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'The Mikado' with a modern twist

By RUSTY MARKS
Of The Herald-Dispatch staff

REVIEW

Take a 19th-century Englishman's view of the world and couple it with a need for an exotic setting for an operetta, and you've got "The Mikado." You've also got a classic.

Gilbert and Sullivan's musical recreation of feudal Japan was first presented to the public more than 100 years ago, and it has been delighting audiences ever since. Last night, as done up by the New York Gilbert and Sullivan Players, it played to a full house at the Keith-Albee Theatre, which just goes to show that the shogun must go on.

A humorous, often sarcastic look at ancient Japan, and 19th century England, and modern America, for that matter, "The Mikado" was originally born of the mania with the Orient that swept Great Britain in the late 1800s. But as the intervening years have proven, the show packs a contemporary punch.

Of course, the NYG & SP's creative staging, within the framework of a basically traditional production of the show, helped matters. Well-placed "alterations" to the script brought in modern references — to Ollie North, American Express and Hulio's, with an "H," no less. The sacred lyrics have even been tampered with — call it operatic license — such that the March of the Mikado's Troops ("Mi-Ya Sa-Ma") was sung last night with the memorable phrase "Mitsubishi, Kawasaki, Sony, Sanyo, Toyota!"

The more conservative witness to such a seeming bastardization may have taken offense at such a crime, but it can be argued that the NYG & SP was merely keeping the spirit of the original production, which itself fell back on popular notions and references of its day. What better way to bring a Victorian musical into the 1980s?

You could try obtaining a tight, sensitive orchestra. You could get a cast of professionals with good voices and excellent expression. You could build effective sets.

They did. In fact, probably the only thing the NYG & SP didn't have was a bigger house to bring in more people.

In short, "The Mikado" came off very well because of the talent of the performers and musicians, because of Gilbert and Sullivan, who started it all, and perhaps most of all, because the cast took the time to care about its production and the audience, a failure in much modern theater, particularly in a traveling company like the NYG & SP. Through their creative script personalization, the company tried to put a little bit of Huntington, of our area, and thereby, of us, into the show.

When it comes right down to it, that's what theater's about, isn't it? Because, without an audience, there can be no show.