

# PITTSBURGH PUBLIC THEATER



## THE MIKADO

By Gilbert and Sullivan  
Directed and Choreographed by Ted Pappas



Study Guide

# Pittsburgh Public Theater

A study guide to Pittsburgh Public's  
production of

## *The Mikado*

By W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan  
Directed and Choreographed by Ted Pappas

**September 25 – October 26, 2003**

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## Introduction

The remarkable collaboration of librettist William S. Gilbert and composer Arthur Sullivan reached its pinnacle in 1885 with the premier and production of *The Mikado* at London's Savoy Theatre. This whimsical, satirical and romantic tale, set in the town of Titipu in an imaginary imperial Japan, has proved for the last century to be the most popular of all the G&S operas.

A Japanese sword hanging as a decoration in Gilbert's study which fell one day from its wall inspired the librettist to write a comic opera parodying the vogue in Britain for *japonaiserie*, Western art reflecting Japanese traditions. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century painters such as James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Claude Monet, and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec frequently used Japanese motifs and subjects in their art. Instead of authentic Japanese works created by Japanese artists, *japonaiserie* refers to Western interpretations of Japanese culture. Whistler, for example, painted several portraits of Victorian women wearing kimonos, holding fans, and standing near decorative screens. Rather than aiming to represent and reflect Japanese society, however, Gilbert and Sullivan wrote *The Mikado* as a satire of contemporary England. As in many of the collaborators' comic operas, the setting of the play disguises the true subject of its commentary, which was Victorian political and social hypocrisy.

The G&S partnership began in 1871 when Sullivan was asked by London impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte to compose music for a comic libretto by Gilbert called *Thespis*. Although their first piece was not all that well-received, the partners were reunited by D'Oyly Carte four years later when Sullivan was invited to provide the score for Gilbert's satire of Britain's judicial system, *Trial by Jury* (1875). *Trial by Jury* established the tone and process for future collaborations of the partners – the two men rarely worked directly together. Gilbert wrote the libretto first, and then delivered the finished text to Sullivan who wrote melodies to fit the meter. Despite their tremendous success, the two men were never close friends and often communicated by letter. Their partnership was continually plagued by disputes and conflicting goals, which resulted in numerous quarrels.

In addition to *The Mikado*, G&S are also known for their collaborations on *H.M.S. Pinafore*, *Iolanthe*, *Trial by Jury*, *The Pirates of Penzance* and *The Yeoman of the Guard*. Most of Gilbert and Sullivan's best-known works were first produced by London impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte at London's Savoy Theatre, because of which they are sometimes called the Savoy Operas. *The Mikado*, which opened in London on March 14, 1885, originally ran for 672 performances, a record that was not to be broken at the Savoy for 35 years. It became so popular that by the end of 1885 it was being performed in Europe and America by nearly 150 companies. It has remained a favorite of the public for 114 years now, regarded as the quintessential achievement of its creators.

## Gilbert & Sullivan: Partners in Rhyme

William S. Gilbert was born in London in 1836, the son of a retired naval surgeon. Except for a kidnapping by Italian brigands in Italy at age two, and a ransomed release, he appears to have had a very normal upbringing. Beyond normal schooling, he took training as an artillery officer and studied military science in preparation for the Crimean War. However, the war ended before Gilbert graduated so he joined the militia and was a member for twenty years. For a short period of time, he practiced law. However, William Gilbert was not meant to spend his life in a courtroom.

He had shown a talent for wit and sarcasm from an early age and his flair for language would prove to be his greatest asset. Beginning in 1861, Gilbert wrote dramatic criticism and humorous verse for the popular British magazine *FUN*. The cartoons and sketches that accompanied some of his work were signed “Bab.” Many of the characters in the Gilbert & Sullivan operas were modeled after some of Gilbert’s “Bab” characters. He was knighted by Edward VII in 1907 and died in 1911 at the age of 74 while attempting to save a drowning woman.

Arthur S. Sullivan was born in Lambeth, London in 1842 to a gifted musical family. His father was a bandmaster at the Royal Military College and before the age of 10, Sullivan had mastered all of the wind instruments in his father’s band. He composed his own anthem when he was eight years old, and at the age of 14 became the first winner of the Mendelssohn Scholarship. At the age of 10, Sullivan wrote music to accompany Shakespeare’s *Tempest* and became a recognizable public figure. Until around the age of thirty, he was a professor of music, a teacher, and an organist.

Throughout his career, he also composed several major choral works including, *The Light of the World* (1873), *The Martyr of Antioch* (1880), *The Golden Legend* (1886), and his lone grand opera, *Ivanhoe* (1891). Queen Victoria knighted Sullivan in 1883. From 1872 until his death at the age of 58 in 1900, he suffered from extremely painful kidney stones, and ironically, it is said that his most beautiful music was composed while he endured great pain.

