

# Long family helps to keep Gilbert & Sullivan comic operas on stage

By TONYA CONE

SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH OUTLOOK

**T**he works of W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan are alive and well in Austin, thanks in part to the Long family.

Mark Long, a systems analyst at the University of Texas by day, has performed in Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Austin productions annually since 1997. His wife, Roberta, serves on the organization's board of directors.

The Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Austin was formed in 1976 to educate the public and preserve the works of the librettist and composer, who in 1871-96 collaborated on 14 comic operas, known as the Savoy Operas.

The organization is known for its annual fully staged productions from the Gilbert and Sullivan repertoire, but the society is primarily an educational group, dedicated to spreading and teaching the work of Gilbert and Sullivan in schools and the community.

Its Wand'ring Minstrels are the society's ambassadors to Central Texas. They perform at schools and special events, and, throughout the year, the society produces a program of music and history featuring Gilbert and Sullivan and other works from the 19th century.

"The (GSSA) meetings teem with quiet fun," Mark Long said, noting that those present sing "Now to the Banquet We Press," a song from "The Sorcerer," before enjoying refreshments at the end of each session.

Mark, who also has been part of the Austin Choral Union, Chorus Austin and Texas Choral Consort and was in the Austin Lyric Opera Chorus in 1987-2004, was first part of a Gilbert and Sullivan show in 1966, when he was in the chorus in a production of "The Gondoliers" at Concord College (now Concord University) in Athens, W.Va.

His first Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Austin performance came in 1997, when he was in the chorus of "The Yeoman of the Guard." Next month, he will perform in his 10th GSSA production, again "The Yeoman of the Guard" as a member of the citizens' chorus, where his voice will be part of a quartet.

"Gilbert and Sullivan is one of those music theater deals where being in the chorus is already a really great thing," he said. "The chorus is on stage maybe a third of the time, way more than an opera. I've never felt disappointed by being in the chorus."

Roberta Long added, "The chorus is almost like a character in Gilbert and Sullivan."

A longtime supporter of the society, she got involved with the group when she start-



**Roberta and Mark Long (photo at right) have long been involved in the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Austin — she as a volunteer and board member, and he as a cast member in a variety of productions.**

PHOTO BY TONYA CONE

ed volunteering at performances. She was there anyway, so she began taking tickets and manning the concession booth. Eventually, she was asked to join the board.

A retired certified public accountant and a volunteer in Congregation Agudas Achim's gift shop and adult education program, today she serves as office manager of the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Austin.

The Long family also has spread their love of Gilbert and Sullivan across the globe. Mark and Roberta's son, Steven, who performed in two GSSA productions while a student at Anderson High School, was the Pirate King in a recent Jerusalem Gilbert and Sullivan Society production of "The Pirates of Penzance."

The show was staged in December at the Hirsch Theatre in Jerusalem and in January at Yad Labanim in Ra'anana.

Steven, a natural musician who sang before he could walk and talk, grew up watching his father perform, mostly at dress rehearsals. He went on to play the piano and drums in the Anderson band and always sang. While in high school, he was in the chorus in GSSA productions of "Patience" and "H.M.S. Pinafore."

His father said of Steven's roles, "It's a



**PHOTOS BY Nanci and Benny Jay**  
At left and above, Mark Long appeared in the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Austin's production last summer of 'Iolanthe,' one of the duo's less known comic operas — but Long's favorite from the Victorian-era duo.



good opportunity for voice majors to get a named role on their résumé and the experience. It's tough to get a featured role in an opera production. There aren't that many operas around."

As a voice major at UT-Austin, Steven studied with David Small, Rose Taylor and Nikita Storojev. He then went on to study vocal performance at the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University, where he studied with Richard Stilwell.

While growing up in Austin, Steven performed in the children and adult choirs at Agudas Achim, as well as a joint Agudas Achim and Congregation Beth Israel choir. That background came in handy while he was in Chicago, when, after only three days in the city, he was hired as leader of the bass section in the High Holidays choir at Temple Chai in Long Grove, Ill.

He became friends with Temple Chai's cantor, Scott Simon, who taught him liturgy and held several concerts with him. Steven ended up working as section leader there for the next two years. During that



PHOTO BY TONYA CONE

**Mark Long poses with a prop — a picture him in character — from 'Ruddigore,' in which he appeared. In the show, pictures of the cursed Baronet of Ruddigore's ancestors — cursed themselves — hang on castle walls. When the baronet fails to fulfill his obligations under the curse, their ghosts emerge from the picture frames to haunt and punish him.**

period, he also sang in the choir at Chicago Sinai Congregation as a substitute and during special programs.

After finishing his graduate program, Steven remained in Chicago, where his girlfriend, Sonia Nizny, was finishing her master's degree. While he did some auditioning and performing, he worked at Trader Joe's and saw that trying to make a life as an opera singer was not the way he really wanted to live.



Simon encouraged Steven to attend cantorial school, and he is finishing his first year at Hebrew Union College, which is in Jerusalem. The rest of his program will be in New York.

His mother said, “His experiences in Chicago brought him closer to Jewish tradition.”

