

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

The Flowers That Bloom ... tra la

A REVIEW BY ATHENA DEJANGI

A new production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* is playing at The American Stage Festival in Milford, through August 30th. If you're a G & S loyalist, go see it! This *Mikado* will live up to, and perhaps exceed, your expectations. If you're a fan of musical theater in general, go see it—the voices won't disappoint you. If you enjoy the BBC fare of Monty Python, *Fawlty Towers* or *Prime Minister*, that frightfully Brit mix of witty social satire and silliness, go see it: *The Mikado* has some of Gilbert's best mockery. And this production would've made him proud.

The Mikado remains the most-often recorded and performed of Gilbert and Sullivan's fourteen light operas. It includes several of their most memorable songs. Some of the finest samples of Gilbert's clever lyrics and Sullivan's amazing penchant for melody and musical parody. And while act one is a bit unhurried, by modern standards, act two almost always rolls to resolution in a sprightly manner. It certainly does in this production!

Like *Salome* (my other favorite), *The Mikado* has a wealth of the recitative style G & S is known for, along with a richness of reference to various songforms. The ground traversed by *The Mikado*, from



The American Stage Festival will present Gilbert & Sullivan's outrageous comedy *The Mikado*, a musical about "rice, love and politics," for only 13 performances from August 20 to 30 on the Summer Stage at the American Stage Festival. Michael Pivon will take the role of The Mikado soon here with Katisha, played by Michele Henderson.

"Three Little Maids From School Are We" to "I am So Proud" to "With Aspect Stern and Gloomy Stride" to "Brightly Dawns Our Wedding Day," is tremendous. The ASF production is intelligent and sensitive in its handling of this range.

The ASF direction by Jim Weaver allows each song to attain the full reach of its particular form. There is no glossing over, no forced conformity, no homogenization of expression and effect. His choreography

nicely complements the music and lyrics of each piece. The musicians in the pit, guided by music director and pianist, Jim Rice, ably provide the edge that professional quality live music always gives a performance.

Michael Moore, portraying Nanki-Poo, the disguised son of the Mikado. From his first solo ("A Wand'ring Minstrel, I"), it's clear he has the sort of large and lyrical voice this role deserves. Monika Kendall as Yum-Yum brings a radiant soprano

strength to their duets.

As Katisha, the Mikado's daughter-in-law elect, Michele Henderson has a voice that will knock your socks off! She delivers "With Aspect Stern and Gloomy Stride," the show's Wagnerian parody, with commanding force and elegance.

As well as these individually brilliant voices, the ensemble work of this cast, in song after song, is truly exceptional. And, not only has ASF assembled a cast that can do justice to the

songs, the acting also sparkles with excellence. All the principals have risen to the challenge of bringing the characters to life. Their performances are brimming over with enthusiasm.

Monika Kendall's Yum-Yum is coy and self-absorbed. She could be right out of an Oscar Wilde play. It was a pleasure to see how she avoids the insipid styness with which the role is sometimes saddled. She makes Yum-Yum an eager and equal partner for Michael Moore's Nanki-Poo. This was especially effective in their "Were You Not to Ko-Ko Fought" and "Here's a Howie-do" scenes.

Amherst native Natalie Brown offers an unusually energetic and well-rounded depiction of Pittsburg. Spirited and forward at times, she remains within the bounds of traditional feminine youthful exuberance and girlish giggles. Thoroughly charming, Charlotte Anne Dore in Poo-go, the third of Ko-Ko's wives. Her distinctly English accent is used to great effect during her conversation with Yum-Yum about the wedding happiness that will be "cut short" after a month.

Of particular note for his comic support with the audience is Roger Anderson as Ko-Ko. His asides to the audience, of gesture and facial expression, provide the delightful illusion of spontaneity that's so important to any performance of Gilbert and Sullivan. So believably a former tailor thrust into prominence by fickle circumstance!

Scott Severance as Fish-Fish also reveals a flair for tickling the audience funny bone—with a mere flick of a fan, a shrug of a shoulder, or a strut across the stage. He's also responsible for a humorous updating of "those who won't be missed" to Ko-Ko's "I've got a little list" lyrics.