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CULTURE DESK

AN ASIAN-AMERICAN REIMAGINING OF GILBERT AND SULLIVAN'S "THE MIKADO"

By E. Tammy Kim December 27, 2016

On a recent weeknight in midtown Manhattan, the Broadway actor Kelvin Moon Loh led a rehearsal of "The Mikado," one of the most popular works by the nineteenth-century duo W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan. The two-act comic operetta, set in Edo-era Japan, is a satire of Victorian culture masquerading as a convoluted and kitschy love story. In the predominantly white world of American and British theatre, its Japanese characters have typically been played by white actors in wigs and kimonos, with tape-stretched eyes and kabuki-style makeup. But the show that Loh is assistant-directing, by the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players (N.Y.G.A.S.P.), does away with yellowface and exotic costumes, and features Asian-Americans both behind the curtain and onstage. In a baby-pink rehearsal space lined with mirrors, Loh, wearing jeans and a hoodie, led a pianist and forty-odd actors, many of them fresh off day jobs, through a complicated finale number. "What are you doing with those fans?" he asked a dozen women, as they practiced snapping open their props. He borrowed one from a lead and demonstrated. "Hold them like this, in the still position."

A thirty-two-year-old Chinese-American who grew up in Queens and Long Island, Loh joined the N.Y.G.A.S.P. production after the company made a troubled attempt to stage "The Mikado" last year. The troupe, which does not have a home theatre, was scheduled for a one-week run at N.Y.U.'s Skirball Center. But when it posted the front cover of its brochure to Facebook, featuring white actors in Japanese getup, N.Y.U. student activists and members of New York's theatre community protested. In a widely read post on an industry blog, the playwright Ming Peiffer wrote, "Why must we once again go through the panoply of politically correct racial discourse to explain why [*INSERT OUTDATED ASIAN MUSICAL HERE*] is offensive. Is incorrect. Is *racist*." The show was quickly cancelled, though N.Y.G.A.S.P. did fulfill its contract to take "The Mikado," with adjustments—no wigs, no Oriental makeup—on tour to the Villages, the mega retirement community in Florida.

There are thirteen operettas in the Gilbert and Sullivan oeuvre, but only three—"The Pirates of Penzance," "H.M.S. Pinafore," and "The Mikado"—can reliably fill theatres today, and each is essential to a small repertory-theatre company like N.Y.G.A.S.P. But whereas "Pirates of Penzance" and "H.M.S. Pinafore," set in far-off but Western locales, have retained their zany relevance over time, "The Mikado" 's crude Japanese stereotypes—what Loh diplomatically calls "inappropriate performance practices"—have long felt out of step with modern notions of cultural representation. Two years ago, the Seattle Gilbert & Sullivan Society caused a national scandal when it featured actors in yellowface, with male characters squinting and gesturing menacingly, like American caricatures of the Japanese during the Second World War. Opera companies have tried to update the work over the years: casting only actors of Asian descent or, as executed by Monty Python's Eric Idle, in 1987, transposing the story to twentieth-century Britain. But even some well-meaning efforts have proved controversial: last month, the Harvard-Radcliffe Gilbert & Sullivan Players rendition, whose staff included an Asian-American dramaturge, was condemned by one undergraduate protester for avoiding "racial issues altogether."

After cancelling the N.Y.U. performances, N.Y.G.A.S.P. decided to attempt its own "Mikado" reimagining. It held meetings with Asian-American members of the theatre world and convened an advisory panel to oversee the recruitment of new actors and staff. Not everyone agreed that "The Mikado" should be saved, and the process was at times contentious. At a recent public forum, David Wannan, the group's executive director, recalled, "One week, I was getting

e-mails about being racist; another week, I was getting e-mails about caving in to the 'P.C. barbarians.' ” Anshuman Bhatia, an Indian-American set designer, was hired to reinvent the setting of cherry blossoms, pagodas, and other generically Asian motifs. Loh, whose only previous Gilbert & Sullivan experience was a college production of “Pirates of Penzance,” was brought in as assistant director. After an additional round of auditions, focused on “diverse” casting, Viet Vo, a lapsed business major, was hired into the ensemble, and three Asian-American actors were given key roles. A recent study found that, in the 2014-15 theatre season, only four per cent of Broadway and off-Broadway roles were filled by actors of Asian descent. After N.Y.G.A.S.P.’s recent round of hirings, ten per cent of the company was made up of Asian-Americans.

