

George Grossmith

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George Grossmith, as illustrated in *The Idler* magazine, 1897

George Grossmith (December 9, 1847 – March 1, 1912) was an English comedian, writer, actor, and singer, best remembered for creating a series of comic characters in the comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan, for performing his own comic sketches, and for writing the comic novel (with his brother Weedon) *Diary of a Nobody*.

Contents

- 1 Life and career
 - 1.1 Early career
 - 1.2 D'Oyly Carte years
 - 1.3 Later years
- 2 Writings and compositions; legacy
- 3 Recordings
- 4 References
- 5 External links

Life and career

George Grossmith was born in London, the son of a lecturer, entertainer and court reporter also named George Grossmith. As a young man, Grossmith was sometimes credited as "Jnr", but with the D'Oyly Carte organisation he was

credited simply as "George Grossmith". Later, his actor-theatrical manager son, the third George Grossmith was credited as George Grossmith "Jr" rather than "III"; some sources confuse the two. His other son, Lawrence Grossmith, was also a successful actor, mostly in America. Grossmith married a Miss Noyce in 1873.

Grossmith was educated at North London Collegiate School and hoped to become a barrister. Instead, he worked for some time in the 1860s with his father as a court reporter and as a journalist for *The Times* among others. He then joined his father in his entertainments, lectures, and imitations, and began to add music to the entertainments, which his father had not done.^[1]

Early career

After

receiving some recognition for amateur "penny readings," Grossmith took to the stage in 1870 with a sketch called *Human Oddities*, written by his father. His first appearance on his own was at the "old Polytechnic."^[1] The sketch was so successful that young Grossmith took it on tour

for
six



months. He toured with Mr. and Mrs. Howard Paul in 1871. Grossmith then wrote and performed a sketch called *The Silver Wedding*

(including what would be one of his most popular songs, "I am so Volatile," with words by his father).^[2] The comic pianist and entertainer John Orlando Parry (1810-1879), who performed in the German Reed Entertainments, trained Grossmith to develop his own entertainments (combinations of sketches and comic songs centered on the piano), and the young entertainer became known as a comedian throughout London. One song was called "The Gay Photographer" (that is, the "carefree" photographer). The song, illustrated at left, concerns a photographer who broke the heart of a young lady named Miss Jenkins; so she drank his chemicals and died.^[3]

In 1876, he collaborated with Florence Marryat, the reciter (the daughter of Captain Frederick Marryat), on *Entre Nous*, a series of piano sketches, alternating with scenes and costumed recitations, including a two-person "satirical musical sketch" called *Cups and Saucers*, which they then toured. Grossmith then took a number of engagements, including recitals at private homes.^[2] He was noted for his ability to get laughs, often improvising comic business in roles—although he sometimes did this even in

dramatic situations that were intended to be serious. Indeed, the main criticism often directed at Grossmith was that he seemed unable to content himself with playing any scene straight. Later, W. S. Gilbert and the actor had a famous exchange about an improvised bit of "business." "I get an enormous laugh by it," sniffed Grossmith. "So you would if you sat on a pork pie", replied Gilbert. (Ayre, p. 137).

D'Oyly Carte years

Grossmith had appeared in charity performances of *Trial by Jury*, where both Sullivan and Gilbert had seen him. Arthur Sullivan suggested him for the role of John Wellington Wells in their next comic opera, *The Sorcerer*.^[4] On meeting Gilbert, Grossmith wondered aloud if the role shouldn't be played "by a fine man with a fine voice." Gilbert replied, "That is exactly what we don't want." (Ayre, p. 137)

Grossmith became a regular member of Richard D'Oyly Carte's company. He created all nine of the lead comic baritone roles in Gilbert and Sullivan's famous



as Jack Point in *Yeomen*, 1888

Savoy Operas in London from 1877 to 1889, including Sir Joseph Porter in *H.M.S. Pinafore* (1878), Major-General Stanley in *The Pirates of Penzance* (1880), Reginald Bunthorne in *Patience* (1881), the Lord Chancellor in

Iolanthe (1882), King Gama in *Princess Ida* (1884), Ko-Ko in *The Mikado* (1885), Robin Oakapple in *Ruddygore* (1887), and the jester Jack Point in *The Yeomen of the Guard* (1888). *The Times* noted Grossmith's "nimbleness, his diverting tricks, his still more diverting dignity—the dignity of a man of few inches high or round—and his incomparable power of rapid speech and singing."^[1]

The actor, famously nervous on opening nights,

is depicted both on and off stage in the acclaimed biographical film, *Topsy Turvy*. He is known to have been addicted to morphine, and in the film he is shown injecting himself on the opening night of *The Mikado*. In his diary, Arthur Sullivan wrote afterwards, "All went very well except Grossmith, whose nervousness nearly upset the piece" (Allen 1975, p. 241). Grossmith spoke self-deprecatingly about his own vocal prowess: *"Of course, I haven't any voice to speak of, but I have a great register, and Sullivan used to amuse himself by making me sing bass in one number of an opera and tenor in another. In 'Ruddygore', Sir Arthur had engaged a man to play the servant, my menial, so to speak, who had an enormous bass voice, and who had to go down to the lower E flat. Singularly enough, he could go down to G, and then he dropped out entirely, and I did the [low E-flat] below. Generally the audience roared with laughter, and it absolutely brought down the house."*^[5]

