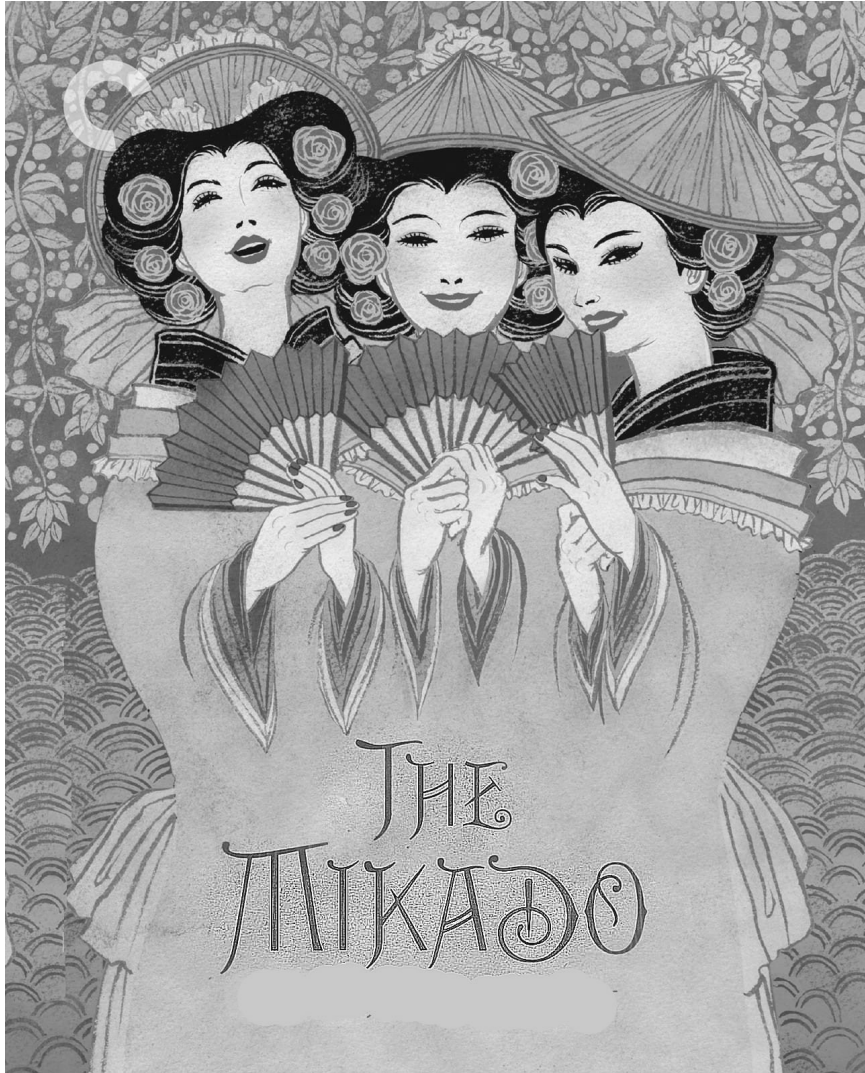


Comedy in Song



6. Satire on Stage

October 22, 2025

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INSPIRED BY THE DESIGNS ON JAPANESE PRINTS AND CERAMICS, WS Gilbert imagined an absurd Japan whose administration was arbitrary and discipline draconian. Set to music by Sir Arthur Sullivan, this became *The Mikado* (1885), the most successful of the pair's Savoy Operas. Of course the audiences realized that this picture-book Japan was not real, but a satire on the *English* political scene. Nevertheless, many modern companies have avoided charges of cultural appropriation by removing Asian references. Jonathan Miller's 1987 production for the English National Opera, set in a resort hotel in the Twenties, was one of the first and still the cleverest; we shall watch most of Act One. *rb.*

A. An Imagined Japan

After hearing one of Sullivan's loveliest numbers as a sample of the unique atmosphere of this show, we look into the origin of the Savoy Operas in general, and what led Gilbert to propose a Japanese setting for this piece in particular.

Sullivan: *The Mikado*, "The sun whose rays are all ablaze" (D'Oyly Carte 1967; Valerie Masterson, *Yum-Yum*)

Film: *Topsy Turvy*, excerpts (Mike Leigh 1999; Jim Broadbent, *Gilbert*; Leslie Manville, *Mrs. Gilbert*; Alan Corduner, *Sullivan*)

B. England Absurd

There are three main targets of political satire in *The Mikado*: Victorian prudery in general, government figures such as Pooh-Bah who have long since been promoted to their level of incompetence, and the numerous social nuisances listed by Ko-Ko as worthy of extermination. But satire is a moving target, and later productions may require updating:

Gilbert: *The Mikado*, Pooh-Bah's introduction (Stratford Ontario 1982; Richard McMillan, *Pooh-Bah*)

Gilbert & Sullivan: *The Mikado*, "I've got a little list" (D'Oyly Carte 1967; John Reed, *Ko-Ko*)

Gilbert & Sullivan: *The Mikado*, "I've got a little list" (ENO 2015; Richard Suart, *Ko-Ko*)

C. Let's Talk Cultural Appropriation

Although Gilbert was portraying English figures in fancy dress, and in no way commenting on Asian ones, *The Mikado* in recent years has become subject to charges of cultural appropriation. We look at some examples to discuss the issues for ourselves.

Gilbert & Sullivan: *The Mikado*, opening (D'Oyly Carte 1967)

Gilbert & Sullivan: *The Mikado*, opening (PBS 1983)

Gilbert & Sullivan: *The Mikado*, opening (Opera Australia 2011)

D. The Laws Against Flirting

We watch a large part of Act One in the 2015 revival of Jonathan Miller's 1987 production for the English National Opera, cutting only the sections given in grey in the synopsis below.

Gilbert & Sullivan: *The Mikado*, Act I exc. (ENO 2015; Mary Bevan, Yum-Yum; Rachael Lloyd, *Piti-Sing*; Fiona Canfield, *Peep-Bo*; Yvonne Howard, *Katisha*; Anthony Gregory, *Nanki-Poo*; Richard Suart, *Ko-Ko*; George Humphreys, *Pish-Tush*; Graeme Danby, *Pooh-Bah*; Jonathan Miller, *director*)

Nanki-Poo, the only son of the Mikado, has fled his father's court rather than be forced into marriage with the elderly harridan Katisha. Traveling in disguise as a strolling musician, he falls in love with Yum-Yum, the ward of Ko-Ko. He comes to Titipu to find her, only to discover that she is to be married to her guardian.

[Two court officials, Pish-Tush and Pooh-Bah, explain the situation. Then Ko-Ko, the Lord High Executioner, arrives, with a list of targets of society offenders who "never would be missed."]

Yum-Yum enters with her former schoolfriends. Ko-Ko tries to get Pooh-Bah 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. The others point out that the most obvious candidate is *himself*, since he is already under sentence of death. But then Ko-Ko hits on the idea of finding a substitute.

[In the ensuing dialogue, Ko-Ko comes upon Nanki-Poo trying to kill himself because he cannot marry Yum-Yum. But, seeing a potential substitute, Ko-Ko offers him 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, launching the joyous Act I Finale. However, the jollity is interrupted by the arrival of the scorned Katisha—accompanied in this production by a figure credited as her "pilot, accompanist, and unrequited admirer." When Katisha attempts to reveal Nanki-Poo's secret that he is the son of the Mikado, Yum-Yum organizes outbursts of fake Japanese to drown her out. Katisha leaves in high dudgeon.

[In Act Two, the Mikado will arrive, and make things a lot worse before they get better. 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.]

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