In Jerusalem, Steven attended a Gilbert and Sullivan Society audition for “The Pirates of Penzance” when Nizny went to try out for a role in the operetta. He told them he was a cantorial student and they asked him to audition.

Not only did Nizny leave the audition with the role of Edith, Steven landed the role of Pirate King.

“It was very exciting and flattering to be offered such a major role for an audition I wasn’t even planning on doing,” Steven told *The Jewish Outlook* via e-mail.

“I had to think long and hard if I wanted to accept it, because the first year of cantorial school is a massive undertaking,” he said. “In the end, I decided that I couldn’t miss the opportunity, and although it was a difficult semester, it was extremely rewarding being part of the show.”

The biggest difference between working with the Gilbert and Sullivan societies in Austin and Jerusalem, Steven said, is that in Israel the entire cast and production team were Jewish, many of them Orthodox, so no rehearsals were held on Shabbat and a group prayed evening services after each rehearsal.

“It also meant a very strong sense of community within the group,” he said. “Every time something good happened like an engagement or a birth, or conversely, a tragedy like a death in someone’s family occurred, it was shared with the entire cast and crew, and everyone was extremely supportive of each other. In the end, I believe this led to a sense of community and familiarity that really made the show come to life.”

Steven previously performed in several operas in Israel. He spent his summers in 2006-08 at the International Vocal Arts Institute, a summer program for young artists founded and directed by Joan Dornemann and Paul Nadler of the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

Visiting teachers, coaches, directors and conductors from all over the world participate in the program, giving master classes, coaching, and producing and directing the program’s operas.

In 2007, Roberta Long joined her son in Israel, spending three weeks in Jerusalem studying at the Conservative Yeshiva and three weeks in Tel Aviv.

Steven is not the only member of Austin’s Jewish community who has participated in the Jerusalem Gilbert and Sullivan Society, an arm of Encore! Educational Theatre Company. Peter Stone, an Agudas



PHOTOS BY BRIAN NEGIN  
Above and at left, Steven Long, son of Mark and Roberta, appears as the Pirate King in the Gilbert and Sullivan Society Jerusalem’s production of ‘The Pirates of Penzance.’ At left, he carries the character Edith, portrayed by his real-life girlfriend, Sonia Nizny.

Achim member, played violin in the orchestra in the society’s 2008 production of “The Yeomen of the Guard” and the organization’s 2009 production of “Oklahoma!”

Roberta observed that it is amazing for the work of Gilbert and Sullivan to continue to hold up more than 130 years after it was written, especially in comparison to other musical comedies, such as “South Pacific” and “Oklahoma!,” which have aged much more in a much shorter span of time.

“Some things are very much of their time, but not that many,” she said. “You don’t have to do too much updating to make the material still work today.”

Works like “Patience” and “Princess Ida” contain humor that is so specific to their time that modern audiences can find it hard to relate them — such as references to specific Victorian-era writers, “newfangled ideas” like Darwin’s Theory of Evolution and women’s universities. On the other hand, complaints about such things as Britain’s House of Lords and House of Commons in other plays remain relevant because they could be said about today’s U.S. Senate or House of Representatives.

Minor revisions like changing racial slurs

trayed how the operettas might have turned out if Gilbert and Sullivan had been Jewish, Mark said.

He identified his favorite work by Gilbert and Sullivan as “Tolanthe,” one of the duo’s less known, which the Gilbert and Sullivan performed last year.

“It surprised everyone, including the society, by taking in a lot of money last summer and practically sold-out performances,” he said of the show. “The production was that good, and the work is that good, too.”

He also likes the three best-known Gilbert and Sullivan works: “H.M.S. Pinafore,” “The Mikado” and “The Pirates of Penzance.”

His wife said she goes back and forth on which is her favorite Gilbert and Sullivan work but settled on “The Yeoman of the Guard,” describing it as less of a parody, more of a tragic comedy, and closer to an opera than most of their other operettas.

Mark said the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Austin is going out on a limb by performing the duo’s lesser known shows instead of mainly focusing on the three best-known, as no built-in audience exists for those shows.

While the society used to perform one of the three best-known works every other year, with shows having less name recognition staged in between, Mark said a show can be performed too often.

In a bad economy, people are less likely to attend something they have seen before, he said, so the society decided to mix it up a little.

The GSSA gained the confidence of their audience, Mark said, with the success of past productions. He credits the society’s stage director, Ralph (Rafe) MacPhail Jr., who he said knows how to make something viable and theatrically effective out of the tradition, as well as Jeffrey Jones-Ragona, its music director. The conductor of the makheilah (adult choir) at Beth Israel, Jones-Ragona received the B. Iden Payne award in 2003 for his musical direction of “The Pirates of Penzance.”

Mark said the society also benefits from having a sophisticated audience in Austin.

“In a lot of places of comparable size,” he said, “we would be taking more of a risk doing some of the lesser known works.”

The society will be performing Gilbert and Sullivan’s “The Yeoman of the Guard” — known for its satire, hilarious one-liners and score, which many believe is Sullivan’s finest — from Thursday, June 10, through Sunday, June 20, at Travis High School Performing Arts Center. For more information, visit [www.gilbertsullivan.org](http://www.gilbertsullivan.org).

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