

Victorian Theatre



Jana Pöthke
Julia Melchior

23.05.05

Victorian Theatres

- ◆ 19th century is the age of truly popular theatre
- ◆ Victorians built some of the very large theatres:
 - Drury Lane: 3,600 seating capacity (only West End theatre of that size)
 - Britannia 3,900
 - Pavilion 3,500
- Licensing Act allowed only 2 theatres in London to actually perform plays

Drury Lane Theatre



Changes in the Theatre

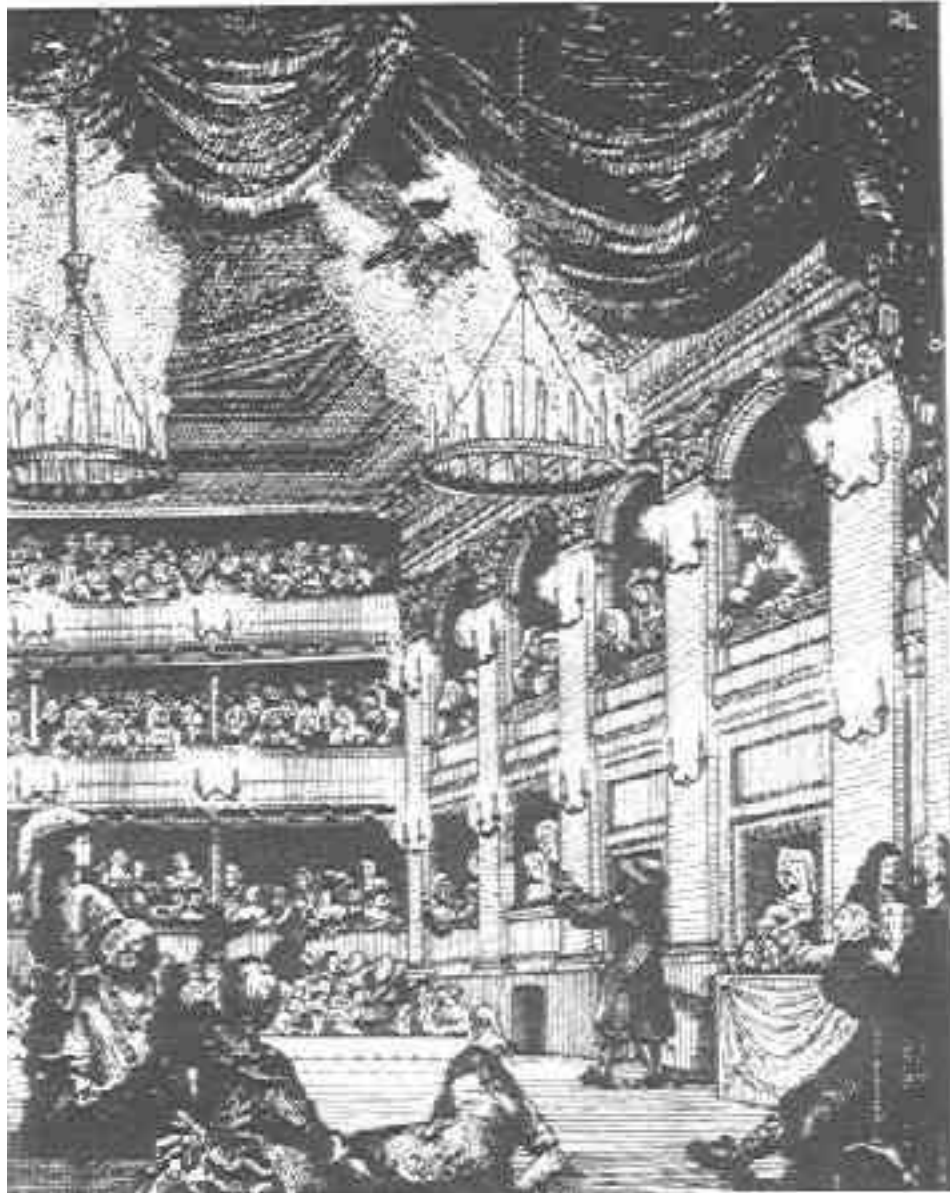
- ◆ placing backs on benches
- ◆ introduction of chairs in the pit
- ◆ orchestra stalls (1828)
- ◆ boxes remained but became fewer in number
- ◆ Lavish decoration of auditorium

