

The New York Times

CORINNA da FONSECA-WOLLHEIM | OPERA REVIEW

Rx for Political Incorrectness: Absurdity and More Diversity

A New York troupe makes a great case for 'The Mikado' as a comic gem worth salvaging.

To devotees of British comic opera, "The Mikado" is one of the pinnacles of the genre. But, increasingly, it also represents an embarrassment.

At the heart of this 1885 operetta by the librettist William Gilbert and the composer Arthur Sullivan is a satire skewering British bureaucratic zeal. But its setting is Japan: an imaginary town with the snigger-worthy name Titipu, whose infantilized citizens are ruled by a despot — the Mikado — with laws that are as draconian as they are daffy. Traditional productions have enthusiastically amplified the Victorian-era casual racism of the work with extravagant amounts of bowing and shuffling and casts of white actors singing in a pinched, nasal tone while sporting taped-back eyelids and yellowish makeup.

On Wednesday, the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players presented a new production of "The Mikado" at the Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College that makes a solid case that, in the midst of the wreckage of political incorrectness, the work is a comic gem worth salvaging. Armed with great skepticism, I found myself won over by the show's handsome designs, sharp acting and (for the most part) impressive singing, and came to admire the adroitness with which the director, David Auxier, defused the work's most damaging cultural land mines.

Getting it right meant a lot to this company. Last year, the Gilbert & Sullivan Players scrapped a planned revival of its older production of "The Mikado" when posters showing a white actress in yellowface drew sharp protests. Over the course of the following year, the organization convened an advisory panel, diversified its company by hiring more Asian-American actors and



The Mikado

Through Jan. 8 at the Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College, Manhattan; nygasp.org.

brainstormed ways to contextualize the show.

The main resulting innovation is a new prologue, written by Mr. Auxier, which frames the operetta as the fantasy of a Victorian librettist, caused by mild head trauma. The scene is the London office of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company in 1884,

where Gilbert (Joshua Miller) and Sullivan (David Macaluso) have just unveiled their latest show, "Princess Ida." As actors interrupt with petitions and complaints, the company's impresario, Richard D'Oyly Carte (Matthew Wages), urges the two men to conceive their next joint venture.

As it happens, an exhibition of Japanese art and handicrafts is being set up in town, and D'Oyly Carte has brought a selection for Gilbert and Sullivan to preview. Amid the chatter, nonsense syllables pop out that will coalesce into the made-up Japanese

Caitlin Burke, center, with members of the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players in their new production of "The Mikado," at the Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College.

names of "The Mikado": A soprano's delectable voice is deemed "yum-yummy indeed"; a vexatious but talented tenor is "that ill-mannered, unwashed, nincum — nanki — oh, poo!" When Gilbert is struck on the head by a falling object, the stage is set for an operetta in which a prince disguised as the minstrel Nanki-Poo (the very accomplished tenor Daniel Greenwood) vies for the hand of the lovely Yum-Yum (the pert soprano Sarah Caldwell Smith).

The prologue is not just an effective way to frame the show and cushion the impact of its more offensive elements. It also feels quite organic. After all, Gilbert & Sullivan operettas draw much of their comedy from overt references to their own artifice. Jokes about tenors or recitatives, for instance, playfully turn the spotlight on the conventions of the genre. Sometimes the story, in all its magnificent ridiculousness, seems like mere scaffolding, propping up the ritual of the performance.

This sense is reinforced by the imaginative costumes by Quinto Ott, which mix Victorian silhouettes with vibrant Asian fabrics. The actors who play Gilbert, Sullivan and D'Oyly Carte in the prologue remain recognizably British as they take on the roles of Pish-Tush, Ko-Ko and Poo-Bah. Add to that the checkered ethnic makeup of the chorus, and the Japanese setting becomes unobtrusive to the point of invisibility.

What's left is a tightly choreographed comedy of manners with coolly precise slapstick and the requisite helping of improvised winks at the New York audience. Spoken dialogue flows smoothly into patter arias and ensemble numbers, some of them sung with a weightless, silky blend that would be the envy of more classically rooted choirs. The orchestra, led by Aaron Gandy, struggles to measure up much of the time, but that irritation, too, recedes into the distance as the madcap merriment takes its course.