

Class 6: Satire on Stage

A. An Imagined Japan

1. Class title 1 (the ENO *Mikado*)

The picture shows a production **Gilbert and Sullivan's** *Mikado* at the English National Opera in 2015. It is my featured work for the day, and after the break I will play you a considerable chunk of the first act in this production. You will notice that the director **Jonathan Miller** (1934–2019), sets it in a resort hotel in the Twenties; the characters are all recognizable English types, albeit greatly exaggerated. But this is by no means the traditional way of performing *The Mikado*, or the setting that Gilbert gave it.

2. Section title A (London to Japan)

Yes, as both the title and the illustration suggest, *The Mikado* was set in Japan—but a picture-book Japan of Gilbert's imagination. The journey from Japan to England is my agenda for the first hour. But first I want to expand upon that snatch of music you just heard by playing you the song from which it comes. It is in Act Two, so I would otherwise have to omit it. But I think is one of the most beautiful things Sullivan wrote, equally beautifully sung here by **Valerie Masterson** in a traditional production. The heroine Yum-Yum, who is to be married that day, is thinking about her beauty and comparing herself in turn to the sun and the moon. As you listen, think what is special about the song, how it fits into the Japanese décor, and if any aspect of it is satirical?

3. Sullivan: *The Mikado*, “The sun whose rays” (Valerie Masterson, D'Oyly Carte)

4. — still from the above

Your comments? Quite apart from the beauty—which tends to take second place to comedy and action in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta—the thing that strikes me most about this song is the length of its lines. They are 15 syllables long as opposed to the 8 or 10 of most English verse. And they flow in a constant unbroken rhythm, which makes the music sound organic rather than divided up into beats, bars, and couplets. I don't say it is Japanese, but it is certainly not traditional British. There is some satire in the dialogue, with Yum-Yum's disingenuous modesty, but it all goes when she starts to sing. However, we'll get into a lot of satire elsewhere in the operetta. Her music may not actually be Japanese, but Sullivan did use some real Japanese tunes; here is one of them, with a video I made for my *Music on the Stage* course in Columbia a year and a half ago; about half the material in this first hour was previously used in that.

5. Animated title: *Mikado* posters.

6. — still from the above

Let's parse this. The poster is not from the 1885 premiere of *The Mikado* but from a later production by the D'Oyly Carte Company, which held exclusive rights to the music until 1950 and to the words until 1961. During this time, their hold was draconian; even amateur performances had to be inspected, and even slight divergences from Gilbert's original productions were forbidden. But what was the D'Oyly Carte Company, and why were the works called the Savoy Operas?

7. D'Oyly Carte, Gilbert, and Sullivan

Richard D'Oyly Carte (1844–1901) was a businessman, hotelier, and impresario. He is remembered mainly for bringing the composer **Arthur Seymour Sullivan** (1842–1900) together with librettist **William Schwenk Gilbert** (1836–1911), serving as midwife to the often difficult births of the 14 light operas collectively known as the **Savoy Operas**. "Savoy" after the Savoy Theatre which D'Oyly Carte built in 1881 to house them; he went on to build the Savoy Hotel next door, which is still going strong. "Opera" is perhaps a misnomer; plays with spoken dialogue, they were closer to German or French comic opera, although Sullivan managed to write music of some complexity for the act-finales and a few other scenes.

8. Savoy opera posters

These posters by **John Hassall** are for the D'Oyly Carte Company, but from the 1920s rather than the original dates; I chose them simply because they work well together. They show *The Mikado* with two of the better-known shows on either side of it. I want to make a couple of points: each Gilbert and Sullivan opera occupies a distinct and highly colorful visual world—a man o'war, a rocky coastline, and imaginary Japan, the Tower of London, and picture-postcard Venice—and most of them take off from some existing popular genre: sea story, pirate tale, Gothic thriller (*Ruddigore*, not shown), or historical romance. Most also contain political satire: *The Gondoliers*, for example, demonstrates the absurdity of republicanism as opposed to monarchy. *The Mikado* is equally political, as you shall see, but it is based upon an artistic fad rather than a literary genre.