Audience

- ◆ Audience: lower, middle and upper class
- ◆ people dressed up (expensive dresses, jewelry etc....)
- ◆ were primarily not interested in play, only in presenting themselves
- ◆ division of audience into box, pit and gallery
- ◆ box: aristocracy & the fashionable
- ◆ pit: lawyers, critic, students and tradesmen
- ◆ gallery: servants, apprentices and journeymen

Conditions in the Theatre

- ◆ atmosphere: very hot, dry, smelly, lacking oxygen
- ◆ seats jammed closely together
- ◆ foyer space sacrificed to bar space
- ◆ dressing rooms and other facilities for performers quite inadequate, sometimes downright dangerous
- ◆ every theatre in Britain had become a potential death trap



On Stage

- ◆ introduction of orchestra stalls
- ◆ forestage was shortened
- ◆ final Victorian form: picture frame stage
- ◆ as it looks today



On Stage

- ◆ desire for greater artistic consistency in setting and costume
- ◆ urge to wrap stage and players in historically authentic clothing
- ◆ stage was fully and handsomely furnished
- ◆ three dimensional scenery

Machinery

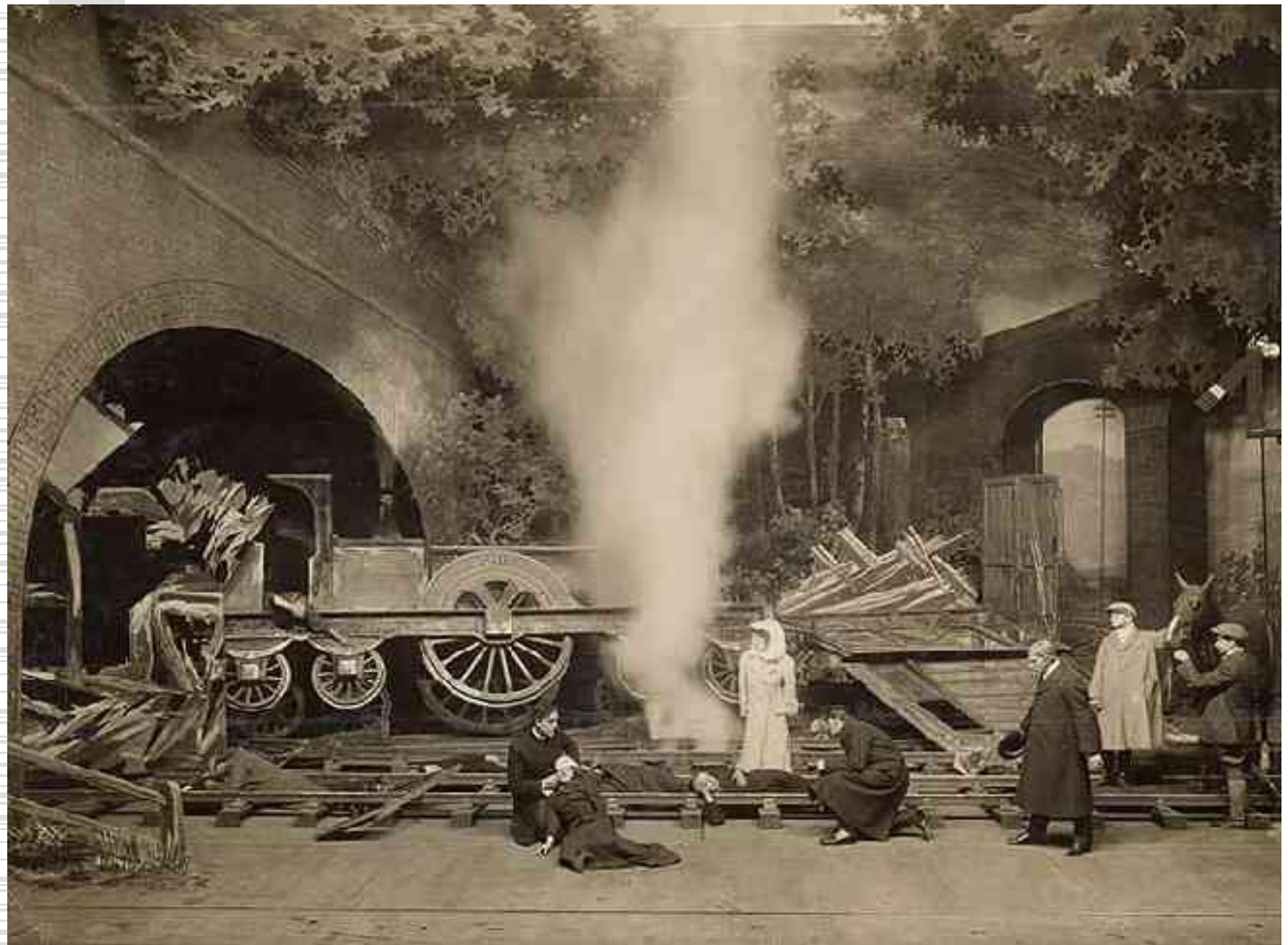
- ◆ gridiron: at the very top of the backstage space, high above the stage
- ◆ for everything that had to be raised, lowered and hung out of sight of the audience
- ◆ machinery beneath the stage responsible for everything appearing from beneath the stage or sinking through it
- ◆ Flying, not only of scenery but also of actors