**Resource:** [diamond.bosiestate.edu/gas/html/Sullivan.html](http://diamond.bosiestate.edu/gas/html/Sullivan.html)

**Principal Works by Gilbert and Sullivan**

	Year of First Production
<i>Thespis</i>	1871
<i>Trial by Jury</i>	1875
<i>The Sorcerer</i>	1877
<i>H.M.S Pinafore</i>	1878
<i>The Pirates of Penzance</i>	1880
<i>Patience</i>	1881
<i>Iolanthe</i>	1882
<i>Princess Ida</i>	1884
<i>The Mikado</i>	1885
<i>Ruddigore</i>	1887
<i>The Yeoman of the Guard</i>	1888
<i>The Gondoliers</i>	1889
<i>Utopia Limited</i>	1893
<i>The Grand Duke</i>	1896

## Behind the Scenes with Gilbert and Sullivan

The plots for Gilbert and Sullivan operas were dreamed up by Gilbert, who upon developing an idea would draft a synopsis, which he would then read to Sullivan. Gilbert sometimes revised the plot of an opera a dozen times before it seemed right to him. If Sullivan agreed with the general outline, Gilbert would begin writing the full libretto. The two men rarely met after the outline of the opera was agreed upon; instead they would correspond by letter.

Sullivan composed mostly at night, sometimes staying up until four or five in the morning, getting only an hour or two of sleep before he resumed work. He composed with a fury, usually finishing a score just before the deadline. He could write more than 30 pages of music in a 24 hour burst.

Gilbert was the partner in charge of staging the premiere productions of the operas, devoting many hours of work to getting every detail exactly right. After the music was rehearsed, Gilbert would begin dramatic rehearsals. He carefully choreographed all the stage movements and even set the tempi for spoken dialogue by clapping his hands. Sullivan would sometimes attend these rehearsals, but not always. He generally conducted opening performances. Francois Cellier, the partners' usual conductor, handled most musical matters in his absence.

Gilbert would begin the dramatic rehearsals by sitting on a "bridge" that spanned the orchestra pit. He would then explain his libretto to the company. As the stage manager (or director in today's terminology), Gilbert's philosophy was that acting was improved more by regimentation than inspiration. Actress Jessie Bond described some of Gilbert's methods in her autobiography:

"He would have no horseplay, no practical joking, no make-up of the crude, red-nosed order or ridiculous travesties of dress and manner. All must be natural, well behaved and pleasant, and the actors were trained to get their effects by doing and saying absurd things in a matter of fact way, without obvious burlesque of the characters they were representing."

Although their partnership was plagued with quarrels, both Gilbert and Sullivan knew that their collaboration and not their work created individually was the source of their greatest financial success and popular appeal.

So, after each of their rifts, the two eventually patched up their differences and returned to work. Sullivan frequently complained about the trivial subject matter of the operas and often threatened to leave comic opera behind and return to composing more serious music. Gilbert, who was by nature touchy and quick to take offense, often resented that Sullivan was taken seriously than he. This became a particular sore point between the two during a trip to America in 1879. Gilbert thought that Sullivan was being given more attention by the American press, and felt slighted in comparison.

The collaborators' worst quarrel of all came in 1890. This rift was brought when Gilbert sued producer Richard D'Oyly Carte over who was responsible for paying for new carpeting in the Savoy Theatre. At the trial, Sullivan testified in favor of D'Oyly Carte, and Gilbert lost the case. After this quarrel, Gilbert forbade his librettos to be performed at the Savoy, and their schism lasted for more than three years.

## At the Savoy

By Lynne Conner

Outside the new building, the crowds of excited Londoners stood in lines around the block—down the Strand and past the Savoy Chapel. All 1,292 seats had been sold months in advance, but many waited anyway, hoping to buy standing room tickets. Inside, well-dressed men and women mobbed through the opulent circular foyer, admiring the white and pale yellow walls and staring up at the gold trim that lined the hand-carved ceiling and archways. Entering the auditorium, they paused slightly to look at the beautiful Venetian red boxes and dark blue house seats (upholstered in rich velvet). They were literally stopped in the mid step, however, by the luster of the gold satin curtain that hung from the top of the proscenium arch.

Finally, some minutes after the scheduled 8:30 curtain time, the gaslights lining the stage and the auditorium dimmed. The crowd hushed as Richard D'Oyly Carte owner of the brand new Savoy Theatre, took center stage. Carte carried with him an odd looking lamp connected to a long cord. This lamp was glowing with a soft, pretty white light. As the gas lamps in the auditorium were fully extinguished, another source of light filled the theater. The audience responded with a collective gasp as they watched 1,200 electric incandescent lights being to burn. Carte addressed the hushed crowd: "From the time, now some years since, that the first electric lights in lamps were exhibited outside the Paris Opera house, I have been convinced that electric light in some form is the light of the future for use in theaters," he told the audience. "Here at the Savoy, the new light is not only used in the audience part...but on the stage, for footlights, side and top lights...in fact, in every part of the house."