9. Japanese prints

10. Whistler: *The Peacock Room* (1877)

The fad in question was already twenty years old. In the 1860s, Japan opened its ports to overseas trade, and a flood of porcelain and other exotic items flooded the market; these were often wrapped in prints which opened the eyes of **Van Gogh**, **Gauguin**, and others to new ways of seeing; it was a significant influence on Post-Impressionism. But more significant for our purposes is the grip that Japanese fashions exerted on home decor. **James McNeill Whistler** (1834–1903) did an entire dining-room on the theme (now in the Freer Gallery, Washington), and the department stores stocked up. Gilbert's great idea was to ask "*What happens if we take all this obviously stylized art as real, and imagine people actually living these highly colored two-dimensional lives?*" He was not entirely consistent about this idea, as we shall see, but in terms of costume and set design it was a most attractive one. The 1999 film *Topsy Turvy* by **Mike Leigh** shows the genesis of *The Mikado*. Richard D'Oyly Carte suddenly finds himself with a hole in his schedule; a new opera is needed fast, but Gilbert and Sullivan cannot agree. Then Gilbert's wife persuades him, much against his will, to visit a Japanese exhibition in town. **Jim Broadbent** is Gilbert.

11. *Topsy Turvy*, clip 1: visit to the exhibition

Gilbert is intrigued, but doesn't connect it with his present predicament just yet. Then a Japanese sword that he has bought suddenly falls from the wall, and a lightbulb goes off in his mind.

12. *Topsy Turvy*, clip 2: Gilbert's vision

That was the entrance of the principal comic character, **Ko-Ko**, in Gilbert's own staging and with the music that Sullivan would eagerly write for it. Afterwards we heard him read the opening number—I'll show it after the break—Broadbent's delivery shows just how witty Gilbert's texts could be.

B. England Absurd

13. Section title B (reverse of title A)

Enough of an imagined Japan; let's go back to the England of Gilbert's time. Never mind the decapitated dancers, the three men in the front of this shot of **Jonathan Miller's** production at the English National Opera are clearly British establishment types. At least the outer two, **Pooh-Bah** and **Pish-Tush**, are; the man in the middle, **Ko-Ko**, is presented as an ambitious politician. For the truth of the matter is that Gilbert was not writing about Japan at all; his target was contemporary Britain. **GK Chesterton** wrote: "I doubt if there is a single joke in the whole play that fits the Japanese; but all the jokes fit the English."

14. Gilbert: *The Mikado*, opening of Pish-Tush song

For example, the basic premise of the plot is presented in the third number, a song by **Pish-Tush**. The *Mikado* has decreed that flirting outside of marriage is punishable by death. Absurd, of course, for how could you ever get married if you did not flirt first? But absolutely in tune with Victorian censoriousness, that preferred to pretend that sex didn't exist.

15. Sir Joseph Porter, Major-General Stanley, Pooh-Bah

One of Gilbert's prime targets was the authority figure who, a century before the enunciation of the Peter Principle, had been promoted to their level of incompetence. So **Sir Joseph Porter KCB** in *HMS Pinafore* had risen to First Lord of the Admiralty through decades of boot-licking, but had never actually been to sea. **Major-General Stanley** in *The Pirates of Penzance* knows everything that an Oxbridge education can teach him, except actually how to be a soldier. **Pooh-Bah** in *The Mikado* is a different type, a person of aristocratic breeding whose family connections have given him the *entrée* to a variety of jobs that he holds simultaneously, largely by being willing to fix anything for a price. The term "Pooh Bah" is still used in Britain to describe the pompous but useless civil servant. Here is **Richard McMillan** as Pooh-Bah in a production from the Stratford Festival in Canada from 1982

16. Pooh-Bah's introduction (Stratford)

One thing you may have noticed is that, after a certain point, McMillan diverged from Gilbert's script to list roles that presumably had a meaning for Canadian audiences in 1982, but have little meaning to us south of the border four decades later. Chesterton wrote that Pooh Bah "is something more than satire; he is the truth." But I don't think anyone in Britain today would recognize Pooh-Bah as a current political type (though there might be more relevance in America now). There is a tradition in Gilbert and Sullivan productions of rewriting the more topical songs to bring them up to date. For example, when Ko-Ko, the Lord High Executioner, appears onstage, he immediately shares a list of all those people who would become top priorities if he should ever be called upon to act professionally. Here is the celebrated John Reed in the traditional D'Oyly Carte production, delivering Ko-Ko's list pretty much as written. Question: what still works, and what absolutely doesn't?

17. Gilbert and Sullivan: *The Mikado*, Ko-Ko's little list (John Reed)

18. —text of the above

Here are the key parts of Gilbert's verses. One thing that strikes me is how deliberately *non*-specific he manages to be. The beginning and end—the parts in white—could come from any period. The middle section (in yellow) is indeed more specific; they are Gilbert's *bêtes noires*, and they leave a rather nasty taste, with hints of racism and more than a little misogyny.

