

Thespis  
or, The Gods Grown Old  
An Entirely Original Grotesque Opera, in Two Acts

Synopsis by Fredric Woodbridge Wilson

Produced at the Gaiety Theatre, London, under the management of John Hollingshead, on Saturday, December 26, 1871 (as an after-piece to Henry J. Byron's drama *Dearer Than Life*), for 63 performances through March 8, 1872. Sullivan conducted the first performance.

Aged Olympians

JUPITER, King of the Gods	John Maclean
APOLLO, God of the Sun	Frederic Sullivan
MARS, God of War	Frank Wood
DIANA, Goddess of the Moon, Apollo's Sister	Mrs. Henry Leigh
VENUS, Goddess of Love	Annie Jolly
MERCURY, Messenger of the Gods	Nellie Farren
THESPIS, Manager of a Travelling Theatrical Company	J. L. Toole
SILLIMON, the Stage Manager	J. G. Taylor

Thespians

TIMIDON	Mr. Marshall
TIPSCION	Robert Soutar
PREPOSTEROS	Henry Payne
STUPIDAS	Fred Payne
SPARKEION, Betrothed to Nicemis	Mdlle. Clary
NICEMIS, Betrothed to Sparkeion	Constance Loseby
PRETTEIA	Rose Behrend
DAPHNE	Annie Tremaine
CYMON	Lardy Wilson

OTHER AGED DEITIES, etc.

The opera was never produced in America, nor was it revived during the lifetime of the authors. Since the first production the music to the opera has been lost.

ACT I — RUINED TEMPLE OF THE GODS ON MOUNT OLYMPUS

The opera opens on the summit of Olympus as a Chorus of Stars return from their

fatiguing night's work (Chorus, *Throughout the night*). Diana, the frail and elderly Goddess of the Moon, calls to her brother, Apollo, God of the Sun, to take up his shift. An elderly "buck" garbed in a dressing gown, Apollo declines to go out today; he wants rest.

Mercury enters rapidly, carrying several parcels. He too is fatigued, from the commissions of theft he has been assigned by the other gods (Song, *Oh, I'm the celestial drudge*). He reports that the influence of the gods over affairs on earth has greatly waned. Jupiter enters; he is a decrepit, aged man, bearded and wearing a fine dressing gown. He reminisces about the good old days, when the gods were offered human sacrifices. Mars joins them to report that mortals are storming the temple on Olympus (Quartet, *Oh incident unprecedented*). Peering over a precipice, they watch the proceedings, but in their dotage they are powerless to rebuff the onslaught, and they take shelter in the ruined temple.

Two mortals, Sparkeion and Nicemis, succeed in climbing to the summit of Olympus. They are members of Thespis's theatrical troupe, and they do not know where they are. They are in love, and Thespis has given the entire company a picnic on their wedding day. Their marriage ceremony (which lasts all day) is but half completed; accordingly, Nicemis repels Sparkeion's flirtations (Duet, *Here far away from all the world*). Teasingly, he threatens to turn his attentions to Daphne, who would be more receptive. The other members of the troupe enter (Chorus, *Climbing over rocky mountain*); each behaves in an exaggerated manner according to the implications of his name. They are followed by Thespis, who bids the revels commence. Each was to have brought food to contribute to the feast — but everyone has brought condiments instead. Moreover, Tipscion, an inebriate low comedian, has left the wine behind so that he would not be tempted by it. The company grow quarrelsome, and Thespis complains of the burdens of his position. Nicemis flirts with Thespis, to spite her half-husband, but Thespis rebukes her. He is by nature affable, but his position requires aloofness; he relates "the story of the gentlemen who undermined his influence by associating with his inferiors" (Song, *I once knew a chap who discharged a function*).

Returning in full Olympian costume, Jupiter, Mars, and Apollo appear on three broken columns. The mortals run away screaming, except for Thespis, who affects an attitude of disdain. They all introduce themselves, and Jupiter consults the theatrical manager on how they might present a better impression. Thespis does not flatter the gods ("we don't use you much out of burlesque"), but he suggests that they should go down to Earth, incognito, to judge for themselves what action to take; while they are gone, the Thespians (who are "used to take long parts on the shortest notice") would fill their places. Mercury is left to remain with the mortals in case they find themselves in difficulty. They shake hands on the bargain (Quartet, *So that's arranged — you take my place, my boy*).