Next, Carte took the still-glowing electric lamp he held in his hand, wrapped it in a piece of muslin, and hit it with a hammer—smashing it into pieces. The audience stared that the lamp, expecting to see fire spreading from the broken shards. When nothing at all happened, the crowd (including the Prince of Wales, who sat in the premiere box) erupted into a loud cheer followed by a long applause. It was some minutes then before the evening's performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* could begin. The evening described above occurred on October 10, 1881. The Savoy Theatre, so named because of its location in London's Savoy precinct, was the first public building in the world to be lit by electricity inside and out. It was also the most modern playhouse in London (if not the world). Richard D'Oyly Carte, Gilbert and Sullivan's business manager and partner, built the theater specifically to house the growing repertoire of G&S comic operas. He gave Londoners a new kind of theater building with plush surroundings, free programs with readable print, and good-quality whiskey for sale in the bar. In other words the entrepreneurial Carte offered London's growing middle class audience an affordable evening of entertainment and luxury.

Until the Savoy was built, theater patrons believed that electric lighting was dangerous. In point of fact, however, the incandescent lamp was not only a more pleasing kind of light, it was infinitely better than the gas lamp, which beyond the obvious fire hazard, brought on headaches by consuming the available oxygen in a room and also raised the temperature considerably. Once proven to be safe, the Savoy's 1,200 incandescent lamps quickly set the standard. By the early 1890s, theaters around the world were equipped with state of the art electric light. In Pittsburgh, for example, both the Duquesne Theater (on Penn) and the Alvin Theatre (on Sixth) featured full electric lighting by 1891.

## **At the Savoy *continued***

The Savoy name soon found fame for reasons beyond the building itself. “Savoy Operas” became a kind of unofficial genre designation for the Gilbert and Sullivan repertoire. And “Savoyard” became a catchall reference for devotees of Gilbert and Sullivan operas. Savoyard groups were first formed as “appreciation clubs” and later as amateur producing companies. Today if you enter the term “Savoyard” in a web-based search engine, you’ll hit on literally thousands of groups around the world—here in Pittsburgh and as far away as Tasmania (yes, Tasmania!).

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## Famous Musical Theatre Collaborations

The remarkable 25 year artistic partnership of William S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan produced 14 enduringly popular operettas that combined witty, intricately rhyming lyrics by Gilbert with warm, lighthearted melodies by Sullivan. Yet the composers, despite their tremendous success, were never close friends, and their work was continually plagued by disputes and conflicting goals that resulted in numerous quarrels. The two partners often communicated by letter and rarely directly together—Gilbert usually wrote the libretto first, and then delivered the finished text to Sullivan who wrote melodies to fit the meter.

The history of American musical theatre is marked by a series of successful, if sometimes turbulent, partnerships between other composers and lyricists. Here are a few of the most notable musical teams, with a brief look at their best-known pieces and working methods.

One of the first successful collaborations from the Broadway stage was the partnership of the Gershwin brothers, composer George (1898-1937) and lyricist Ira (1896-1983). The Gershwins' stage works include *Lady Be Good* (1924), *Funny Face* (1927), *Strike Up the Band* (1927), and particularly notably, *Porgy and Bess* (1935). Among the most memorable Gershwin songs are "S Wonderful," "Oh, Lady Be Good," and "Summertime."

Ira Gershwin described the Gershwins' collaborative work process as follows: "Once we receive the outline of the plot, we really get down to work. We decide that such-and-such a tune is best for this-or-that situation. The tune decided on, I go to work alone...George might have just the opening section of a tune and would wait for me to come up with some notion, and the words and music would then be developed almost simultaneously."

The legendary teams of Rodgers and Hart and later, Rodgers and Hammerstein, created some of the most respected triumphs in the history of the Broadway stage.

Richard Rodgers (1902-1979) composed the music for more than 40 shows during his long career. With the lyricist Lorenz (Larry) Hart (1895-1943), he wrote 27 musicals including *On Your Toes* (1936), the first Broadway show to include ballet, *Babes in Arms* (1937), *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938), and *Pal Joey* (1940). Those scores yielded more than 80 songs that have become popular standards, including "My Funny Valentine," "The Lady Is a Tramp," and "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered," notable for their wedding of Hart's wry and wistful observations on love with Rodgers' buoyant melodies.

Music historian Stanley Green has written of Rodgers and Hart's music, "It seems to have been the product of just one man. There is always the effect of not only singleness of expression but of single-mindedness as well. For to fuse lyrics with music so that each seems to belong totally and indivisibly with the other, both composer and lyricist must yield a little so that neither element in the song is given sustained prominence."

Rodgers began to collaborate with lyricist and librettist Oscar Hammerstein II (1895-1960) on *Oklahoma!* (1943), considered one of the two or three most influential Broadway musicals because of its integrations music, lyrics, libretto, and choreography. Over the next 16 years, Rodgers and Hammerstein would collaborate on eight more Broadway shows: *Carousel* (1945), *Allegro* (1947), *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951), *Me and Juliet* (1953), *Pipe Dream* (1955), *The Flower Drum Song* (1958), and *The Sound of Music* (1959). In addition to the Broadway works, they

## Famous Musical Theatre Collaborations *continued*

worked on the movie musical *State Fair* (1945) and the television musical *Cinderella* (1957).

The Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals involved intensely collaborative planning sessions about choice of material, storyline, and the placement of songs in the book. After they had developed the basic structure of a show and its songs, the partners would separate to their respective homes. Once Hammerstein would perfect a lyric, he would send it to Rodgers by mail or read it to him over the telephone, and the composer would set it to music, often working very rapidly. Because both collaborators felt joint responsibilities for their work, they occasionally vetoed one or the other's efforts, and the material was tossed out, not to be used again.

Richard Rodgers' widow has compared her husband's relationships with his two collaborators. "[Hart] was brilliant, and we loved him, but he was difficult. Sometimes he would disappear while you were talking to him. When he and [Rodgers] worked, he would never put pencil to paper until Dick had finished a tune. And Dick always had to stay in the room while Larry was working.

"Oscar, on the other hand, was meticulous, methodical and dependable. He liked having the freedom to write his lyrics before Dick set them. And Dick really didn't care which way he worked. He adapted very easily. Writing music seemed to be a kind of a magic."

Hammerstein had begun his career in the world of operetta, where he had helped create some of the biggest hits of the 1920's, including *The Desert Song* (1926) and *Show Boat* (1927), the landmark musical with score by Jerome Kern containing the well-known songs "Bill," "Ol' Man River," and "Make Believe." *Show Boat* was the first Broadway show to weave book, music, and lyrics into a coherent whole. Jerome Kern was one of the first to argue that in a legitimate play, the merits of the score cannot be separated from that of the book or the show itself, and his collaboration with Hammerstein on *Show Boat* lived up to those principles.

After Rodgers and Hart and Rodgers and Hammerstein, one of the other great collaborative musical teams of American musical theatre was Alan Jay Lerner (1918-1986), a protégé of Hart, and Frederick Loewe (1901-1988). Lerner and Loewe, who began their collaboration through a chance meeting at the Lambs Club in New York in 1942, are best known for *Brigadoon* (1947), *Paint Your Wagon* (1951), *My Fair Lady* (1956), *Gigi* (1958), and *Camelot* (1960). The team's finest songs, such as "Almost Like Being in Love," "I Could Have Danced All Night," and "On the Street Where You Live" are marked by conversational fluency and precision of phrase joined to graceful melody.

Lerner has said that he and Loewe usually worked together in very precise steps. "First, we decide where a song is needed in a play. Second, what is it going to be about? Third, we discuss the mood of the song. Fourth, I give Loewe a title. Then he writes the music to the title and the general feeling of the song is established. After he's written the melody, then I write the lyrics. Only twice have I written the lyrics in advance: 'There But for You Go I' and 'They Call the Wind Maria.'"

Stephen Sondheim (1930-) had famously successful collaboration with composer Leonard Bernstein on *West Side Story* (1957). However, Sondheim, a protégé of Hammerstein, typically has written his own music as well as lyrics. Major works composed by Sondheim include *Company* (1970), *A Little Night Music* (1973) and *Sweeney Todd* (1979); each carefully matches the music to the mood and tone of his highly original lyrics. Sondheim does not write his own books, however proving that even in the late 20th century, musical theatre remains a collaborative art.

## Victorian Theatre in the Age of Gilbert and Sullivan

The comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan were just one of the many entertainment options that were available to British theatergoers of the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century. During this time, Victorian theatre experienced tremendous growth in attendance and social respectability. Among the types of plays frequented by Victorians were melodramas, spectacles, extravaganzas, and pantomimes, all of which frequently capitalized on audiences' interest in spectacular scenery and stage effects.

Although there were some productions of serious drama, such as Shakespearean tragedies and adaptations of historical novels like *Ivanhoe*, Victorian audiences were chiefly interested in plays for their production values. Most popular were melodramas, which were characterized by sensational plots, spectacular effects, and clearly defined hero and villain characters. Among the best-known authors of melodramas was Dion Boucicault, an Irishman whose plays include *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), *Arrah-na-Pogue* (1864), and *The Shaughraun* (1874).

The type of entertainment known as the spectacle contained elements of the melodrama. Sometimes referred to as aqua dramas or equestrian dramas, these productions would often include on stage live animals such as elephants and horses. One London production, called *The Arctic*, featured 70 live polar bears on stage. Another spectacle, performed at the Hippodrome during the 1880s, flooded the entire lower level of the theatre with 100,000 gallons of water. The element of danger was another attraction of these spectacles, but occasionally the spectacular elements had tragic consequences, such as when a horse killed a jockey on stage during a performance. Another type of spectacle, the extravaganza, focused on fantasy or myths.

Circus-type acts were very popular on stage. One group, the Hanson-Lees, who called themselves "Entortilationists," performed a show called *Journey to Switzerland*, in which a group of travelers are seen setting out on a boat trip to Switzerland when they encounter a storm at sea. The extravaganza then transformed into a dizzying display of acrobatics and sensational spectacle, and included one actor tumbling head first into a specially constructed piano.

Pantomimes were plays organized into a series of scenes or tableaux selected for their scenic potential. These were often based on fairy tales and children's stories, such as *Sinbad the Sailor* (1882), *Aladdin* (1885), and *Puss-in-Boots* (1887).

