

Savoyards do well by an old favorite

By JOHN AEHL

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"The Mikado," as presented in the UW-Madison Music Hall: Beautifully staged, beautifully sung, well acted.

The most popular opera ever written began a seven-performance run in Madison Friday.

"The Mikado" is a comic opera, or operetta (let us not quibble or argue about what is opera or operetta), and seems to never have been off the stage since its London beginning in 1885.

"The whole thing is like a glass of champagne," a member of the first audience said. That is still true.

Bright and bubbly and sweet, but not cloying, "The Mikado" still shows Gilbert, with zesty wit, and Sullivan, in fine melodious form, at the height of their creative powers.

The Madison Savoyards got most everything right in this, their sixth "Mikado" traversal in their 46th year of annual productions. It was a joyous, exuberant staging.

Before getting to the principals, praise should be heaped on the staging direction of Terry Kiss Frank, who managed to pack 49 colorfully costumed participants onto the not-very-large Music Hall stage and kept them moving without the whole thing seeming too crowded. It was a major feat of spatial engineering in a nicely designed set that included colorful painted backdrops of mountain and sky, an island shrine, and the prow of a boat that unloaded and loaded principals at appropriate times.

The singing was almost uniformly excellent, and compliments are due for very good enunciation, including by the chorus of 40 men, women and children.

Not necessarily in order of on-stage time or quality of performance, six main characters must be mentioned:

The harridan-comedic-sympathetic role of Katisha gave every opportunity for Kathleen Butitta to shine, and she did. Dressed abundantly in satin red and green and yellow, she displayed a solid mezzo-soprano voice, while her wry aside glances and furious entreaties commanded attention.

The stentorian voice of Anthony Ashley's Pooh-Bah was allied with a fine sense of comic timing. Donavon Armbruster as Ko-Ko, the catalyst of the show, gamboled about in comedy-perfect style, but appropriately quieted down for his "Tit-Willow" song. The light, sensitive tenor of James N. Kryshak suited the role of Nanki-Poo, and Amanda Compton's Yum-Yum was light and bright and bouncy in singing and acting. Bert Adams was the imperial and mildly confused Mikado.

The 27-piece orchestra played well under the direction of Christopher Ocasek.

The Madison Savoyards production of "The Mikado" will be staged six more times: at 7:30 tonight; at 3 p.m. Sunday; at 7:30 p.m. next Thursday, Friday and Saturday; and at 3 p.m. next Sunday. Call the Vilas Hall box office (hours 11:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m.) at 608-262-1500.