

Resistance is feudal to 'Mikado' fun

By LINDSAY CHRISTIANS
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Nobody goes to a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta looking for gritty realism. The audience doesn't care whether "H.M.S. Pinafore" told historically correct tales of the Royal Navy or if the swordfighting techniques are proper in "The Pirates of Penzance." They're in the seats looking for the quirky characters, boisterous singing and endlessly clever song lyrics that are hallmarks of the duo's work.

The Madison Savoyards' production of "The Mikado" aims to provide that, but puts the production's enduring silly charm against a backdrop that's more realistic than audiences might expect.

Stage director Terry Kiss Frank chose to zoom in on the second half of the play's full title: "The Mikado, or The Town of Titipu," so audiences can get a real sense of place. Frank wanted to reinforce a more authentic version of feudal Japan instead of the Anglicized, "exotic" Japan often depicted in productions of the show.

That means including many classes of people, she explained — fishermen, peasants, the entire social strata. The approach also informed a detailed set design that focuses on a Japanese island with a Shinto shrine and a backdrop with little houses rising up a mountainside. All stage entrances and exits are made by bridge, boardwalk or boat.

The set reflects Frank's desire to give depth and resonance to a genre that is typically dismissed as being simply light and funny. It's more interesting, she argues, to perform with real characters.

"It's no longer enough to captivate — especially a younger audience — to just stand and sing," she said. "Let's make this a little more engaging, give it some more depth."

But more depth doesn't mean the plot is heavy. "The Mikado" winds together thwarted young lovers, a prince in disguise, a flirtatious Lord High Executioner and a colorful chorus. Nanki Poo, the son of the Mikado, escapes the attentions of an older woman by disguising himself as a wandering minstrel. He falls in love with Yum-Yum, the lovely young ward of the Lord High Executioner,



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

Above: Nicholas Klawes, Dick Yde and Governor Harris play a warrior, a nobleman and Pish-Tush in the Savoyards' "Mikado." **Below:** Nanki-Poo (James Kryshak) innocently woos the lovely Yum-Yum (Amanda Compton).

who himself is in trouble because there have been no executions for a month. Throw into the mix the self-important Grand High Poo-Bah, keeper of dozens of governmental jobs, and Katisha in pursuit of Nanki Poo, and hilarity ensues.

"It all makes sense in the end," said music director Chris Ocasek. "It's not illogical, but it takes you on twists and turns."

In addition to plot twists, actors get a lot of practice with tongue twisters as they deliver their lines.

"If you love language, you will love Gilbert and Sullivan," Frank said. "It builds a great appreciation of language for young people. It can lead to a real love of language and wordplay."

Ocasek has spent much of his time coaching the singers on how to maximize this wordplay, emphasizing diction and precision.

"Everything needs to be crystal clear," he said. "The tempos need to be just right so everybody can understand exactly what they're saying. Gilbert and Sullivan are notorious for putting a million words in one little measure."



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Maya Webne-Behrman and Lily Frautschi play peasants in the Savoyards' "Mikado."

"The Mikado" constitutes a return to a more popular work for the Savoyards. Last year, the company presented a double bill of two early, lesser-known works: Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Sorcerer" and "Cox and Box," a play with Sullivan's music and F.C. Burnand's text.

While Frank has worked with the Savoyards off and on since 1984 as a costumer, associate music director and director, Ocasek is working with the group for the first time. He is earning his master's in orchestral conducting at Florida State University and is in Madison for the summer.

"It's exciting for me because I knew the show, but I'd never had the chance to be the primary music director," Ocasek said. "I have been very impressed with (the Savoyards)."

Madison Savoyards have been producing Gilbert and Sullivan operettas since 1963, when it put on "Iolanthe." The company is run by a volunteer board that produces one summer show and a recital performance in February.

"The Mikado" includes a cast of 48 people, ranging in age from 5 to mid-70s. One family of five daughters will grace the stage, as well as a few sets of moms with two daughters.

"They really make the best

use of all their resources," Ocasek said. "They work so hard ... I've seen them in the past, and I'm always impressed by the level of professionalism and detail."

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IF YOU GO

Madison Savoyards' "The Mikado" runs weekends from Thursday, July 17, through Sunday, July 27, in Music Hall, 925 Bascom Mall, on the UW-Madison campus. Friday and Saturday performances begin at 7:30 p.m.; Sunday performances begin at 3 p.m. A Thursday performance on July 24 is possible if the first weekend sells out.

Tickets cost \$30 for adults, \$28 for seniors, \$15 for students and \$5 for children younger than 13. Tickets are available through the Wisconsin Union Theater box office at 262-2201 and the Vilas Hall box office at 262-1500, as well as online via the Union Theater box office Web site.