Although melodramas often contained comic moments, traditional comedy was not especially popular in the large Victorian houses, aside from Shakespearean comedy in which scenic spectacle was emphasized. Burlesque and burlettas were popular forms of comedy, full of exuberance but with less sophistication than traditional plays; they often were replete with satire, parody, and verbal puns. Unlike the burlesque, the burletta interpolated song and dance into the spoken presentation.

The comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan catered to the largely conservative taste of the Victorian public. These lighthearted but sharp-witted satires contained more intelligent comedy than burlesques, and helped raise the standard for comedy on the Victorian stage. The work of Gilbert and Sullivan was also popular with Queen Victoria. After a 30 year period during which no theatre was produced at Windsor Castle, it was a Savoy production of *The Gondoliers*, which was the first show to receive an audience before the queen.

## Behind the Fan: *The Mikado* as Satire of Victorian England

The comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan up through *Iolanthe* (1882) were satires set in the England of the collaborator's time. With *Princess Ida*, written a year before *The Mikado*, Gilbert began to disguise his social commentary behind a veneer of historic or fantastic atmosphere and situation. Despite the Japanese setting of *The Mikado*, the behavior, speech, and attitudes of the characters are decidedly British. Although Titipu is an actual Japanese town located a few hours north of Tokyo by train today, Gilbert merely used its name and Western images of Japan to create a Wonderland of topsy-turvy conventions, similar in tone to the writing of his contemporary Lewis Carroll. Japan served Gilbert as the looking glass in which he could reflect the restrictive social codes, self-important politicians, and moral hypocrisy of Britain in his time. As critic G.K. Chesterton wrote in 1907: "Gilbert pursued and persecuted the evils of modern England till they had literally not a leg to stand on, exactly as Swift did in *Gulliver's Travels*... There is not the whole length of *The Mikado* a single joke against Japan. I doubt if there is a single joke in the whole play that fits the Japanese. But all of the jokes in the play fit the English."

In *The Mikado*, or *The Town of Titipu*, Gilbert did not directly attack specific figures, but rather poked fun at the elaborate system of values that defined the Victorian era. The absurdity of unthinking, rigid adherence to codes of correct social behavior was a recurring theme in his body of work, and *The Mikado* presents a world in which human conduct is carefully regulated and controlled by laws as arbitrary as they are extreme. The attempt to conform to these illogical and unnatural edicts often force Gilbert's characters into ridiculously duplicitous behavior, and much of the comedy of *The Mikado* is derived from their ingenuity and deviousness in circumventing severe and unbending rules. For instance, flirting in Titipu is punishable by decapitation – an ironic commentary on the emotional and sexual prudery that defined the Victorian era. Victorians were expected to behave in accord with strict ideals of propriety, duty, sobriety, and earnestness. Inevitably, there was a gap between these ideals and reality. Gilbert delighted in showing the discrepancy between outer appearances and inner reality, and many of the characters in *The Mikado* are hypocrites or lead double lives: Ko-Ko is a tailor trying to be a public executioner; Nanki-Poo is a prince who disguises himself as a minstrel; Pooh-Bah's public respectability conceals his greed and lack of ethics. The dual quality of *The Mikado*'s japonaiserie setting, which is not authentically Japanese but a British imitation, further embodies the dual nature of the piece's humor.

Trained as a lawyer, Gilbert delighted his entire career in satirizing the contradictory and often absurd elements of his nation's legal system and the hypocrisy of British government officials. A favorite target was the British House of Lords. The character of Pooh-Bah perhaps best epitomizes Gilbert's attitude toward bureaucratic authority. Because the other officers of the state have resigned, Pooh-Bah assumes multiple, often conflicting, and political positions as "Lord High Everything Else." He has no system of true values and changes his opinions and decrees, as he deems convenient (or if bribery makes profitable). The only lawgiver with any true authority is the Mikado himself, depicted as a benevolent dictator who alternates severe punishment with fatherly love. Although he does not appear until the second act, the Mikado is undeniably the most authoritative figure in the opera, and his beliefs and attitudes have a profound impact on the other characters. According to Gilbert and Sullivan scholar Charles Hayter, "The Mikado himself is a Victorian character. He is not so much political ruler as a dispenser of public morality... a Victorian papa watching firmly over the conduct of his family. Taken one step further, the Mikado is an oblique caricature of Queen Victoria, whose behavior served as a moral beacon for an empire."

## Behind the Fan: *The Mikado* as Satire of Victorian England *continued*

If the Mikado is portrayed at moments as a harsh, often unreasonable parental figure, his subjects seem to be suspended in a never-land of perpetual childhood: “Nanki-Poo” is slang for a nappie or diaper; “Yum-Yum” echoes a phrase used to encourage children to eat; “Peep-Boo” is a variant of the shepherdess from *Mother Goose* or a variant of the game “peek-a-boo”; “Pitti-Sing” is recognizable baby talk for “pretty thing”; “Ko-Ko” is hot chocolate served to Victorian children too young for tea; and the terms “Pooh,” “Bah,” “Pish,” and “Tush” were used to express judgment, scorn or disbelief by Victorians of all ages.