“The Mikado: Re-Imagined,” which opens at the Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College on December 28th, leaves Gilbert & Sullivan’s music and loopy story line unchanged. Nanki-Poo, the son of the Japanese emperor Mikado, disguises himself as a minstrel to avoid being married off to Katisha, an older woman. He ends up in the fictional town of Titipu, where he falls in love with Yum-Yum, a ward of the Lord High Executioner Ko-Ko. (Vaguely Oriental names abound.) After a series of ridiculous narrative swerves, there’s a wedding, a dodged beheading, and a big reveal. Like all Gilbert & Sullivan works, “The Mikado” lies somewhere between the poles of European opera and the American musical, and lampoons the repressive, nepotistic ordering of British society. The operetta also includes several memorable songs, among them the aria “The sun, whose rays are all ablaze,” in which the engaged Yum-Yum boldly compares herself to the sun and moon: “I mean to rule the earth / as he the sky / We really know our worth / the sun and I!”

As Loh sees it, the new show preserves the integrity of Gilbert & Sullivan’s composition while stripping away the irrelevant junk that has crept into productions over the years. It opens with an original prologue, set in the office of Richard D’Oyly Carte, Gilbert & Sullivan’s real-life producer, where actors playing all three men, dressed in Victorian suits, inspect a scroll painting by the Edo-period painter Utagawa Hiroshige. In the process, they signal to the audience that the story they’re about to see is set in a Japan of the nineteenth-century British imagination. As the first act begins, the Hiroshige painting becomes the set’s backdrop, and the three men morph into the characters Pish-Tush, Ko-Ko, and Pooh-Bah. Later, when Yum-Yum is betrothed to Nanki-Poo, she and her sisters, clothed in angular takes on the Victorian kimono bustle dress, sing the famous trio “Three little maids from school,” with modern confidence instead of in a geisha-like simper. There are no taped-back slant eyes or faux-hawkish Samurai hairlines, just stage makeup and severe Victorian middle-parts. Even Gilbert’s libretto gets a few tweaks: “An abject grovel in a characteristic Japanese attitude” becomes, simply, “an abject grovel”; the Japanese-y gobbledygook “*O ni! bikkuri shakkuri to!*,” sung by the ensemble chorus, becomes “Oh! We listen to nothing from you!”

As the cast members danced into place and rehearsed this defiant “Oh!” with Loh, he frowned and swept back his bangs. “What would it look like if you *overacted* the whole thing?” he said. “Let’s try that!” When rehearsal finished, I accompanied him and Robert Lee, a musical-theatre writer and a member of N.Y.G.A.S.P.’s “Mikado” advisory council, to a bar near Penn Station. Over wine and French fries, Loh told us that much of his career has been spent “ping-ponging” between two kinds of roles: those in which “I play an Asian” and those in which “I play just an American or a human”—or, in the case of “The SpongeBob Musical,” which premièred this summer in Chicago and will soon come to Broadway, a fish. Some Asian actors, he said, spend a lifetime confined to a narrow set of roles. “My first agent said, ‘The King and I’ and ‘Miss Saigon,’ those are your bread and butter, and your foot in the door,” Loh recalled. “ ‘ Once you prove you can do those, you can do other things.’ ” Though he resented this advice at first, he later found that the agent was right. “I did a slew of ‘Miss Saigon’s. I did a slew of ‘King and I’s before I had to stop. I thought, If I never tell them no to ‘Miss Saigon’ and ‘The King and I,’ they will never stop saying yes to only that.”

With “The Mikado: Re-Imagined,” Loh said, he has let his “rage cool into action.” He appreciates the chance to make small adjustments to the show: a little less Japanese-fan action, a little less Fu Manchu gesticulation, a little more naturalism in what is, admittedly, a melodramatic story. “I’m a young Asian-American man, and I get to stand in front of a company that is not at all an Asian-American one,” Loh told me. “And I get to make effective change in the piece, one scene, one moment, one lyric at a time.” Still, he knows that some of his peers will disapprove of his work on “The Mikado,” even in revised form. The worst-case scenario, he said, is that he will be accused of “not serving the Asian-American community and its interests.” He continued, “If there is a negative critique of what I’ve done with this production, I hope it’s ‘He sucks as a director.’ That I’ll accept.”