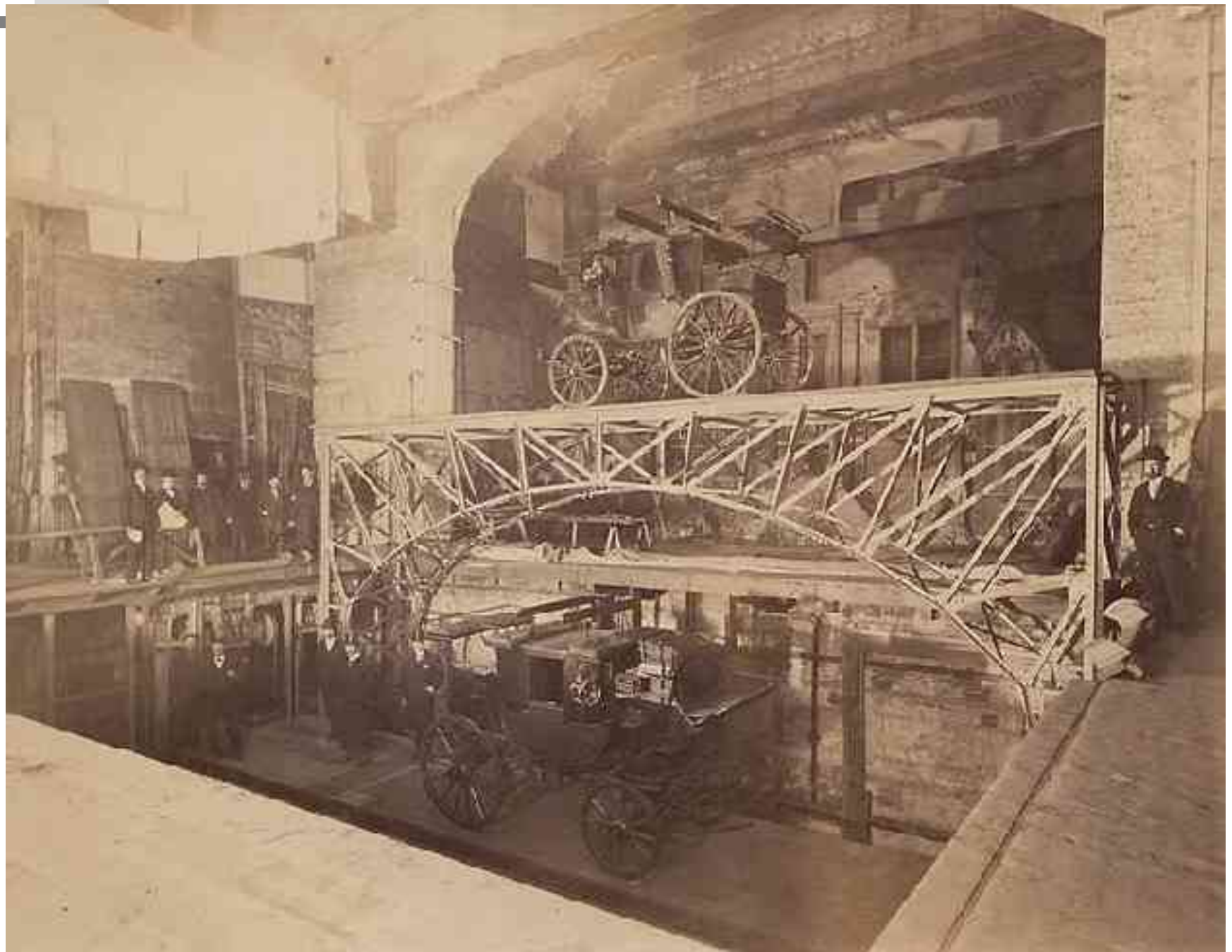
Lighting

- ◆ within 2 generations from candles and oil lamps to electricity
- ◆ 1st: use of wax candles
- ◆ 1817: Drury Lane used gas lighting for stage and auditorium
- ◆ blacking out the auditorium while play is in progress
- ◆ might be lowered for special effects : ghostly vision, moonlit scene
- ◆ 1881: Savoy Theatre was the first to be lit entirely by electricity

Victorian Melodrama

- ◆ Became fashionable during 1780s and 1790s
- ◆ Grew out of burletta (comic opera), retained musical elements- therefore no play.
- ◆ Basic character stereotypes (recognizable immediately): spotless hero, black villain, maiden in white, motley fool.
- ◆ Sensational, special effects (train crash, explosions, fire, balloon ascent, underwater scenes, star traps...)
- ◆ Became so popular that they were even produced in patent theatres.







Shakespeare

- ◆ Victorian people loved costume dramas
- ◆ ‚good theatre‘: historical intrigue in 5 acts, accurate costuming, lavish scenery
- ◆ Edited older dramas to fit this format, especially Shakespeare.
- ◆ Changed settings, endings and dialogues that seemed unfitting to them.

Cup and Saucer Drama

- ◆ Also:
„Drawing
room comedy“
- ◆ Stage: real
room with
doors, sofas
tables.

