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CHICAGO THEATRE REVIEW

RECOMMENDED SITES

A Fine How-De-Do!

Colin Douglas (<https://www.chicagotheatrereview.com/author/theatredude/>) October 6, 2025

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The Mikado

In 1999, "Topsy-Turvy," a hit British film by Mike Leigh, won Academy Awards for Best Costume Design and Best Makeup. The movie told the story of famed British operetta writers, W.S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan, during a creative conflict that occurred between playwright and composer. Set during the late 19th century, producer Richard D'Oyly Carte finally called upon Gilbert and Sullivan, imploring them to heal their creative differences and write a new operetta. Money talks loudly. Inspired by a Japanese sword that fell off the wall in his study, Gilbert supposedly hit upon the idea of writing a libretto set in exotic Japan, a country to which he'd never actually traveled. The idea was to poke fun at Victorian English society, without the story actually taking place on the British Isles. And, according to legend, the highly popular THE MIKADO was born.



That story made for an appealing movie, but it was largely fictional. The actual inspiration for THE MIKADO was that European trade with Japan between 1860-1870 inspired an English craze for all things Japanese. Gilbert thought he could cleverly mask another musical satire of British society by setting the story in Japan. It would "afford a picturesque treatment, scenery and costume." Gilbert went on to say that he thought that "the idea of a chief magistrate who is both judge and magistrate in one may perhaps please the public." He also wanted to parody some of the crimes that were, at that time, stupidly punishable by death.



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The operetta had the longest original run of all of the Savoy works and it's become the most frequently performed. It's also been translated into the most languages. But in recent years, complaints were raised that THE MIKADO included a too fanciful and inaccurate Japanese setting, stereotypical costuming and made-up Japanese names. When the Seattle Gilbert & Sullivan Society's traditional production was picketed and criticized by the press, other companies decided to either avoid the show or develop a novel interpretation. In essence, the operetta as it is now, is considered racist.

The Savoyaires of Evanston, under the guidance of Resident Stage Director and Life Member, Kingsley Day, decided it was time to once again produce one of their favorite and most-requested operettas. But Kingsley hit upon his own reimagining of the operetta. While all the original music, lyrics and dialogue remain, some elements have been changed. The pronunciation of "Mikado" and "Japan" have been altered. The setting is a completely imaginary locale. Some additional lyrics have been added to give certain songs a more contemporary political bite. And, although pronounced the same, the spelling of the characters' names look different in the program.

The topsy-turvy tale is about a wandering minstrel and trombonist named Nan-Keypu (Naki-Poo), who falls in love with the beautiful Ium Ium (Yum-Yum). However, she's betrothed to marry her guardian, Cocoa (Ko-Ko), the new Lord High Executioner. When the country's ruler, the Emperor Mikado (pronounced now with long vowels, rather than short), decrees that it's been far too long since there was a beheading in the village of Titipu, youthful Nan-Keypu and sagely Cocoa try to come up with a solution.

The young wandering minstrel agrees to being beheaded if he's allowed to be married to Ium Ium for a month. After that time, Cocoa will be able to marry the widowed Ium Ium. However, a forgotten law surfaces, discovered by Poob-Ah (Pooh-Bah), the haughty Lord High of Everything Else. It states that if a woman's husband is beheaded, then she must be buried alive at the same time. So, as the Mikado arrives with Katty-Schah (Katisha), an elderly woman in love with Nan-Keypu, everyone tries to arrive at a plan that doesn't involve anyone losing his life. Other notable characters who try to help solve the problem include the town noble, Pisch-Tusch (Pish-Tush) and Ium Ium's two sisters, Pitt-Ee-Cingue (Pitti-Sing) and Piep-Beaux (Peep-Bo).

The cast of the Savoyaires' new production is, as always, stellar in many ways. Beautifully Directed by Kingsley Day, with crisply humorous and homogeneous Choreography by Mary Nora Wolf, the cast boasts an array of superb vocalists. They all wrap their sublimely trained voices around Sullivan's lovely music and Gilbert's clever lyrics and dialogue.

