Londoner who arrived in Australia in 1925. Joe, as he was always known, had been a keen follower of the Gilbert and Sullivan tradition as presented by the D'Oyly Carte Company, and had taken part in many amateur productions in London. He became choirmaster of the Bondi Junction Synagogue (later the Central). He married Sadie Klineberg, and so into a family who were to become with their cousins and friends the foundation members of the Sydney Musical Society. His brother-in-law, Philip Klineberg, was its first president.

The inaugural meeting called to consider the formation of a musical society was held in May 1935 when about 15 people attended, consisting mostly of young ladies. The chair was taken by Captain (later Major) Hatfield, who was accompanied by Norman Thomas, then M.L.A. for Bondi. It was decided to form a society and to commence rehearsals for "The Mikado". Rehearsals were first held at the School of Arts, Bondi Road. To quote from the foreword of the programme of "The Mikado", the first production to be presented to the public at the Savoy Theatre was on 18 and 20 February 1936:

The Sydney Musical Society was formed at the instigation of Mr Joe Joseph, our producer, early in 1935, but it was not until the middle of the year that rehearsals were well under way. There were many difficulties to overcome and the early days of the Society were hard ones. A rehearsal hall suitable to everyone was not easily found, finance was scarce and the executives and cast needed careful selection and constant amendment.

The Society was formed not only with the object of providing an outlet for young Jewish people with musical tastes, but also as a social meeting place where those of similar interests could be introduced to each other on a mutual footing. In this particularly we have been manifestly successful and our rehearsals are always happy evenings of music and relaxation.

It is also to be stressed that this is the only Jewish Gilbert and Sullivan Society in Australia, surely an effort worthy of praise.

This first production was notable in that the whole of the cast was Jewish, apart from one principal, Bert Cruikshank, a leading tenor with the Gilbert and Sullivan Society. Joe Joseph produced the show and played the principal role of Ko-Ko. He was to continue in this dual capacity as producer and principal in the many productions that were to follow.

The musical director, Ralph Levy, was a graduate of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, and for some time choirmaster of the Great Synagogue. Sam Cohen, assistant musical director, who played Pooh-Bah, had been a member of the Sydney University Gilbert and Sullivan Society. The accompanist, Norah Lurie, was to become a noted concert pianist after a period of overseas study. George Amsberg, a well known barrister, later to become a judge of the District Court, played the Mikado of Japan, a part he had taken on earlier occasions with the Gilbert and Sullivan Society.

In its second season the Society turned to a double production with "Trial by Jury" as curtain raiser to "The Sorcerer". The latter had not been produced in Australia for many years and its enthusiastic reception by appreciative audiences induced J.C. Williamson to include it in their forthcoming professional Gilbert and Sullivan season. The show ran for three consecutive nights from 24 August 1936, a rather demanding feat for a group of amateurs who had to carry on with their normal working lives as well. As before, all principal parts but two were taken by Jewish players, giving an opportunity to some former chorus members to gain experience in principal roles. The all Jewish chorus had grown from 22 in the first production to 32, an indication of the success of the Society in providing an opportunity for participation in cultural activity while enjoying the society of other young Jewish people. Active membership had grown to 50, and social activities, including the Annual Ball, were strongly supported. By this time rehearsals had moved to the Maccabean Hall, where the Society continued for some years to meet in the Dugout, the clubroom of the Ex-Servicemen's Association.

It was decided to present the third season at the Conservatorium of Music where on 16 and 19 June 1937 "Iolanthe" was produced. Here the stage was larger so that scenery from J.C. Williamson could be used, and the dressing rooms were better suited to the bigger chorus numbers than had been the case at the Savoy. Also the Conservatorium Hall could better accommodate the growing audiences that the Society was attracting. The chorus continued to be all Jewish with new names appearing in the programme, an indication of the wider appeal the Society made to young people, both musically and socially. A number of small principal parts again were filled by former chorus members, with three major principals introduced for the first time to appear again in later seasons – J.C. (Clarrie) Bell, Bonnie Judd and Marcia Schofield. Joe Joseph filled the role of Lord Chancellor and as before produced the show with his usual good humour and insistence on high standards. The critics gave a good review and the Society was encouraged to present "Iolanthe" again, on the following August, this time with proceeds going to the Picton Lakes Village (T.B. Settlement) of which Phillip Lazarus was President.