During his time with the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, Grossmith wrote the music for Arthur Law's *Uncle Samuel*, the one-act curtain raiser that preceded *Patience* on the Opera Comique program. His sketch *Cups and Saucers* was

revived and played with *Pinafore* and also played by the company on tour. He also wrote, composed, and performed in several one-man drawing room sketches or monologues that were given at the Opera Comique or the Savoy Theatre in place of the companion pieces when shorter matinee programs was playing. These sketches included *Beauties on the Beach* (1878), *Five Hamlets* (1878), *A Silver Wedding* (1879), *The Drama on Crutches* (1883), *Homburg, or Haunted by The Mikado* (1887–88), and *Holiday Hall* (1888).^[2] In addition, Grossmith's song written during the 1880s, "See me dance the polka", has been used in a number of films.

Later years

Grossmith left the D'Oyly Carte organisation and *Yeomen* on 17 August 1889 and resumed his career entertaining at the piano in Britain, Ireland, America and Canada, performing drawing-room sketches that included his own popular songs, such as "See me Dance the Polka," "The Happy Fatherland," "The Polka and the Choir-boy," and "We left the baby on the shore." According to *The Times*, "His genial

satire was enjoyed even by those at whom its shafts were aimed."^[1] When he toured Scotland in the autumn of 1890, he gave a command performance for Queen Victoria at Balmoral Castle. Grossmith also composed the music for a three-act comic opera with Gilbert, *Haste to the Wedding* (1891; in which his son George made his stage debut), which was unsuccessful. In 1892 he toured North America, writing a successful new sketch, *How I Discovered America*.^[2]

In
1892,



Charles (left) and Lupin Pooter at
Broadstairs, from Chapter VI of *Diary of a*

Nobody

Grossmith collaborated with his brother Weedon Grossmith to expand a series of amusing columns they had written in 1888–89 for *Punch*. *The Diary of a Nobody* was published as a novel (Bristol, J. W. Arrowsmith, 1892) and has never been out of print since. The work has itself been the object of dramatization and adaptation, including three times for television: 1964,^[6] 1979^[7] and 2007.^[8]

By 1890, Grossmith had retired from stage work, preferring to perform and tour in his entertainments. In 1894–95, however, Gilbert enticed Grossmith to take the role of George Griffenfeld in *His Excellency*, with music by Osmond Carr. Also, in 1897 he played briefly as King Ferdinand V of Vingolia in F. C. Burnand's *His Majesty* at the Savoy) and made two more short London stage appearances thereafter, in *Young Mr. Yarde* (1898) and *The Gay Pretenders* (1900).^[2] Grossmith suffered from the death of his wife died in 1905, and his health began to fail after that, so that he increasingly missed engagements. He stopped performing altogether

by around 1908.^[1]

Grossmith died in Folkestone, Kent at the age of 64.

Writings and compositions; legacy

Grossmith wrote numerous humorous pieces for the magazine *Punch*, as well as two other books, *The Reminiscences of a Society Clown* (1888) and *Piano & I* (1910). In his career, Grossmith wrote 18 comic operas, nearly 100 musical sketches, some 600 songs and piano pieces, and three books. He also wrote both serious and comic pieces for newspapers and magazines throughout his career.^[1] His output displays a wide range of styles.

Grossmith was followed, in the Gilbert and Sullivan comic roles, by a number of other popular performers, including Henry Lytton, Martyn Green, Peter Pratt, John Reed, and many others, who each owed a debt to Grossmith as the creator of the roles. Many actors have portrayed Grossmith in biographical films, reviews and

sketches. In Britain, among others, Martyn Green and Simon Butteriss have done so. Australian Anthony Warlow created a one man show called *A Song to Sing O* in 1987.

Recordings

Over forty of the songs that Grossmith wrote or performed in his one-man shows have been recorded by baritone Leon Berger (well-known Gilbert & Sullivan singer and Grossmith scholar), accompanied



as Bunthorne in *Patience*, 1881

by Selwyn Tillett (G&S scholar) on two CDs: *A Society Clown: The Songs of George Grossmith* and *The Grossmith Legacy*. The latter also contains the recorded voice of Grossmith's son, George Grossmith Jr. Both are on the Divine Art Label.^[9] No known recordings of Grossmith's voice exist, although wax cylinder recording technology was available during his lifetime.

References

1. ^ *a b c d e f* Grossmith's obituary in *The Times*, 2 March, 1912
2. ^ *a b c d e* Biography of Grossmith at the Who Was Who website
3. ^ Cover art of the sheet music, from "Images of Photographers" website
4. ^ Information from the *Memories of the D'Oyly Carte* website
5. ^ Grossmith quoted in Wells, Walter J. *Souvenir of Arthur Sullivan*. London: George Newnes, 1901
6. ^ IMDB reference to 1964 broadcast of *Diary*
7. ^ IMDB reference to 1979 broadcast of *Diary*
8. ^ BBC website reference for 2007 broadcast of *Diary*
9. ^ Information from the Divine-Art website

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External links

- Works by George Grossmith at Project Gutenberg
- George Grossmith on the Pinafore site
- Profile and photo of Grossmith
- Brief profile of Grossmith
- Information about TV adaptations of novel

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English humorists | English novelists | English
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