Despite the fairy tale tone of *The Mikado* and its farcical use of disguise, misunderstanding and coincidence, the pervasive threat hanging over Titipu is death. References to execution, suicide, decapitation, and being buried alive or boiled in oil occur continually. Gilbert often complained that while he could not bear to crush an insect under his boot, many of his fellow countrymen had an inexhaustible appetite for violence and the macabre. Public execution in England was discontinued only 17 years before the premier of *The Mikado*. The Victorian public was fascinated, its high moral code notwithstanding, by stories of sexual deviance and the criminal mind. The gruesome murders of “Jack the Ripper” received lavish newspaper coverage, “sensation melodramas” recreated violent current events on stage, and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* stories all enjoyed enormous popularity. Such obsession with crime and punishment is reflected throughout *The Mikado*, which sardonically catalogues, numerous behaviors condemned by law- most notably in Ko-Ko’s list of “society offenders who might well be underground”- and presents capital punishment as a discipline for petty irritations.

Behind its wit, charm and romantic façade, *The Mikado* cleverly explores many of the darker undertones at the heart of the Victorian era. Ironically, this element of the work was lost on many of its original audience members, who respond primarily to the piece’s whimsical comedy, ingenious rhymes, engaging music, and japonaiserie spectacle. Queen Victoria herself, while enthusiastically praising Sullivan’s music, failed to grasp Gilbert’s satire and dismissed it as “rather silly.”

## Japonaiserie

From 1639 until 1854, Japan maintained a policy of complete seclusion toward the western world. For more than 200 years, the Tokugawa dynasty of shoguns ruled the country as a military government under strict feudal law, prohibiting almost all contact with outsiders. In an effort to open Japan to foreign commerce and to protect shipwrecked American Sailors, U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry and the American Navy sailed to Japan in 1854 and forcibly negotiated a trade agreement, the Treaty of Kanagawa. This hastened the restoration of imperial rule to Japan and accelerated the country's path toward modernization. During the 1870s, the Meiji Empire that became the dominant force on Japanese government imported foreign advisors to help it establish a new socioeconomic ruling system, and sent official delegations to study the modern ways of European societies.

At the same time, in the late years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that the Japanese were mining the Western world for information and attempting to emulate its technology and educational systems, Europe was becoming increasingly fascinated with Japanese culture. Prior to the forcible opening of Japan by Perry and the black ships of the American Navy, Japanese culture has been almost a complete mystery to most Europeans. In 1867, cosmopolitan society began to be introduced to Japanese culture at the World Exposition held in Paris, visited by more than 16 million people, which included a reproduction of authentic Japanese village. Soon thereafter, several Parisian stores created "Japanese departments" within their businesses to meet a strong new demand for imported Japanese merchandise. A wide variety of Japanese prints were made available to the Western public, and by 1870, Japanese art was being imitated frequently by European artist and designers, as well as admired and collected by many Europeans.

The term *japonaiserie* was introduced by French art critic Philippe Burty in 1871 to describe Western art, design, and decoration reflecting Japanese influence during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Japonaiserie refers to a distinctly European art movement borrowing and interpreting Asian design elements rather than to authenticate Japanese work created in Japan and for the Japanese. In addition to representing Japanese or quasi-Japanese subjects, elements of japonaiserie typically include a dramatic sense of color, large areas of open space, and graceful, simple lines that define shape, volume, and texture. Japonaiserie succeeded a related art movement drawing upon Chinese culture known as chinoiserie, and became a prevalent motif in painting, furniture design, and decorative arts throughout France and Britain for more than half a century. Impressionists and post-impressionists owed much to its inspiration, and its influence can be found in works by Monet, van Gogh, Matisse, Toulouse-Lautrec, Whistler, Klimt, and others extending into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The vogue for japonaiserie in Britain was in many ways an outgrowth of the 19<sup>th</sup> century British aesthetic movement that rejected the typical Victorian values of utility, scientific fact and theological process. The aesthetic movement's founding figures, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris, believed that the glory of art was in the fact that it needn't be meaningful or practical, only beautiful. In their assertion of the decorative arts, the aesthetes helped to raise admiration for the beauty of Asian art within London society and championed japonaiserie. These tendencies were reflected in Oscar Wilde's exotic tastes and his predilection for his famous blue china, and in Whistler's prints in rice paper and portraits of Victorian women wearing kimonos, holding fans and standing near decorative screens.

Japonaiserie reached its height of British popularity around 1885, after a major Japanese cultural exhibition similar to the earlier Paris show was held in Knightsbridge, London (it is made reference

## Japonaiserie *continued*

to in *The Mikado* when Ko-Ko reports Nanki-Poo's address aboard as "Knightsbridge"). The top-hatted and crinolined British public flocked to marvel at the dress and customs of the Japanese, so completely different from their own. Soon, the influence of japonaiserie had become noticeable in the many exotic fabric prints, decorative screens, and *objets d'art*, which the Victorians installed in many of their drawing rooms. Victorian women began to carry fans and wear silk kimonos, and Japanese-style gardens became commonplace at British homes. London's *Daily Telegraph* declared in 1885: "We are all being more or less Japanned! Advertisements tell us every morning that we have Japan in London, and the quaint art of a strange people is receiving from us that form of homage which the proverb describes as the sincerest form of flattery."

