

Iolanthe

or, The Peer and the Peri

An Entirely Original Fairy Opera, in Two Acts

Synopsis by Fredric Woodbridge Wilson

First produced at the Savoy Theatre, London, under the management of R. D'Oyly Carte, on Saturday, November 25, 1882, for 398 performances through January 1, 1884. Sullivan conducted the first performance.

THE LORD CHANCELLOR	<i>Light Baritone</i>	George Grossmith
THE EARL OF MOUNTARARAT (GEORGE)	<i>Baritone</i>	Rutland Barrington
THE EARL TOLLOLLER (THOMAS)	<i>Tenor</i>	Durward Lely
PRIVATE WILLIS, of the Grenadier Guards	<i>Bass-Baritone</i>	Charles Manners
STREPHON, an Arcadian Shepherd, Iolanthe's Son	<i>Baritone</i>	Richard Temple
QUEEN OF THE FAIRIES	<i>Contralto</i>	Alice Barnett
Fairies		
IOLANTHE, Strephon's Mother	<i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>	Jessie Bond
CELIA	<i>Soprano</i>	Miss Fortescue
LEILA	<i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>	Julia Gwynne
FLETA	<i>Soprano</i>	Sybil Grey
PHYLLIS, an Arcadian Shepherdess, and a Ward in Chancery	<i>Soprano</i>	Leonora Braham

DUKES, MARQUISES, EARLS, VISCOUNTS, BARONS, and FAIRIES

Simultaneously produced at the Standard Theatre, New York, under the management of R. D'Oyly Carte, on November 25, 1882, for 105 performances through February 24, 1883. First revived in London at the Savoy Theatre, under the management of Mrs. D'Oyly Carte, on December 7, 1901, for 113 performances through March 29, 1902.

ACT I — AN ARCADIAN LANDSCAPE, BETWEEN 1700 AND 1882

The Fairies enter, dancing in “never-ceasing motion” as they sing (Chorus, *Tripping hither, tripping thither*). Their “fairy revels have not been what they were,” however, since the Queen banished Iolanthe (who was “the life and soul of fairy land”) for marrying a mortal. The Queen enters, and explains that although the fairy law called for a sentence of

death, because of her surpassing love for Iolanthe, she commuted Iolanthe's sentence to penal servitude for life, to be served at the bottom of a stream. The Fairies appeal to her to pardon Iolanthe, and the Queen acquiesces (Invocation, *Iolanthe! From thy dark exile thou art summoned!*). Iolanthe, clad in water-weeds, rises from the water, and humbly approaches the Queen. She is pardoned, and all of the Fairies embrace her (Chorus, *Welcome to our hearts again*).

Iolanthe explains that she chose to live at the bottom of the stream to be near her son, Strephon. He was born shortly after her sentence, twenty-five years ago — a fairy only down to the waist. He is an Arcadian shepherd, in love with Phyllis, a shepherdess and a ward in Chancery. Strephon enters, playing on a flageolet, and greets Iolanthe with the news that he is to be married on that day (Song, *Good morrow, good mother!*). He is undaunted by the fact that the Lord Chancellor has refused him permission to marry Phyllis. Iolanthe tells him of her pardon, and introduces him to all his aunts. Strephon confesses that he has not told Phyllis that he is part fairy, and he complains that his fairyhood has been “the curse of my existence.” The Queen resolves to make him a Member of Parliament, as a Liberal-Conservative. The Fairies take their leave affectionately (Ensemble, *Fare thee well, attractive stranger*).

Phyllis enters, playing on a flageolet (Song, *Good morrow, good lover!*). She is worried by the consequences of disobeying the Lord Chancellor's prohibition — penal servitude for life — and suggests that they might wait two years until she is of age. Strephon, aware that the entire House of Lords are paying particular attention to Phyllis, persuades her to marry him at once (Duet, *None shall part us from each other*). They exit.

The Peers enter in a grand procession (Chorus, *Loudly let the trumpet bray!*). They are joined by the Lord Chancellor (Song, *The Law is the true embodiment Of everything that's excellent*). He describes the particular delicacy of his position as constitutional guardian of “pretty young wards in Chancery,” one by one “giving agreeable girls away.” The business of the day concerns Phyllis, who not only has captured the hearts of each of the Peers, but of the Lord Chancellor himself: “If I could reconcile it with my duty, I should unhesitatingly award her to myself, for I can conscientiously say that I know no man who is so well fitted to render her exceptionally happy.” The Lords express their sympathy at the Lord Chancellor's painful position.

Phyllis, who has been asked to present herself, enters (Recitative, *My well-beloved Lord and Guardian dear*). Lord Tolloller expresses the feelings of the entire House when he proclaims that Phyllis's charms outweigh her lowly origin (Solo, *Of all the young ladies I know*). Phyllis replies (Solo, *I'm very much pained to refuse*) that she prefers to “stick to my pipes and my tabors.” The Peers plead with her, and Lord Tolloller asks her not to be prejudiced (Ballad, *Spurn not the nobly born*), for “high rank involves no shame.” Phyllis confesses that her heart is given (Recitative, *My Lord, it may not be*), and the Peers are horrified. The Lord Chancellor demands to know who has defied his command, and

Strephon appears to claim his beloved (Ensemble, *A shepherd I*). The Peers, inwardly reeling, exit with feigned dignity. Phyllis also exits.

