It is, it is a glorious thing . . .

PHILIP CLIFFORD

The sound of "The Pirates of Penzance" at Drury Lane was designed by Don Ketteler and three technicians – Ric Salzedo, Steve Williams and Marytka Jablkowska – operated rehearsals and subsequent performances. My own part in all this was to organise back-up during a lengthy and demanding rehearsal period. It seemed at the time to keep me busy, but I did have the leisure to reflect on the procedures (which are largely my own) employed by the sound crew. Some of these reflections are naturally critical, (no doubt because they concern my own practice) but I will say at the outset that the sound at Drury Lane and the work that made it are of a high standard and a credit to those I've named and to Autograph whose workmanship is as good as the equipment they supply. I am free to say this because I can claim no credit for it.

At their first meeting, the Major-General and the Pirate King lock horns in a misunderstanding of 'often' (in the king's pronunciation) for 'orphan'. This misunderstanding, sadistically prolonged by Gilbert, threatens once more to overwhelm the King in Act II. The outburst of delighted laughter in the Drury Lane audience at the reappearance of this verbal puzzle shows clearly that Gilbert's play with the words and letters of his libretto is not a charming period ornament but is a true part of "Pirates".

It is certainly true that Gilbert lovingly cultivated his taste (and his audience's) for verbal play, and that this taste can be seen at work in the theatre of succeeding writers like Wilde and Shaw. But to understand this as a historical or sociological curiosity is to miss its point. Frederick's predicament as 'the slave of duty' is the thread of story-telling in "Pirates" and the predicament originates in another mishearing: 'pirate' for 'pilot', this time. Further, he cannot escape it because, being born on 29 February, he cannot come out of his apprentice pirate's indentures until he is 84. There is no need to multiply this example, I think.

But one more might drive the point home. At their first meeting with Frederick, the Major-General's daughters exclaim in horror and are echoed by a fortissimo thwack on tympani and bass drum. They remonstrate with the percussion player who effectively defends himself by pointing out the notes in his part. Although neatly done, not least by the outragedly innocent musician, this could easily be a bit of village-hall pantomime, were it not that here once more literal authority is invoked and settles the issue with crushing finality. Genuinely funny, more so than the other bits of orchestral "business" in the performance.

The plot, such as it is, of "Pirates" relies on the complete and immediate trust by each character in what he is told, and a grotesquely exact and literal faithfulness in interpreting it. The conflicts in "Pirates" are verbal or literal and the winners are those with most verbal adeptness. The Major-General is a Napoleon of verbal force and cunning, while the Pirate King is a defeated refugee from the verbal rat-race, retired to the West country and there practising the older and more gentlemanly arts of rape, seamanship and (non-verbal) bullying.

Described so, "Pirates" may seem elegant, facetious and ultimately tiresome, and there are Gilbert and Sullivan operas of which this could be said. But the verbal sharpness of "Pirates" torments its characters into revealing and appealing vulnerability; Gilbert succeeds in being both sardonic and forgiving. Farcical, brilliant and absurd, "Pirates" is affectionate and inspires affection, one of the biggest and best of all Gilbert's paradoxes.

This, of course, is an argumentative basis for saying that in "Pirates" the words are paramount – for the sound man, that is. For myself, the argument is redundant, because I think that in theatre musicals they always should be. Many readers of CUE will agree with this, although thinking it so obviously true that it doesn't need writing down. But during rehearsals of "Pirates" at Drury Lane it became clear that for some

the proposition is not self-evident or universally true. In one discussion, I found myself saying that the upper limit on the sound level of a musical is the level to which the vocal can be raised, this level in turn determining the level at which the band must be held. It seemed that this for some people was unwelcome, even disagreeable, though hard to dispute. If such is the limit on our work – I imagine this question, but I think it sums up the opposition to what I said – what sort of work is that for a grown-up sound technician? Quite what sort of work it is I hope to make clear.

There probably are some musical performances in which clearly intelligible vocals are not a high priority – some church music, some rock, some opera are possible examples. But in musical theatre the words are the actor's primary means of performance, just as they are in other kinds of theatre, because they are the only part of the actors' performance to which you cannot shut your eyes. The exchange of communication between actor and audience is the theatre's first business and probably its only essential. The wealth and variety of resources employed in a musical can render this communication with unforgettable force but simultaneously can damage it beyond hope, by obscuring, smothering or distracting it. Speaking only of the sound of a musical, I am sure that the audience listens to the words first (given the chance); once secure in this they can attend to the complexity of feeling and force of assertion that the partnership of voices and instruments is capable of.

It is quite legitimate in a musical to make the instrumental level press hard on the vocal, even submerge the vocal, if the audience can perceive what this stress is meant to convey; this perception by the audience can even be subconscious. But this device can surely not be exploited for long, because the audience becomes simply fatigued by it. If they must strain to hear for long periods they will detect, consciously or not, the technical or managerial failure which is going to give them a hard time. So