

St David's Players - 50th Anniversary Season

'The Grand Duke' - October 2019

A summary of the plot

The story is set in that well-known Bavarian style Duchy of Pfennig Halbpennig and begins with Ernest Dummkopf's Theatre Company managing three things at the same time: their forthcoming production of Shakespeare's 'Troilus and Cressida'; the wedding of their leading actor Ludwig to the beautiful young actress Lisa and a plot to overthrow the miserly and unpopular Grand Duke Rudolph with Ernest proposed as his replacement in the hope that he will bestow favours upon company members once he is in post. There is a delay in the marriage ceremony since the Grand Duke has summoned all of the parsons to a meeting (to organise his own marriage the following day) and hence the company partake of the prepared wedding breakfast before the nuptials have been completed.

The company's long established leading lady - Julia Jellicoe - feels that the role of 'Grand Duchess' should fall to her (much to Ernest's delight), but plans start to go awry when Ludwig accidentally reveals their plot to the Duke's private detective. The secret sign of the conspirators is the eating of a sausage roll, and Ludwig thought the detective a safe conversationalist since he had consumed three.

Following detailed legal advice from Dr Tannhauser, it is suggested that a statutory duel (the subtitle of the piece) between Ernest and Ludwig is staged. The rules of the statutory duel are that serious disputes should be settled by the drawing of cards rather than by a physical fight to the death with swords or pistols. The one drawing the lowest card is 'declared dead' and the winner takes on the dead man's position, including his responsibilities. The advantage here is that the 'survivor' can go to the Grand Duke and denounce the 'dead' man as the instigator of the plot and himself receive a free pardon for his evidence. Since laws in Pfennig Halbpennig only last for one hundred years and this one is due to expire the following day, and since death expunges crime, the loser will be able to come to life again the following day with 'a clean slate'.

Ludwig emerges the winner of this duel.

Meanwhile, the Grand Duke himself is also faced with a triple set of situations: it is his marriage to the wealthy Baroness Von Krakenfeldt the following day, but he had been betrothed in infancy to the Princess of Monte Carlo and he then discovers the plot to remove him. When Ludwig arrives to carry out his proposed plan, he finds the Duke in a terrified state fearing an assassination. Ludwig advises him to 'disappear' via the mechanism of the statutory duel - they having rigged the cards - so Ludwig wins again.

Celebrations begin and Ludwig declares that he will renew the law for another hundred years (thus keeping Ernest and Rudolph out of the way) and promises to reward members of the company. But then Julia appears, claiming that theatre contractual rules giving her lead roles outweigh any marriage promises or vows and since she believes the role of Grand Duchess belongs to her, she transfers her allegiance to Ludwig - much to Lisa's distress.

Given the splendid costumes which the company have ready for their Shakespeare production, they decide to wear these for the marriage of Ludwig and Julia.

When the couple are left alone together, Julia reassures Ludwig of her ability to play this 'first rate part' by a varied melodramatic performance of her own displaying her range of talents.

The general celebrations are interrupted by the arrival of an angry Baroness looking for her betrothed. On hearing that he is 'dead', she points out that her betrothal pre-dates Julia's appearance and thus Ludwig finds that he has assumed not only the title, but also Rudolph's fiancée - hence another wedding is to be celebrated and Julia is cast aside.

Though 'dead' Ernest feels an overwhelming need to catch up on what has been happening and thus makes a 'ghostly' appearance. He is much relieved to see that Julia is not with Ludwig and thus hopes to be able to claim her as his bride on his imminent return to life. However, Julia explains that there is a now a century-long extension to his 'death' and that she has a dislike of long engagements! - so they part.

The celebrations for Ludwig's marriage to the Baroness continue - she consuming copious amounts of champagne - but further complications ensue when the royal party from Monte Carlo arrive having made enough money (by inventing the game of roulette) to clear their debts and to travel to meet the princess' long-betrothed. Given that this was arranged over two decades previously, they state that she has the prior claim - fiancée number four for Ludwig.

How on earth does all this sort itself out?

It emerges that there has been a mistake with one of the elements of the statutory duel. Does this mean that things can return to normal?

You'll just have to come and see if the complications all unravel, but knowing Gilbert's plots and Sullivan's finale music - all is likely to be well!