Summoned by Mercury, the actors return, and Thespis gives them their parts (Air, *While mighty Jove goes down below*). Sparkeion is to play Apollo, Nicemis is to be Diana, Timidon is to play Mars, and Daphne is to portray Calliope. The act ends as the gods descend to Earth

(Chorus, *We will go, Down below*) and the Thespians, kneeling, bid them farewell.

ACT II — ONE YEAR LATER, THE TEMPLE ON OLYMPUS RESTORED

The Thespians pose in Olympian costume, obviously relishing their new roles (Chorus, *Of all symposia, The best by half*). Sillimon, the indulgent stage manager, is barraged by the actors with suggestions and criticisms concerning the parts they have been assigned to play, based on the proprieties and improprieties of the gods' marital and extra-marital affiliations: "This passion for realism is the curse of the stage!" Invariably he accedes to any request from his actresses: "I'm all bow, though I'm sure I try to be stern." Moreover, Sparkeion (as the Sun) accompanies Diana each night, purportedly for the sake of respectability and health. Sillimon fears that Apollo's attentions to Diana may offend his wife, Calliope; but Sparkeion is confident she should soon get over any feelings of jealousy. To prove his point, Sparkeion tells Sillimon a tale of the "young lady who was engaged to Cousin Robin" (Song, *Little maid of Arcadee*).

Sillimon asks Mercury for his impression of the actors' success; though Mercury sees merits on both sides, "on the whole I prefer *you*, because your mistakes amuse me" (Song, *Olympus is now in a terrible muddle*). Thespis enters with customary bluff and bravado, and when Mercury suggests that the world is in danger of being turned "*quite topsy-turvey*" because Thespis leaves "so much to accident," Thespis proudly states that he does not hamper his actors with routine and red tape, and encourages them to experiment. He boasts that no complaint has ever reached him. Mercury informs Thespis that all the petitions addressed to Jupiter have been entrusted to him, to be delivered once a year — this day — and that there have been a "thundering lot" of complaints. Mercury departs, to summon the court.

Daphne enters, weeping because of Sparkeion's behavior toward her. Thespis commands her to "assume your Calliope" and in an instant transformation she takes on the dignity of her rôle. She points out that, according to mythology (Lemprière's Classical Dictionary — the *Family* Edition), Apollo marries Calliope. Nicemis and Sparkeion enter, having overheard Daphne's claim, and they bicker over whose husband Sparkeion should be (Quartet, *You're Diana, I'm Apollo*).

They exit, and Jupiter, Apollo, and Mars, wearing cloaks and disguises, appear from below (Recitative, *Oh rage and fury! Oh shame and sorrow!*). Mercury enters and they denounce him for neglecting his responsibilities (Recitative, *Oh Monster!*) until he tells them that the fault is with Thespis, who has habitually disagreed with Mercury — instead of consulting with him, he has *insulted* him. Thespis is summoned, and he appears, much terrified. He is denounced by the gods (Recitative, *Oh Monster!*); but he attempts to make light of the situation. He reminds the gods that the annual court of Olympus is about to assemble, and summons the members of his company. The gods are introduced as

“influential members of the Athenian press.”

The court convenes, and the first complaint is that on Earth it has been a rainy Friday in November for six months. Cymon, as Father Time, explains that he has abolished Saturday from the week owing to the awkwardness of the number seven; but the days and months would not proceed without Saturday. As for the rain, Thespis had turned it on, and forgot to turn it off again. Thespis casually suggests that Earth might have “a blazing Tuesday in July for twelve months” as compensation. The second petition is from the Peace Society, who complain that there have been no battles. Timidon, as Mars, explains that he has abolished battles; but the consequence is that war is universal: “Now that nations can’t fight, no two of ’em are on speaking terms.” Thespis decrees: “Let battles be restored and peace reign supreme.” Mercury reads a petition from the wine merchants: the grapes are full of ginger beer. Tipscion, as Bacchus, explains that as an abstainer he had no other course.

The disguised gods have heard enough (*Aside, We can’t stand this*), and they reveal themselves to the company. They are joined by the other gods and goddesses. The mortals kneel and ask for their pardon (*Jupiter, Mars and Apollo*). The gods banish the Thespians from Olympus (*Chorus and Ballet, Let us remain, we beg of you pleadingly*). They guess their sentence: “We shall all be eminent tragedians, Whom no one ever ever goes to see!” Having driven the mortals away, the gods assume attitudes of triumph; Thespis concludes with couplets and the chorus pay him tribute (*Chorus, Now, here you see the arrant folly*).

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