19. Eric Idle DVD cover

Jonathan Miller put on his 1987 production for *Monty Python* comedian **Eric Idle**. Idle completely rewrote the words of this song; I will put both his performance and his text online. The words are a combination of generic such as Gilbert himself would write and topical references that go down with the audience, but are lost on us 40 years later. All right, let's turn to something more recent, the version sung by the Ko-Ko in the 2015 production, **Richard Suart**, a relatively minor opera singer who seems to have made a name for himself in this role. 2015 is only ten years ago, and we may get most of the references, but they are not of the moment, and I find some of them even rather embarrassing.

20. Gilbert and Sullivan: *The Mikado*, Ko-Ko's little list (Richard Suart)

Personally, as a Brit, I have always known that *The Mikado* was about my own country, not Japan. So I was taken aback when an annual class on *Mikado* that I would deliver as a favor for a Hopkins colleague met with increasing opposition as more and more Asian students elected to take her course. So...

C. Let's Talk Cultural Appropriation!

21. Section title C (Valerie Masterson / Katy Perry)

22. — still from the above

That was **Katy Perry** singing her song "Unconditionally" at the American Music Awards in 2013. Viewed from our current perspective, it is a blatant case of cultural appropriation. But 2013 was still relatively

early in the rise of the woke movement. It was not until 2014 that a production of *The Mikado* in Seattle came to national attention because of the criticism it aroused in Asian communities. In 2015, **the Gilbert and Sullivan Players of New York** withdrew a planned production for similar reasons. Other companies have found—or tried to find—ways around it, such as the **Lamplighters Theatre in San Francisco** which reset the show in Renaissance Italy as *Il Ducato* in 2018 or **Gilbert and Sullivan Austin** (the company where I did my own first G&S production) with *McAdo* in 2022, set in the Scotland.

23. *Il Ducato and McAdo*

Just because you can find a title that sounds approximately the same does not mean that *The Mikado* works in the Scottish Highlands or Renaissance Florence. To me, both these photos look drab, totally lacking the poetry that makes *The Mikado* so appealing. How could I pass up the opportunity of set, costumes, or lighting such as you see here?

24. *The Mikado* (Young Victorian Theatre, 2005; Roger Brunyate, *director*)

I am going to end the hour by playing the opening scene in three different productions, and ask you to comment on the question of cultural appropriation. Since this is a lot, I won't play the complete scene after you have watched it the first time. Nor will I add titles; you have already heard Gilbert read the text; here it is again:

25. Gilbert: *The Mikado*, text of opening number

So here we go. First, the original production, more or less, as faithfully preserved by the D'Oyly Carte Company; this performance from 1966 is the same you already saw for Ko-Ko's song; this one I'll play complete. Then immediately after that, a 1983 production shown on PBS. The question in both cases is the same: can they withstand charges of cultural appropriation?

26. *The Mikado*, opening scene (D'Oyly Carte, 1966)

27. *The Mikado*, opening scene (PBS, 1983)

28. — stills from the above

You can probably already guess my views. I find the D'Oyly Carte version artificial, stilted, and totally unreal—but its artificiality saves it from any question of cultural appropriation. The PBS one, on the other hand, aims at a certain realism in terms of setting, and because it is so real, it makes the spectacle of all those cute little Asians running about quite simply demeaning. Let me add one more, from Opera Australia in 2011. The differences are subtle: are they enough? Down Under (Australia and New Zealand, which are a lot closer to Asia than England is). I'll show first a production by **Opera Australia** in 2011, which I'll play complete, then an adaptation from **New Zealand** in 1996; it greatly extends the opening, so I'll stop soon after the singing starts. I think you'll find the solutions here a lot more radical, but interesting in different ways. Same questions.

29. *The Mikado*, opening scene (Opera Australia, 2011)

30. Two shots from the Opera Australia production

What did you think? I found it quite interesting. They keep the Japanese references—including “many a vase and fan.” But contextualizing them, by placing the whole thing firmly within the tradition of British Music Hall—witness the advertising drop at the beginning, the references to Queen Victoria, and the fact that although the cast wear vaguely Japanese costumes, their make-up and manner is clearly English. Talking of the Antipodes, I posted on the website an extraordinary production from New Zealand that simply substitutes Māori culture for the Japanese; it was too way out to include here.

