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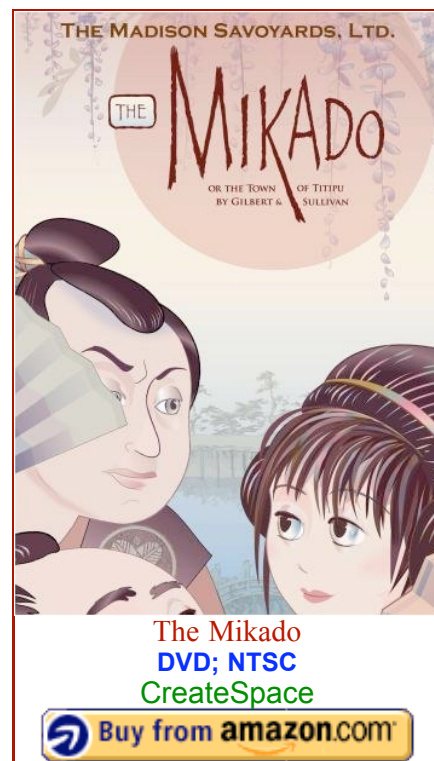
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Video Review by Barry Brenesal

SULLIVAN *The Mikado* • Christopher Ocasek, cond; Bert Adams (*Mikado*); Donovan Armbruster (*Ko-Ko*); James Kryshak (*Nanki-Poo*); Governor Harris (*Pish-Tush*); Anthony Ashley (*Pooh-Bah*); Amanda Compton (*Yum-Yum*); Sara Johnson (*Pitti-Sing*); Kathleen Butitta (*Katisha*); Catherine Schweitzer (*Peep-Bo*); Madison Savoyards O & Ch • MADISON SAVOYARDS no number (DVD: 140:22) Live: Madison 7/2008

The film medium and *The Mikado* go back a long way, together—to 1907, when John Morland directed 12 songs from the opera, using the Walturdaw Company’s Cinematophone sound-on-disc system. (It’s a Hollywood myth that sound didn’t come to films until 1929.) Well-known singers took part in these movie shorts, including George Thorne, a popular G&S performer of the 1890s as Ko-Ko. Alas, no copies are known to have survived, but since then there have been two motion pictures featuring the late D’Oyly Carte Opera Company (onetime holder of the G&S copyrights), and many filmed stage productions issued on DVD. Most of the latter are by amateur or semi-professional performing groups, and purchasable through their companies’ Web sites. What sets the Madison Savoyards’ version apart from the rest is its general availability. That is a good thing, in my opinion. However uneven the quality in these productions recorded live, making



copies of their work both known and accessible to all gives us a broader range of perspective for comparison. It also means more Gilbert and Sullivan. And as a general rule of thumb, you can never have too much decently performed Gilbert and Sullivan.

With that in mind, let's start with the visuals and sound. We're limited in this production to a single camera, angled from slightly stage right, somewhere up in the audience. The view shifts to follow the main action, and there are a few smooth zooms. In general, moderate long shots are employed, so we lose just a bit of facial detail in exchange for more sets and surroundings. That works for me—better in fact than on many DVDs that suffer from the need to switch camera angles every few seconds. The visual definition is high, and the lighting is effective. The audio is more problematic. Balance between the orchestra and vocalists is very good, but there's a sharp drop in sound levels towards the wings. This means that some exchanges involving characters arriving or leaving are partially smothered. Stage noises are present but not too intrusive, and the stereo spread is good.

On to the production. The costuming and sets are both broadly traditional and excellent. Blocking in general is handled well, which is more of an accomplishment than might be supposed, considering the number of main and auxiliary parts in the opera. The basically solid direction runs to the busy side of matters, with chorus members sometimes engaging in gestures and movements that are unnecessary and distracting when main characters are singing solos. A little of this is good: bringing on a group of small children to dance around Nanki-Poo so he can address "And if you call for a song of the sea" to them in "A wandering minstrel" works well, but when the focus is constantly taken off Yum-Yum during "The sun, whose rays" by her attendants' actions, the words are lost.

Equally problematic are a few numbers where unusual blocking and movement vitiate the drama. For example, it is counterintuitive when a gleefully smiling Nanki-Poo illustrates that "the brass will crash" and dances a little step with Pish-Tush to depict "and they'll cut a dash on their wedding day," since the words to Pooh-Bah's song "Young man, despair" are, basically, "Nanki-Poo, the girl you fell in love with and spent a month on the road to see is going to marry somebody else tomorrow." Or again: it doesn't make sense to line the characters up vertically for the contrapuntal trio, "I am so proud," having each pop out with his contribution, always facing the audience. This undercuts what's some pretty impressive theater: Ko-Ko's desperate search for a substitute victim met with Pooh-Bah's hypocritical excuses and Pish-Tush's blithely detached manner.

The cast is mixed, more successful in general with the songs than with physical acting. (A major exception is Sara Johnson, whose sharply focused gestures and facial expressions supply a counterpart to her attractive voice.) Donovan Armbruster's Ko-Ko doesn't dance, making "Here's a how-de-do" a bit of a letdown. He also doesn't project quite enough at times, but his interpretation is interesting, all broadly curving gestures and aesthetic poses—as though one were watching Bunthorne (from *Patience*) play the lead. It's clever and distinctive. The Pooh-Bah, Anthony Ashley, has a deeply sonorous bass and a lyrical delivery that usually works to good advantage—as in the "long life to you" cadenza of the act I finale. When he uses facial expressions, he ably seconds his good acting instincts, but he seldom uses them. By contrast, James Kryshak could have been less manic in his. While depicting Nanki-Poo as a simple-minded ingénue had its advantages—ably supported by his fine lyric tenor and strong performing instincts—the physical exaggerations he occasionally indulges in don't get a laugh.

Amanda Compton's Yum-Yum is effectively sung, though with a tendency to unsteady volume in conversation. Governor Harris as Pish-Tush displays a fine voice and good enunciation, but no acting ability. Kathleen Butitta gives a very fine performance as Katisha, the voice a bit too soft in its lower register, but gleaming and bright up above. She is also one of the best all-around actors in the group, making more simply but profoundly out of "The hour of sadness" than several professional Katishas I've seen. The Mikado of Bert Adams, alas, is wobbly and badly under-energized, with no apparent effort at characterization. The Madison Savoyard Orchestra is good, the Chorus ragged. Christopher Ocasek leads with spirit, and a sense of discipline that doesn't preclude flexible tempos for his performers. In general, all of Gilbert's dialogue outside the vocal numbers is handled well. The performers speak naturally, without any attempt at accents. There is none of the milking of every line for every drop of humor that sometimes stuns and stops an otherwise decent *Mikado* dead in its tracks.

The words and score are presented complete. This isn't the case with the two film versions made by the D'Oyly Carte, nor is it the case on the ostensibly complete Ohio Light Opera's recent CD set. (They include the dialogue, but cut the second verse of the glee, perhaps because their Pitti-Sing is seriously over-parted.) The OLO performance also suffers from frequently glacial tempos and some terrible overacting. If you're looking for a "complete" *Mikado*, I actually prefer the audio track of the Madison Savoyards DVD to the OLO, despite the occasional sound problems of the former, simply on performance grounds.

The audio is available solely in Dolby Digital 5.1, though I found no loss of signal after switching my system to stereo. Video format is 16:9. All in all, I think the Madison Savoyards do themselves up proud. This is a souvenir of a highly enjoyable semi-professional *Mikado*. G&S fanciers might also want to check out their Web site at www.madisonsavoyards.org. **Barry Brenesal**

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