

ON THE WRITING OF LYRICS

The musical comedy lyric is an interesting survival of the days, long since departed, when poets worked. As everyone knows, the only real obstacle in the way of turning out poetry by the mile was the fact that you had to make the darned stuff rhyme.

Many lyricists rhyme as they pronounce, and their pronunciation is simply horrible. They can make "home" rhyme with "alone," and "saw" with "more," and go right off and look their innocent children in the eye without a touch of shame.

But let us not blame the erring lyricist too much. It isn't his fault that he does these things. It is the fault of the English language. Whoever invented the English language must have been a prose-writer, not a versifier; for he has made meagre provision for the poets. Indeed, the word "you" is almost the only decent chance he has given them. You can do something with a word like "you." It rhymes with "sue," "eyes of blue," "woo," and all sorts of succulent things, easily fitted into the fabric of a lyric. And it has the enormous advantage that it can be repeated thrice at the end of a refrain when the composer has given you those three long notes, which is about all a composer ever thinks of. When a composer hands a lyricist a "dummy" for a song, ending thus,

Tiddley-tum, tiddley-tum,
Pom-pom-pom, pom-pom-pom,
Tum, tum, tum,

the lyricist just shoves down "You, you, you" for the last line, and then sets to work to fit the rest of the words to it. I have dwelled on this, for it is noteworthy as the only bright spot in a lyricist's life, the only real cinch the poor man has.

But take the word "love."

When the board of directors, or whoever it was, was arranging the language, you would have thought that, if they had had a spark of pity in their systems, they would have tacked on to that emotion of thoughts of which the young man's fancy lightly turns in spring, some word ending in an open vowel. They must have known that lyricists would want to use whatever word they selected as a label for the above-mentioned emotion far more frequently than any other word in the language. It wasn't much to ask of them to choose a word capable of numerous rhymes. But no, they went and made it "love," causing vast misery to millions.

"Love" rhymes with "dove," "glove," "above," and "shove." It is true that poets who print their stuff instead of having it sung take a mean advantage by ringing in words like "prove" and "move"; but the lyricist is not allowed to do that. This is the wretched unfairness of

the lyricist's lot. The language gets him both ways. It won't let him rhyme "love" with "move," and it won't let him rhyme "maternal" with "colonel." If he tries the first course, he is told that the rhyme, though all right for the eye, is wrong for the ear. If he tries the second course, they say that the rhyme, though more or less ninety-nine percent pure for the ear, falls short when tested by the eye. And, when he is driven back on one of the regular, guaranteed rhymes, he is taunted with triteness of phrase.

No lyricist wants to keep linking "love" with "skies above" and "turtle dove," but what can he do? You can't do a thing with "shove"; and "glove" is one of those aloof words which are not good mixers. And--mark the brutality of the thing--there is no word you can substitute for "love." It is just as if they did it on purpose.

"Home" is another example. It is the lyricist's staff of life. But all he can do is to roam across the foam, if he wants to use it. He can put in "Nome," of course, as a pinch-hitter in special crises, but very seldom; with the result that his poetic soul, straining at its bonds, goes and uses "alone," "bone," "tone," and "thrown," exciting hoots of derision.

But it is not only the paucity of rhymes that sours the lyricist's life. He is restricted in his use of material, as well. If every audience to which a musical comedy is destined to play were a metropolitan audience, all might be well; but there is the "road" to

consider. And even a metropolitan audience likes its lyrics as much as possible in the language of everyday. That is one of the thousand reasons why new Gilberts do not arise. Gilbert had the advantage of being a genius, but he had the additional advantage of writing for a public which permitted him to use his full vocabulary, and even to drop into foreign languages, even Latin and a little Greek when he felt like it. (I allude to that song in "The Grand Duke.")

And yet the modern lyricist, to look on the bright side, has advantages that Gilbert never had. Gilbert never realised the possibilities of Hawaii, with its admirably named beaches, shores, and musical instruments. Hawaii--capable as it is of being rhymed with "higher"--has done much to sweeten the lot--and increase the annual income of an industrious and highly respectable but down-trodden class of the community.