On the following Saturday the Society played its social role at the "Iolanthe" Ball, a highly successful occasion at the Chicken Inn, Pitt Street. Rehearsals were commenced almost immediately for the next production – "The Yeomen of the Guard", an ambitious project for this amateur group. It was made possible by changes which were to raise dramatically the Society's musical and acting standards. The key position of Musical Director was filled by Ivan Rixon who brought the benefits of his wide experience as conductor and musical director of symphony orchestras and other musical societies. The Ivan Rixon Glee Singers were regularly presented by a leading radio station. Ivan set high standards for principals and chorus and assembled a professional orchestra for the productions. A firm disciplinarian at rehearsals, he possessed a warm and friendly personality and was a source of confidence and inspiration to all in the stress of public appearances.



Leo Darnton, a former member of the D'Oyly Carte Company and at that time a teacher of singing and dramatic art in Sydney, brought the benefit of his wide experience on the professional stage. Leo portrayed Colonel Fairfax with practised aplomb, and his sotto voce comments to members of the chorus helped to relieve the tension of stage nerves. Joe Joseph continued his fine work as producer, also playing the part of Jack Point with his accustomed skill. Joe and Ivan brought together a fine team of principals who were to stay with the Society for many further seasons – Bonnie Judd a charming contralto as Phoebe, Marie Ryan in the leading role of Elsie Maynard, Gwen Gillard in the part of Kate, Marcia Schofield continuing her outstanding performances as (contralto) Dame Carruthers. For the first time the Society had the valued assistance of Bill Mason, a fine bass as Sergeant Meryll, Beau Pinkerton, whose remarkably pure tenor voice was heard as Leonard Meryll. E.A.Nicholls, noted throughout the Gilbert & Sullivan audiences of Sydney for his studied interpretations, took the part of gaoler Wilfred Shadbolt.

The season for two nights, 16 and 17 February 1938, was again to benefit the funds of the Picton Lakes T.B. Settlement. The Conservatorium was packed, people seated even on the steps in the aisle. The cast and friends celebrated at an after-show supper party at the Dungowan – dancing till 2 a.m. – tickets – 2/6.d. Meanwhile, Philip Klineberg, who had guided the Society as President since its inception, was transferred to the country by the Department of Education. He was succeeded by Harris Morris who occupied the position until the war years brought changes to the composition of the Society, and his own enlistment in the R.A.A.F. In recognition of his initiative in founding the Society and his continuing guidance and support, Joe Joseph was elected the first Life Member. To show appreciation of the continued use of the Dugout for weekly rehearsals, and to assist the funds of the N.S.W. Jewish War Memorial, a Grand Concert was presented in the Maccabean Hall on 13 April, 1938. The principals supported by chorus appeared in a varied programme, with appreciation expressed by President Mark Owen.

Social activities continued with a "mystery hike" on Anzac Day, meeting under the clock at Central Station, the unknown destination turning out to be Heathcote with a hike to Burning Palms. On 30 July 1938 the Stratford Ballroom was the venue of the fourth Annual Ball. Meanwhile, chorus and principals were hard at work in rehearsal for "Ruddigore" which was presented to full houses at the Conservatorium on 3 and 4 August 1938. On this occasion the profits went to the Rotary Club's Appeal for the N.S.W. Society for Crippled Children. To quote the *Herald's* critic – "Even at the back of the hall almost every syllable of the dialogue was clearly audible, and the songs tripped along crisply and blithely. Altogether this "Ruddigore" was a lightly enjoyable performance." So the Society continued to occupy a position of some eminence in the musical life of Sydney, maintaining and enhancing its high standards under the leadership of Joe Joseph and Ivan Rixon, with valued assistance from experienced principals and the enthusiastic efforts of its Jewish chorus. The social life of the Society was actively supported, with house parties, hikes, picnics, dances and car drives.