Gilbert and Sullivan had made earlier reference to japonaiserie in their satire of the aesthetic movement, *Patience*, produced in 1881. In 1885, Gilbert visited the Knightsbridge exhibit, less than a mile from his home in South Kensington, and was intrigued by the sight of "small, graceful oriental figures gliding through the streets." Soon thereafter, a Japanese sword hanging as a wall decoration in his study suddenly fell inexplicably from its place, giving the librettist the inspiration to write a comic opera simultaneously spoofing and capitalizing on the vogue for japonaiserie. He wrote to Sullivan proposing the idea, and Sullivan wrote back: "I gladly undertake to set it [to music] without further discussing the matter or asking what the subject will be."

The concept of japonaiserie provides an important part of the basis for *The Mikado*- a musical theatre masterpiece that had been described by critic G.K. Chesterton as "not a picture of Japan but a Japanese picture." The opening chorus in which the men of Titipu declare "We are gentlemen of Japan/ On many a vase and jar/ On many a screen and fan" introduces at the outset the idea that the opera's setting and situation are not realistically Japanese but a fantasy played out by japonaiserie figures come to life. The most authentic Japanese music in *The Mikado* is the Japanese imperial army march ("Mi-ya Sa-ma") which accompanies the Mikado's entrance. Gilbert photographed the Knightsbridge exhibition to use as inspiration for his staging, and he invited a male dancer and a geisha from the exhibit to coach the original *Mikado* company in Japanese deportment. The ornamental sword from Gilbert's study, which had helped inspire the piece, was used as a stage prop in the Savoy Theatre premier production.

*The Mikado's* London success in 1885 further inflamed the British public's interest in things Japanese. When Richard D'Oyly Carte brought *The Mikado* to New York City later the same year, japonaiserie became all the rage in much of America, too. American society women adopted Japanese elements in fashions, Japanese curios became signs of modishness, and it became trendy for homes of the wealthy to have designated "Mikado rooms" filled with pseudo-Japanese décor. Characters from *The Mikado* were used to advertise all manner of products from corsets to toothpaste and soap. Long after the initial appreciation of japonaiserie has faded, however, the fascination with *The Mikado* continues, and it remains extensively admired as a classic of Western musical theatre uniquely suggesting the other side of the world.

## **Characters in the Play**

**THE MIKADO**, Emperor of Japan

**NANKI-POO**, his son, at first disguised as a wandering minstrel, and in love with Yum-Yum

**KO-KO**, the Lord High Executioner of Titipu

**POOH-BAH**, Lord High Everything Else

**PISH-TUSH**, a noble lord

**YUM-YUM**, one of the three sisters, wards of Ko-Ko

**PITTI-SING**, one of the three sisters, wards of Ko-Ko

**PEEP-BO**, one of the three sisters, wards of Ko-Ko

**KATISHA**, an elderly lady, in love with Nanki-Poo

**CHORUS** of schoolgirls and gentlemen

## Glossary of Terms from *The Mikado*

**ablutioner**—one who washes himself.

**affidavit**—a written document signed under oath in front of an authorized official.

**age of discretion**—the age when one becomes legally responsible for his or her own acts.

**“anchor’s a trip”**—when a ship’s anchor is slightly raised off the bottom of the sea, free from getting bogged in the mud.

**anomaly**—an exception to the standard.

**artistic verisimilitude**—achieving an appearance of truth through creative expression.

**aver**—to declare positively.

**Bach, Johann Sebastian** (1685-1750)—German composer considered the premier composer of masses and fugues and the master of counterpoint, the art of building a composition with overlapping melody lines.

**Beethoven, Ludwig van** (1770-1827)—German composer chiefly known for his nine symphonies and his piano sonatas and chamber music.

**buffer**—bumper or shock absorber (a common term for a component of British Victorian railroad cars).

**capstan**—upright, spool-shaped cylinder around which cables are wrapped for lifting anchors.

**chaffing**—bantering or lighthearted joking.

**Chancellor of the Exchequer**—in British government, the official responsible for the control and balance of government income.

**“cock and bull”** —a nonsense story or a fantastic lie.

**condign**—suitable.

**“connubially linked”** —married.

**“cut a dash”** —put on a flashy exhibition.

**diminutioner**—a word derived by Gilbert to mean “one who diminishes.”

**dock**—a place where a criminal stands during a trial in Britain.

**effulgent**—giving off a flood of bright light.

**equipoise**—a state of balance achieved by an equal distribution of weight.

**finger stalls**—protective sheaths for injured fingers, similar to modern-day splints.

**“genius tutelary”** —guiding influence.

## Glossary of Terms from *The Mikado continued*

**“guy”**—a punning reference to the scarecrow-like effigies burned in England each November 5, in honor of Guy Fawkes Day. Guy Fawkes (1570-1606) was the leader of a group of 36 conspirators who planned to blow up the house of Parliament, killing king James and the whole British government, in an effort to return the country to its Catholic traditions.