The Lord Chancellor questions Strephon, who refuses to answer him directly. The Lord Chancellor offers himself as an example of the happy result of attention to duty (Song, *When I went to the Bar as a very young man*). Iolanthe enters and, finding Strephon in tears, consoles her son: he is half a fairy, and the Lord Chancellor has no power over him. Besides, the Queen of the Fairies has promised Strephon her special protection.

As Strephon thanks his mother for her assistance (Finale, *When darkly looms the day*) the Lords Mountararat and Tolloller lead Phyllis to eavesdrop on their conversation, and conclude that Strephon and Iolanthe are lovers. Phyllis accuses Strephon of infidelity (*Oh, shameless one, tremble!*). The Lord Chancellor enters, whereupon Iolanthe veils herself. The Lords are amused by Strephon's protestation that Iolanthe — who, as a fairy, looks like a maid of seventeen — is his mother (Ballad, *In babyhood Upon her lap I lay*). In anger, Phyllis offers to marry either of the Lords — “and I don't care which!” (Ballad, *For riches and rank I do not long*). They debate which of them should marry Phyllis (Ensemble, *To you I give my heart so rich!*). Strephon calls for the Queen to come to his aid, and the Fairies appear (Chorus, *Tripping hither, tripping thither*). Strephon explains his predicament (*The lady of my love has caught me talking to another*), and the Queen represents him against the Peers. The Lord Chancellor rebukes the Queen (Ensemble, *Go away, madam*), and he so provokes her that she pronounces her vengeance: “Take down our sentence as we speak it, And *he* shall wreak it!” Strephon shall go into Parliament, and every bill that takes his pleasure will be passed. Furthermore, all of their precious privileges will be abolished, and the nobility will be result of competitive examination. The act closes (Ensemble, *Young Strephon is the kind of lout*) as the Peers affect disdain and the Fairies predict the Peers' downfall.

ACT II — THE PALACE YARD, WESTMINSTER, MOONLIGHT

The second act opens on Private Willis, alone on sentry duty. He sings philosophically (Song, *When all night long a chap remains*) on the coincidence “That every boy and every gal, That's born into the world alive, Is either a little Liberal, Or else a little Conservative!” The Fairies enter, tripping round the stage, as the Peers enter from Westminster Hall. They sing of the uncanny success that has attended Strephon's political career (Chorus, *Strephon's a Member of Parliament*). Lord Mountararat proclaims the glories of the House of Peers, an institution “which is not susceptible of any improvement at all” (Song, *When Britain really ruled the waves*). Leila and Celia confess that the Fairies are much impressed by the Peers, and they chide them coyly for their defiance (Duet, *In vain to us you plead*). The Fairies gaze wistfully after the Peers as they leave.

The Queen of the Fairies enters, and warns the Fairies that the penalty for marrying a

mortal is death. She confesses that she herself is not “insensible to the effect of manly beauty” — and shows herself to be particularly susceptible to the qualities of Private Willis, “whose physical attributes are simply god-like.” But she mortifies her inclinations (Song, *Oh, foolish fay*), and the Fairies exit sorrowfully.

Phyllis is greeted by the Lords Mountararat and Tolloller, her two fiancés. They discuss the question of who should marry Phyllis. On this point Phyllis is indifferent: “How can it possibly concern me? You are both Earls, you are both rich, and you are both plain.” The two rival Lords, all the while showing a genial politeness, contemplate a duel; but they eventually agree that Phyllis’s love is insufficient cause to strain their friendship (Quartet, *Though p’raps I may incur your blame*).

They exit, and the Lord Chancellor enters. He is miserable on account of Phyllis (Recitative, *Love, unrequited, robs me of my rest*; Song, *When you’re lying awake with a dismal headache, and repose is taboo’d by anxiety*), and he is troubled by the conflict within him. The Peers, however, advise him to act on his impulses: “Faint heart never won fair lady!” (Trio, *If you go in You’re sure to win*). They dance and exit, arm in arm. Strephon enters in very low spirits. Phyllis approaches, and he takes the opportunity to tell her about his mother’s fairyhood. Phyllis is understanding: “Whenever I see you kissing a very young lady, I shall know it’s an elderly relative.” They resolve to marry without delay (Duet, *If we’re weak enough to tarry*). Iolanthe greets them and gives them her blessing. The couple ask her to plead on their behalf before the Lord Chancellor, but Iolanthe replies that what they ask is impossible: “The Lord Chancellor is — my husband!” She is bound, under penalty of death, never to see him again.

The Lord Chancellor enters, and Iolanthe veils herself. She approaches him (Recitative, *My Lord, a suppliant at your feet I kneel*) and pleads for Strephon (Ballad, *He loves! If the bygone years*), and though the Lord Chancellor is moved, he denies her appeal. Upon learning that he plans to marry Phyllis himself, Iolanthe can not restrain herself, and she reveals that she is his wife. The Fairies enter, and Iolanthe kneels before the Queen to accept her doom.

The Peers enter with Strephon, and the Fairies inform the Queen that “If Iolanthe must die, so must we all; for, as she has sinned, so have we!” Each of the Fairies has married one of the Peers. The Queen of the Fairies sees the dilemma: she “can’t slaughter the whole company,” but the law is clear. The Lord Chancellor suggests a minor alteration in the fairy law: inserting a single word, “Let it stand that every fairy shall die who *don’t* marry a mortal.” The Queen consents, and in order to save her own life she appeals to Private Willis, who readily offers to “ill-convenience himself to save a female in distress.” As the Peers are henceforth “to be recruited entirely from persons of intelligence,” they are of no further use where they are. The opera closes as the men sprout wings and prepare to be transported to Fairyland (Finale, *Soon as we may, Off and away!*).

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