

'The Mikado'

■ The American Stage Festival presents its final show of the summer through Aug. 30 in Milford.



Staff photos by Peter Cervelli

The American Stage Festival will present "The Mikado" through Aug. 30. **Above:** Nanki Poo (played by Michael Moore) and Yum Yum (Monika Kendall) discuss their predicament as Koko (Roger Anderson) looks on in a scene from the musical. **At right:** The Mikado (played by Michael Polsson) rules over his court as Katisha (played by Michelle Henderson) watches in the background.

By ELLEN GRIMM
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MILFORD — In its final show of the summer season, the American Stage Festival has taken on "The Mikado," Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta in which the powerful are corruptible fools, and the rule of law is a maze of absurdities.

"The silly plot is enormously funny," said artistic director, Matthew Parent. "It's that very British sense of humor, wittily poking fun at people and institutions. It's the foibles of people placed in political power; they're all human."

Set in feudal Japan, the story takes place in the town of Titipo, where flirting is punishable by death, and the townspeople elect a convicted flirt as Lord High Executioner. With names like Yum-yum, Nanki-poo, and Pooch-bah (who is Lord High Everything Else), the characters are laughable before they utter a word. Misadventures and romantic mismatches are plentiful.

It has been several years since the American Stage Festival has had the funds to produce a piece of The Mikado's scale, Parent said. With a cast of about 25 and several movable stage sets, the production cost between \$150,000 and \$170,000. The authentic bamboo blinds, kimono costumes, and wigs are the result of extensive research, Parent said.

The last such ambitious undertaking was the musical "1776," which was produced in 1994. The Mikado, directed by New York City-based director Jim Weaver, runs for 13 performances, from Aug. 20 to 30 at the Stage Festival's Summer Stage in Milford.

"This is about British politics, as are all Gilbert and Sullivan," Parent said.

The two satirists, who wrote during the 19th century, were extremely popular in their day. Their operettas, including "HMS Pinafore" and "The Pirates of Penzance," have since become comic classics.

"The music is so melodious and comical and appealing; (their work) is the forerunner of the great American classical musicals, such as (those by) Rogers and Hammerstein," Parent said.

And their observations of human nature — particularly the tendencies toward self-delusion and snobishness that accompany class distinctions and political ambitions — remain

relevant. In fact, several songs in The Mikado are structured so as to allow for updating, Parent said.

"Gilbert was a contemporary political satirist, and if he were alive today, he'd say let's change (these songs) to fit the politics," he said.

Hence, there are references to the current presidential saga in "I've Got a Little List," sung by Koko, the Lord High Executioner. Rewriting some of the lyrics was "a nice chance to get some jabs in," said Jim Weaver, director/choreographer, who also directed "Ain't Misbehavin'" and "The All Night Strut" for the American Stage Festival.

In another song, "Let the Punishment Fit the Crime," Gilbert and Sullivan lampoon English laws that imposed penalties considered too severe for their crimes. "There are a lot of people talking today about what President Clinton's punishment should be," Parent said.

Gilbert and Sullivan based the story in Japan to disguise criticisms of the British Parliament, Weaver said. In addition, he said, Asian influences were popular at the time.

"The lyrics are really what you have to listen to. So much of the story is revealed through the lyrics," he said.

The challenge for some of the performers is to make those lyrics audible. Gilbert and Sullivan are known for their use of "patter songs," which are sung at a particularly fast clip and might easily turn to gibberish if not enunciated clearly.

"People kind of wait for those," said Michelle Henderson, who plays the role of Katisha and sings a patter duet with the character Koko. "You have to learn to articulate very quickly. Once you get the hang of it, it's kind of fun."

For Henderson, who owns Carey-Henderson Vocal Studio with her husband in Nashua, "The Mikado" has been a lesson in comic timing.

"This is a show that does not have any stars in it," said Henderson, who has performed in many operas. "You have to build the comedy by playing off each other because everybody has funny lines."

Henderson plays Katisha, the older, con-

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