"The Mikado" was presented for a second season in February, 1939, a performance of a much higher standard than that of the first attempt. "A brilliant performance," wrote the *Herald* critic. "The Gondoliers" followed in August of that year. "A very creditable performance" wrote one critic, while the *Herald* stated that "Gilbert and Sullivan delighted a crowded house at the Conservatorium on Saturday night last when the Sydney Musical Society gave a sterling performance of "The Gondoliers" under the musical direction of Ivan Rixon and his excellent orchestra. The chorus, as is usual with this company, was animated and gaily dressed and their choral numbers greatly added to the enjoyment of the performance". The Society continued to expand its repertoire with "Princess Ida" in February, 1940, in aid of the Lord Mayor's Patriotic Fund. In August 1940 "The Sorcerer" and "Trial by Jury" were repeated "in aid of war charities". Again, a new venture with "The Pirates of Penzance" in May 1941, repeated in June in aid of Toc H. Hostels Overseas Fund. The Woollloomooloo Police Boys Club benefited from a revival of "The Mikado" in September of that year.

Performances of "Iolanthe" were presented in March 1942 in aid of the Russian Medical Aids and Comforts Committee. By this time the effects of the Second World War were being felt as members, both male and female, enlisted in the armed services. Most were from the chorus, but President Harris Morris, producer Joe Joseph and Musical Director Ivan Rixon were amongst almost 40 names listed in programmes as members of the forces. With the absence of so many young Jewish women and men it became necessary to open the ranks of the chorus to others, so that the Society could continue to present productions of an acceptable standard.

The venue for rehearsals was moved to the studio at North Sydney of Stan Buddle, one of the outstanding principals. Jose Joseph became President, with Ivan Rixon as Vice-President. The present writer's association with the Society ceased in January 1942 on enlistment in the R.A.A.F. He was honoured by becoming the second Life Member. Programmes show the production of "The Mikado" in May 1943 (followed by a greatly appreciated performance to R.A.A.F. personnel at Bradfield Park), "The Pirates of Penzance" in August 1944, "The Gondoliers" in April 1945, "Iolanthe" in May 1946 and "The Mikado" in December, with "Trial by Jury" and "The Sorcerer" in July 1947.

In an endeavour to maintain contact with scattered members *The Sydney Musical Society Bulletin* (Price one penny) was published by co-editors Neville Myers, Syd Friedlander and Frank Finkelstein. Messages to and from old friends in the services were relayed, with snippets of gossip to keep people in touch. To mark the tenth anniversary of the Society's formation a special edition was published in May 1945, containing articles surveying the history and activities of the Society and its members. A special tribute was paid by Joe Joseph to Neville Myers, Mark Snyder and Syd Friedlander and to Sylvia Tooler and Betty Sulman "For their untiring work in holding the Society together during its most trying period."



In retrospect, it is surprising just how much was achieved in the comparatively short life of the Sydney Musical Society. At a time when there were few Jewish youth groups, it provided a meeting place for those with musical interests while filling an important social function. So much was this the case that its members dubbed it the "Sydney Matrimonial Society". Those that I can recall who met and married whilst associated with the Society included Ruth Levine and Sam Cohen, Julie Levy and Harris Morris, Sylvia Tooler and Syd Friedlander, Betty Israel and Lou Stamper, Millicent Bass and Sid Levine, Sheila Rosenberg and Harry Cohen, Rene Cohen and Norman Hart, Edna Hyman and Lionel Alexander, Norah Lurie and Frank Finkelstein, Hannah Lipson and Evan Isaacs, Hilda Soltan and Ron Phillips, Naomi Keesing and Maurice Saunders, and Edith Kaufman and Wally Phillips. A number of members went on to earn positions of prestige in the general community. Philip Klineberg, the Foundation President, became Staff Inspector of Schools in charge of Special Education. Sam Cohen gained his Doctorate in Education in London and later filled the position of Vice-Principal of Sydney Teachers College. When Macquarie University was founded he was appointed its first deputy Vice-Chancellor, occupying that post until his retirement.

Harris and Ben Morris became principals of High Schools in the State system - the only Jewish brothers to do so. Syd Friedlander turned to Local Government and was Mayor of the Lane Cove Municipality on several occasions - he is the present incumbent of that position. R. Lipson moved into wool research in the C.S.I.R.O., and invented the C.S.I.R.O set process to prevent wool shrinkage.

The Sydney Musical Society was unique in Sydney's Jewish community and it has been a pleasure to have recorded its story.

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*\* It is noted with regret that Harris Samuel Morris passed away after a continuing illness on 14 February 1990.*