



THE MIKADO

W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan are very possibly the most successful writing team in theater history. And “The Mikado” is their most popular and best-loved work. From its opening night at the Savoy Theater, London on March 14, 1885, it has never left the stages of the world. The first production ran for 672 consecutive performances, a record at that period!

At the time of *The Mikado*’s composition, G and S (as they are often known) had already written some of their most beloved works, such as *HMS Pinafore* and *The Pirates of Penzance*. And they were already well along the rocky path of their partnership. They were frequently threatening to split as a team, and more than once they declared one of their new operettas to be their last collaboration.

Sullivan (who wrote the music) aspired to write more serious works (operas, cantatas, etc.). He felt that the work he did with Gilbert (who wrote the texts) to be merely “word-setting”. In turn, Gilbert, who was a master satirist and a more practical man of the theater, was offended by Sullivan’s looking down at the works they produced. More than once their feuds were ended by their producer, Richard D’Oyly Carte, who fully realized the huge income that they could all earn from the collaboration.

In fact, it was D’Oyly Carte who built the Savoy Theater especially for the presentation of their works. Opening in 1881 with a production of the team’s *PATIENCE*, the theater was designed and built with no expenses spared. In fact, it was the first theater in the world to use electric lighting. (Until then, gas light was the norm.) The theater is still very much in use today.

At the time that *The Mikado* was composed, there was a famous Japanese Exhibit in London, including the re-creation of a complete Japanese Village in Knightsbridge. These led to a mania for all things from Japan—decor, fans, screens, nick-knacks. After visiting this exhibit (the story goes) Gilbert was sitting in his study, when a large displayed Japanese executioner’s sword fell from his wall! This provided the impetus to proceed on a work set in Japan.

Sullivan actually liked the idea and he immediately began composition as Gilbert delivered the text to him. The first song written, “Three Little Maids From School” was completed in a day. Among other highlights of the score are the beautiful solos for the hero and heroine. Nanki-Poo (tenor) introduces himself with “A Wandering Minstrel I”, and later Yum Yum (soprano) sings the lovely “The Sun Whose Rays”. The entrance song of Ko Ko (the Lord High Executioner) is a special highlight because, from the very beginning, it has been a tradition to update his list of potential victims with references to current politicians, celebrities and scandals. Another favorite is “The Flowers That Bloom in the Spring”, which at the premiere performance received seven encores!

It is ironic that, while G & S both wrote with other collaborators, they were never as successful as when they created one of their Savoy Operas together. Gilbert's words seemed to bring forth an unending stream of graceful, charming, unforgettable melodies from Sullivan. And just as the music remains fresh, it is even more amazing (given that he was satirizing politicians and fads of his day) that Gilbert's razor wit remains brilliant and genuinely funny 125 years later.

There is no denying that they brought out the very best in each other and *The Mikado* represents them at the absolute peak of their powers.

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