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2>Savoyards' 'mikado' Transports Audience To Far East

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Theatergoers found themselves transported to the Far East and treated to classic Gilbert and Sullivan Friday evening as the Madison Savoyards opened its summer production, "The Mikado, or The Town of Titipu," led by stage director Terry Kiss Frank and music director and conductor Christopher Ocasek.

The set could have been a life-sized illustration from a storybook about Japan. A cutout of undulating waves capped with sculpted white crests, like a Katsushika Hokusai woodprint, rose from the orchestra pit and under the arc of a wooden bridge. A collage of patterns and solids in bright hues covered the backdrop, paper lanterns hung from a pagoda that formed the centerpiece and the cast sang and swirled across the picture in colorful kimonos.

"The Mikado" was William Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's most successful collaboration, running for 672 performances after it first opened in London in 1885. The Madison Savoyards have performed it five previous times starting in 1969. Though set in the fictional Far-East village of Titipu, the opera satirizes high society and corrupt bureaucracy from Gilbert and Sullivan's Victorian England, a sort of "Charles Dickens goes to Japan (and considerably lightens his spirits)." It is a classic star-crossed story of a prince in disguise and the lovely ward of an executioner who want to marry, but because of their situations, face either death or an unpalatable marriage to suitors who are far older, uglier and more foolish than the young lovers.

Friday's audience stretched to the ends of the balconies, filling the small Music Hall on campus, and an additional performance has been added July 24 to accommodate the demand for tickets. The Savoyards showed why they are so in demand with impressive performances from the principal cast to the 40-member chorus that barely all fit on the set.

Two particularly outstanding duos led the cast with strong vocals and magnetic stage chemistry. Donavon Armbruster as Ko-Ko the "Lord High Executioner" and Anthony Ashley as Pooh-Bah the "Lord High Everything Else" represented the lovable and laughable political buffoons. Their rules and roles contradicted one another to a point that required Pooh-Bah to arrest himself and put Ko-Ko under order to chop off his own head, and the actors drew many laughs as they sang about and mimed these awkward feats.

Another strong duo included James N. Kryshak as the Mikado's son Nanki-Poo, disguised as a wandering minstrel, and Amanda Compton as his love Yum-Yum, a ward of Ko-Ko and betrothed to the executioner. Kryshak's contagious energy and abandon in his lovestruck and self-sacrificing character was well matched by Compton's bubbly naivete and effortless vocals she lent the vain yet unaffected peasant girl.

The set and costumes were visually stunning, but the staging of characters, particularly the villagers, tended to blend into the two-dimensional backdrop. The chorus members physically remained mostly static with synchronized motions, where levels, angles and separations could have added more interest to the larger scenes. Singers occasionally fell out of sync with the orchestra, particularly during a few of the fast staccato passages, though overall the vocal performances soared from the soloists and chorus.

The production was fast-paced and funny, barely missing a beat throughout the night's performance. Those who can snag tickets will be delighted to partake in this feast for the ears and brightly-colored portrait of the exotic but not-too-faraway Town of Titipu.

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