**“how-de-do”**—an embarrassing or awkward situation.

**Judge Ordinary**—an official in charge of wills, divorces, and other routine legal matters.

**Knightsbridge**—district of London located near South Kensington. In 1885 it hosted a popular exhibition recreating a Japanese village, which led to the vogue in England for japonaiserie and gave Gilbert inspiration for *The Mikado*.

**Lord Chamberlain**—an official who for many years served as the moral censor for public entertainment in Britain. In 1907, the Lord Chamberlain withdrew the license to produce *The Mikado* in England for the duration of a state visit by Japanese prince. Although it had actually already been performed in Japan under the title *Three Little Maids*, the comic opera was banned for six weeks, causing much debate and outraging Gilbert.

**Lord High Executioner**—a humorous title because it contrasts the social standing of an executioner, typically an outcast without social rank, with the tendency in Britain to give high-sounding titles to functionaries in high office.

**Lucius Junius Brutus**—the first consul of Rome, who is said to have founded the Roman republic, and who condemned his own sons to death for treason.

**Madame Tussaud’s waxwork**—refers to the most famous wax museum in the world, located in London, and renowned for its lifelike figures of international celebrities.

**Mikado**—a title of respect for the Japanese ruler, usually called emperor in Western terminology.

**miscreant**—derived from the Latin meaning “one who has other beliefs,” it has come to mean who is a villain.

**“Mi-ya sa-ma”**—also known as “the March of the Mikado’s Troop.” The song is an actual Japanese imperial war song sung by loyalist troops who suppressed a rebellion in 1877. The words mean:

*Oh my Prince, oh, my prince / What is that fluttering in the wind / Before your imperial charger? / Know ye not it is the imperial banner / Of silken brocade, / The signal for the chastisement of rebels?*

**“Modified rapture!”**—restrained bliss. In Gilbert’s original text, the line was simply “Rapture!” but during rehearsal, Durward Lely, the first Nanki-Poo overstressed the word and the ever-vigilant Gilbert shouted at him “*Modified rapture! Modified rapture!*” Lely dutifully repeated the phrase verbatim, and the line has remained the same ever since.

**Monday pops**—London’s weekly classical music concerts that were sponsored by the music publishing company Chappell, who also published Gilbert and Sullivan’s works.

## Glossary of Terms from *The Mikado continued*

**“Mystical Germans who preach from ten till four”** —an obscure reference to Lutheran Germans who had been on a lecture tour of England at the time of the premiere of *The Mikado*, and who were considered long and somewhat abstruse speakers.

**Nancy**—a traditional name in songs and folklore for a sailor’s wife or girlfriend.

**obdurate**—unyielding.

**Parliamentary trains**—by mandate of the British Parliament, each rail company was mandated to have at least one third-class train that stopped local at every stop on its lines.

**persiflage**—a light, flippant manner of writing or speaking.

**Pooh-Bah**—a term adopted into regular use to describe any haughty or pompous official, long on self importance and short on ability. The list of posts Pooh-Bah hold in *The Mikado* is adapted from actual positions within the British government.

**provinces**—to a Londoner refers to anywhere in Britain outside of London.

**sepulcher**—a grave or tomb.

**serried**—when ranks of soldiers or warriors stand closely together, shoulder to shoulder.

**sharp**—a card shark or pool hustler.

**snickersnee**—a large knife or small sword used as a thrusting or cutting weapon.

**Spohr, Louis** (1784-1859) —German composer, violinist, conductor, and teacher. A contemporary of Mendelssohn.

**“a thing of shreds and patches”** —a pun coined by Gilbert and drawn from Hamlet, in which the title character describes his villainous uncle Claudius as “a king of shreds and patches.”

**Titipu**—currently the cement capital of Japan, a town located a few hours north of Tokyo by train.

**tocsin**—an alarm bell that is used to rouse citizens to action in the event of a fire or invasion.

**trammel**—a shackle, which constrains the free movement of a horse; or anything, which hampers and limits freedom of action.

**tremendous swell**—a well-groomed, charismatic, and important person.

**“wind is free”** —blowing in a favorable direction.

**“yam for toko”** —the opposite of the Victorian slang expression “toko for yam,” meaning getting something bad in exchange for something good.

## Interested in Learning More about Gilbert and Sullivan?

### *Web Sites*

For the Gilbert and Sullivan Archive home page, go to [www.math.boisestate.edu/gas](http://www.math.boisestate.edu/gas)

For a comprehensive on-line Gilbert and Sullivan bibliography and discography, go to: [www.lyceum.fas.harvard.edu/gs-bibliography](http://www.lyceum.fas.harvard.edu/gs-bibliography).

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"The Gilbert and Sullivan Overatures" (Naxos, 1998)

"The New D'Oyly Carte *Pinafore*" (TER, 2000)

### *Films*

*Topsy-Turvy*, 1999

*The Great Gilbert and Sullivan*, 1953