31. Class title 2 (still from the above)

After the break, I'll show you most of the first act from the 1987 English National Opera production by **Jonathan Miller** I have mentioned several times already. There is not a hint of Japanese anywhere to be found (except in the words), but unlike *McAdo* and *Il Ducato*, it has not become drab either. The transfer to a resort hotel out of *No, No, Nannette* or *The Boyfriend*, the meticulousness of the detail, the brightness of all those dancing waitresses and bellboys make it as sparkling now (in 2015) as it was when Miller first created it in 1987. Stay tuned.

D. The Laws against Flirting

32. Section title (love duet + title)

“The laws against flirting are exceptionally severe” is a line from the scene shown here—a delightful *non-love-duet*. It is also the central premise of the whole show, as you have already heard. **Nanki-Poo**, (**Anthony Gregory**) the only son of the Mikado, has fled his father's court rather than be forced into marriage with the elderly harridan **Katisha**—Gilbert really had it in for unmarried older women. Traveling in disguise as a strolling musician, he falls in love with **Yum-Yum**, the ward of **Ko-Ko**. Arriving in Titipu to find her, he discovers that she is to be married to her guardian. Here is the opening chorus, Nanki-Poo's entrance—an obvious operatic parody—and his song, “A wandering minstrel I.” I call this type of thing a **Sample Song**, in that it contains samples or parodies of several different musical genres.

33. *The Mikado* (ENO, 2015), clip 1

34. — still from the above

A big cut here, the only one I am really making in the act. **Pish-Tush**, a minor official (here dressed as an Anglican vicar), comes in to tell Nanki-Poo the situation. He is joined by **Pooh-Bah**, including the speech you heard a while back. Then Ko-Ko enters, with the song you have also heard, in several versions.

35. The schoolgirls

Depending on time, I'll pick it up either with the entrance of the women's chorus (this separation of choruses by gender occurs at least once in all the Savoy Operas) or the entrance of **Yum-Yum** (**Mary Bevan**) and her schoolfriends **Peep-Bo** (**Rachael Lloyd**) and **Pitti-Sing** (**Fiona Canfield**). **Ko-Ko** (**Richard Suart**) tries to get **Pooh-Bah** (**Graeme Danby**) to be nice to his fiancée; he resists at first, but then gets

into the act. Left alone together, Yum-Yum and Nanki-Poo sing a love duet about all the things they are *not* allowed to do. Then a message arrives from the Mikado, who expects Ko-Ko to start doing his job by executing someone within a month. Pooh-Bah and **Pish-Tush (George Humphreys)** point out that the most obvious candidate is himself, since he is already under sentence of death. But Ko-Ko hits on the idea of finding a substitute. The ensuing trio, “I am so proud,” is one of Sullivan’s masterpieces: three separate lines that miraculously combine as counterpoint, then go into high gear in a burst of tongue-twisting patter than is also a Sullivan specialty.

36. *The Mikado* (ENO, 2015), clip 2a, “Comes a train of little ladies”

37. *The Mikado* (ENO, 2015), clip 2b, “Three little maids from school are we”

38. Yvonne Howard as Katisha

One final cut, but a tiny one—dialogue only. Ko-Ko comes upon Nanki-Poo trying to kill himself because he cannot marry Yum-Yum. Instead, he offers a month of living high on the hog before being executed officially at the end of it. Nanki-Poo accepts, provided he can spend that month married to Yum-Yum. So the deal is struck, and we begin the joyous Act I Finale, a complex construction that Sullivan obviously based on Mozart and Rossini. However, the jollity is interrupted by the arrival of the scorned **Katisha (Yvonne Howard)**—accompanied in this production by a figure credited as her “pilot, accompanist, and unrequited admirer.” Gilbert’s words appear somewhat sympathetic to the plight of the aging woman, but instead he treats her as a figure of melodrama or ridicule. One moment that you may not understand: Yum-Yum, who knows Nanki-Poo’s secret, organizes outbursts of fake Japanese to drown out Katisha’s attempted revelation that he is the son of the Mikado.

39. *The Mikado* (ENO, 2015), clip 3

40. Class title 3 (Bring on the happy ending!)

In Act Two, the Mikado will arrive, and make things a lot worse before they get better; the mechanics here are pure farce. But there is eventually a resolution. Ko-Ko marries Katisha, getting himself off the hook as executioner, and leaving Yum-Yum free to marry Nanki-Poo. General rejoicing. Curtain.