

ARTS

Guild's entertaining Mikado subtle to the point of sublime

THE MIKADO

Words by Sir William S. Gilbert.
Music by Sir Arthur Sullivan.
Directed by James A. Lopata.
MIT Musical Theatre Guild.
At Little Kresge Theater.
Continuing through September 17.

By CHRISTOPHER J. ANDREWS

POOH-BAH'S FAMILY PRIDE is something inconceivable, thanks to his tall family tree; even though the MTG can't quite trace the ancestry of their production to a protoplasmal primordial atomic globule (as Pooh-Bah does), they ought to be sneering too. The Musical Theatre Guild production of *The Mikado* is hugely entertaining, subtle to the point of sublime, and a must-see on MIT's campus.

The Mikado is one of Gilbert and Sullivan's most popular comic operettas, and is as timeless as any musical comedy ever written, thanks to an implausible but funny script that was already outdated when written in 1884. The action takes place in a half-imagined Japanese Empire, where the citizenry are so well-behaved that the Mikado need pass only frivolous laws to maintain a "decorum" conforming to stereotypical "Oriental" behavior. (The stereotype is patently absurd and shouldn't offend anyone.)

There is no shortage of top-notch performances in MTG's latest. Walter Howe plays the role of Pooh-Bah, a corrupt and snobbish public official, or perhaps the public official, as his presence in the bureaucracy was so onerous that all of his colleagues resigned *en masse*. Howe's rich basso speaking voice and selection of various pompous British accents made a delight for the ears. Here is one of Gilbert's funniest characters ever, (arguably the source of the colloquial term "grand pooh-bah") and Howe's rendition certainly does justice.

Fresh from a clever but eccentric appearance as Strepchon in a spring production of *Iolanthe* presented up the river, new MIT community member Arthur Fuscaldo H '88 put in a humorous, but effeminate, performance as the male hero Nanki-Poo. Fuscaldo's clean singing voice and careful diction made every witty word heard. A stock of hand gestures that might



Kyle G. Peltonen/The Tech

Imperial Court exile Nanki-Poo (Arthur R. Fuscaldo H '88) flirts with his beloved, but forbidden, Yum-Yum (Lisa Reidhaar-Olson G).

have suited Georgia O'Keefe evoked more than a few chuckles from the audience. While Fuscaldo's on-stage mannerisms may have brought a touch of *Madama Butterfly* into the production, it wasn't an unwelcome touch at all. One could get rather used to laughing at Fuscaldo, and even learn to like it.

MTG regular Robert DeVivo's witty per-

formance as the unassuming Ko-Ko, a less-than-enthusiastic Lord High Executioner, boosts the production to the level of truly tasteful. Anticipating that he might be called upon to lop off a head or two, perhaps to assure the Emperor that he isn't a shirker, the underworked hatchet-man has prepared "a little list" of people whose absence would be a "distinct

gain to society at large" and sings about it most effectively.

This song has always been a favorite with G&S audiences for its indirect attacks upon persons and establishments of the day, but some allusions will regrettably go unappreciated by modern audiences. Traditionally, actors "update" some of the words and accompanying pantomime gestures to keep the laughs coming year after year, but the results are sometimes overly pointed or draw upon cheap shots. To wit: a mere mention of the name "Daniel Quayle" might draw a laugh in this context, and some productions do stoop so low, but a far more elegant jab, and one less offensive to the Quayle family, is given later in MTG's show, where the "Indiana National Guard" is mentioned as a sort of sanctuary.

This Ko-Ko's song, like most of the MTG show, is entirely tasteful but modern enough to make every line a laughable one. The butts of his joke include "people who do Rubik's Cube in fifteen seconds flat" and "people who eat Haagen-Daazs and never show a trace," as well as quick jabs at "the movie pugilist" and women who spell "women" with a "y." No cheap shots, and uniformly excellent — it's possibly the most faithfully updated song I've ever seen in a G&S production.

Dance numbers are colorful and often contain visual gags. The Oriental equivalent of Pythonesque self-flagellating chanting monks proceed grandly across the screen but pause to pop a balloon or two; theatergoers have the chance to see what a giggly out-take from Kurosawa's latest epic history might look like. Little Kresge's small stage poses no visible handicap to the chorus, who often put vertical space to use with swinging flags and banners.

There is a lot that's good about the MTG's production: the male leads are outstanding (and it would be a crime to ignore the trio of schoolgirls with fine baby-doll voices), the additions to Gilbert's already funny lines are even more of the same and extraordinarily faithful to the original, and the stage work doesn't dull. The orchestra plays well enough when accompanying the singers, so viewers can hear every word. Every word of this production *ought* to be heard, and listeners will be happy to do so.

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