The handsome, charismatic and magnificently talented tenor, Tejas Gururaja, is one of the three highlights of this production. In his oversized spectacles, Tejas is matched by the exquisite and comely soprano, Anna Caldwell, as his scarlet-haired love, Ium Ium. This pair dazzle with their melodramatic comedy, solos and duets, also adding their voices to small group numbers. Mr. Gururaja delights with "A Wand'ring Minstrel, I" and "I Have Journeyed for a Month." Ms. Caldwell enchants with "Three Little Maids From School Are We" (along with Lauren Sutherland, and especially Katrina Bakas, as her two sisters), "Here's a How-de-do" (sung with Gururaja and Henry Michael Odum), and a most gorgeous rendition of the ballad, "The Sun, Whose Rays Are All Ablaze."

The third highlight of this production is the previously mentioned, Henry Michael Odum. As Cocoa, he makes the hilarious character the real star of this operetta. In the hands of Mr. Odum, the Lord High Executioner shines brightly. A gifted Jeff Award-winning actor, Mr. Odum is a master of comedy, drama and song. He's not only a veteran of Gilbert & Sullivan (having played Ko Ko four times), but he's portrayed such character roles as Tateh in RAGTIME at Porchlight, Henry, the Old Actor, in THE FANTASTICKS at Pegasus, and Uncle Billy in the musical version of IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE. Mr. Odum effortlessly enchants the audience with songs like "As Some Day It May Happen (I've Got a Little List)," a duet with Katty-Schah (played with egocentric evil by Betsy Pennington Taylor) entitled "There is Beauty in the Bellow of the Blast," and most especially Cocoa's delectable solo, "Willow, Tit-Willow." For my money, Henry Michael Odum alone is worth the price of admission.

In addition, although his costume glitters and gleams, Robert Galbreath, Jr. plays the titular role with careful restraint and a smug sense of humor. The Mikado, who doesn't make his entrance until Act II, entertains us with whimsical songs like "A More Humane Mikado (The Punishment Fits the Crime)" and "See How the Fates Their Gifts Allot (He Drew His Snicker Snack)." Two talented Thespians return to the Savoyaires, following last year's impressive performances in THE GONDOLIERS. Jack W. Ellis is truly excellent in everything he does, but he brings so much hammy humor and a lovely baritone voice to his portrayal of the noble lord, Pisch-Tusch. And as Poob-Ah, Carl Chadek, while a bit underplayed, is all arrogance and pomposity in the role. Both actors join Cocoa in lending their voices to several songs, especially the trio, "I Am So Proud."

A production is only as strong as the artistic team who bring the show to life. In addition to Kingsley Day's wise and whimsical direction and staging, the cast is Musically Directed, and the talented 30+ member pit orchestra is Conducted by, Lindsey Baer. Costume Designer Kate Setzer Kamphausen has created a playful black & white palette of apparel for the strong ensemble of musically accomplished men and women of Japan. She's visually allowed the actors in leading roles stand out by clothing them in colorful contemporary costumes and wigs. And Kaylee Arnold's Set Design is purposefully simple, giving characters a subtle background in which to be noticed.

This, the Savoyaires' 59th annual full-scale Gilbert & Sullivan

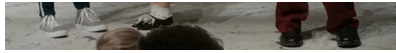


production is, perhaps, the most popular of all their operettas. THE

MIKADO, in the capable hands of Kingsley Day, his adept artistic

staff and a large, talented company of performers, all contribute to bringing this 19th century political parody to life.

Witty and well-tuned, this production is as entertaining an evening of theater as any audience could desire. And that's a Fine How-De-Do!



Highly Recommended

Reviewed by Colin Douglas

Presented October 3-12 by The Savoyaires at Chute Auditorium, 1400 Oakton Street, Evanston, IL.

Tickets are available at the door, by calling 847-563-0155 or by going to www.savoyaires.org/tickets.

Additional information about this and other area productions can be found by visiting www.theatreinchicago.com.

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