

Turning Japanese: "The Mikado," at Lincoln Park through June 18

Written by Mike Schulz

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This past weekend, it was rainy, gloomy, and downright cold for this time of year. Let's face it: The weather sucked.

And thinking about all the local outdoor events where attendance might have been negatively affected by the climate - Race for the Cure, the Left Bank Fine Art Fair, Gumbo Ya Ya, et cetera, et cetera - I couldn't bear to *not* attend Genesis Guild's and Opera@Augustana's Saturday-night performance of *The Mikado*. Foul weather be damned - if

The Mikado

's cast and orchestra were going to suffer the elements, then by God, so was I.

Happily, so were a lot of others, or at least far more than I expected on such a chilly evening - I'm guessing about 100 people showed up to the Lincoln Park performance. That kind of loyalty is inspiring. And even more inspiring was that, as the temperature subtly but noticeably dropped, I didn't see one of those 100 leave before the curtain call. Perhaps they were simply frozen to their seats, but more likely, they were having such a wonderful time at this brilliantly farcical operetta that leaving, quite simply, wasn't an option. For the chance to hear Gilbert & Sullivan's classic sung, performed, and played so well, we probably would have endured much *worse*

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weather.

Granted, during the first 15 minutes or so, I wasn't quite sure that our braving the cold was the right decision. The orchestra - led, like the production itself, by director John Pfautz - played the score's opening strains with great panache. But the show's male chorus members (all half-dozen of them) seemed to have trouble with both the harmonies *and* Margaret Ellis' dance routines; a couple performers looked almost

paralyzed

with fear. And despite his powerful tenor, when Brent Wilson's Nanki-Poo first arrived on stage, I felt a foreboding - Wilson was a defiantly modern, American presence within the show's traditional-Japanese setting, his cocksure bravado at odds with the character's romantic turmoil. Gilbert & Sullivan's

Mikado

, so tuneful and funny, is almost impossible to screw up. Was this group going to find a way to do so?

Not by a long shot. Wilson's offhand, light-hearted charm wound up a perfect counterpoint to a succession of brazen comic performances. Emily Shenk was a dizzy hoot as Yum-Yum (never funnier than when trying to talk her way out of being buried alive), and Wendy Czekalski had - and provided - great fun as the harridan Katisha. (Both Shenk and Czekalski were playing their roles solely on opening weekend; hopefully, second-weekend performers Rochelle Eisenga-Schrader and Linsy De Pooter will match them.) Jonathan Schrader, as he proved in last year's *Pirates of Penzance*, is a fearless comedian who delivers Gilbert & Sullivan tongue-twisters with aplomb, and Michael Callahan, whose diction and projection are extraordinary, was hysterically dour as Pooh-Bah; for a broad comic, he's remarkably subtle.

All of the show's principals - including Erin O'Shea, who played Pitti-Sing with grace and delicate humor - are blessed with sterling voices, and the show's female chorus made intoxicatingly pretty music together. Yet what made this *Mikado* more than merely a first-rate concert performance was the continual cleverness of Pfautz's compositions and Ellis' choreography; the Act I finale (with the actors' kimonos wafting in the breeze) was pure happiness, and Act II's "Merry Madrigal," with the quartet slowly becoming more and more miserable while being served tea, was high-comedy heaven.

Throughout this production of *The Mikado*, the sureness of the staging was matched by the joy the performers and musicians brought to the show, and I apologize to all involved for the Saturday-night applause not sounding as robust as we would have liked. Half of us were wearing gloves.

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