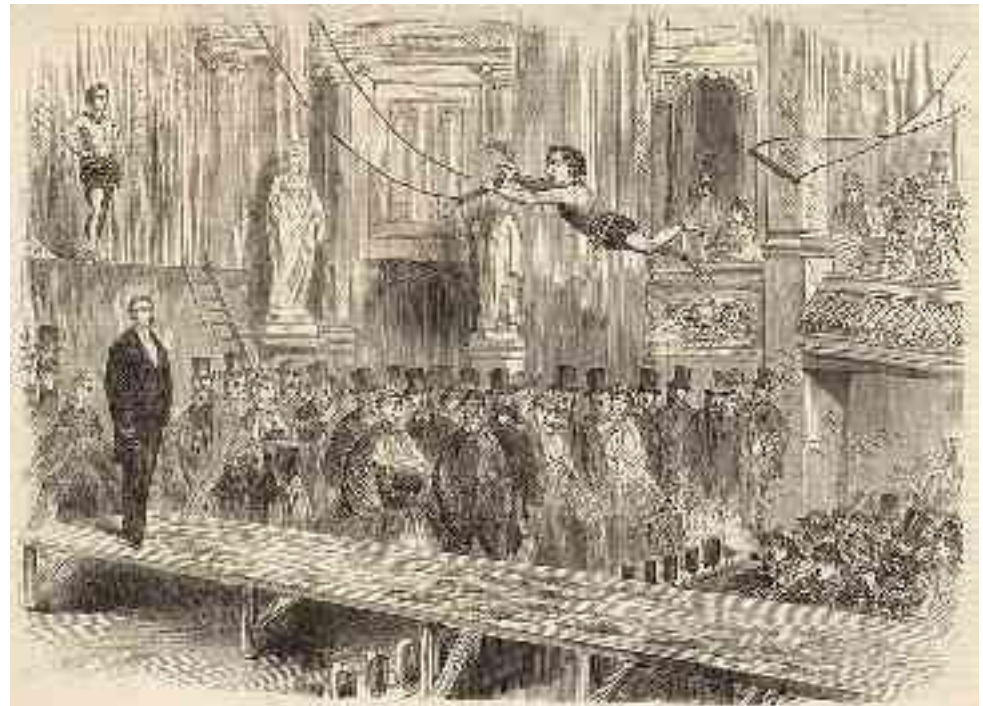


Cup and Saucer Drama

- ◆ 1879 instigated by Squire Bancroft & Marie Wilton in Haymarket theatre
- ◆ Dealt seriously with issues of the day, actors spoke, instead of declaiming. Not much action on stage, instead conversations.
- ◆ In „The Vicarage“ an actor made tea- gave name to the genre

Music Halls

- ◆ Competition to the theatre, opened in 1852, developed from saloon entertainment and all-male drinking clubs



Music Halls

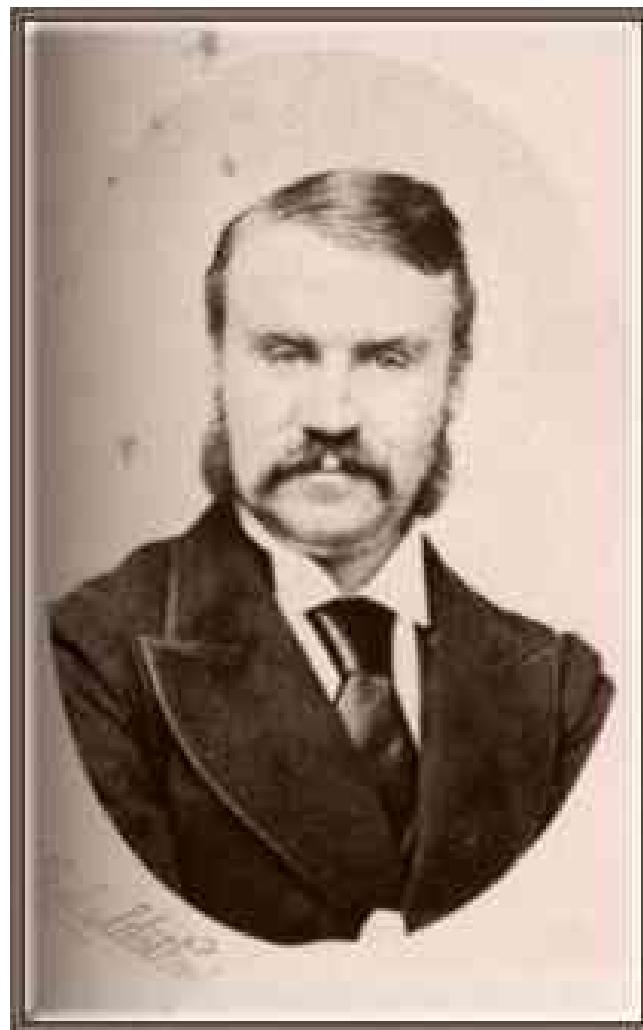
- ◆ Audience seated at tables, food and drinks served, performances on platforms at the side.
- ◆ Primarily drinking houses with added entertainment
- ◆ No real plays performed, but songs, comic acts and all kinds of weird acts.

Gilbert and Sullivan

- ◆ comic operas of William Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan are some of the best loved, and most well-known works in the history of musical theatre



Arthur Sullivan



William Gilbert

Gilbert and Sullivan

- ◆ Sullivan composed the music
- ◆ Gilbert wrote and directed the operas
- ◆ Between 1871 and 1896 they wrote fourteen comic operas
- ◆ Were most successful when working together, e.g.: *Thespis*; *Trial by Jury*; *H.M.S. Pinafore*