

BROS Theatre Company

Hot Mikado • October 2005 • Hampton Hill Playhouse

REVIEW

If you like your Gilbert and Sullivan cool, then try the Hot Mikado. If you like it really hot then try the BROS version: it's explosive!

Gilbert and Sullivan purists should stay away, because this is G&S with a bite: The Mikado revisited through an eclectic concoction of rock, jazz, swing, Charleston(?), blues and ... er, madrigal! And the eclecticism doesn't stop there: the Japanese speak in American accents; the wardrobe is courtesy of Pokémon via Roy Lichtenstein; oh ... and the Mikado himself is an Elvis Presley impersonator.

The 1986 David H Bell and Rob Bowman's revamped hot version (from their warm adaptation of 1939) is just the starting point. Director, Paul Kirkbright, has really shaken in the chilli and jalapeno.

The searing lovesickness of our hero, the "wand'ring minstrel" Nanki-Poo, sung by Andy Clarke, boiler-suited and Mohican tonsured, scorched our hearts as he found his lost love Yum-Yum. Their duet This is What I'll Never Do had a chemistry that was thermal. Lucy Clement sizzled skittishly as Yum-Yum, and in her solo, The Sun and I, her voice really shone. But then again, Yum-Yum is hot stuff and so thinks Ko-Ko, her guardian and suitor.

Carl Smith's Ko-Ko, emerging in golf shoes and plus-fours from his Samurai robes, was Woody Allen but nicer. (Hold on: this is The Lord High Executioner!) The audience seemed to agree heartily with his inclusions on THE LIST, including Big Brother finalists, Cherie Blair, and mobile 'phones (much surreptitious reaching in pockets and handbags). Ranging from the self-deprecating to the self-prompting, enjoying his own puns, his versatile performance scorched along.

The multi-voiced Edz Barrett branded his own style on Pooh-Bah, The Lord High Everything Else. With trousers changing from cheetah skin to leopard skin, the part was clothed in camp conceit, and the pace was blistering.

Pumping past on pink push-scooters, the Three Little Maids made a blazing entrance, breaking into Charleston! Pitti-Sing (Sue Astbury) and Peep-Bo (Faye Rogers) were a joy to listen to. The range of their style was brightly demonstrated with Pish-Tush (Hamilton Faber) in Swing a Merry Madrigal.

However, the temperature reached ignition point with Robbin Pierce as Katisha, G&S's spurned spinster transmogrified into femme fatale. Her strong alto, felt in Hour of Gladness, was powerful but controlled, darkly reminiscent of Ute Lemper. Her power-dressed statuesque presence added to the visual gags with Ko-Ko in Beauty in the Bellow, but she oozed sensuality. Not hot, but torrid.

The fiery entrance of the long-awaited Mikado, emerging from the smoke as silver-booted

Elvis, superstar, was pure hyperbole. Martin Wilcox's enjoyment of his part as "The King" shone through.

What was really hot was the choreography by Caroline Smith, clearly defined, inspired, and innovative. Musical Director, Shaun Critten's precise and energetic music had a oneness with the company, but was sometimes a bit over-enthusiastic and singers' words were lost. It was good to see the band on stage as part of the action, and they looked resplendent.

The design had the mark of fully integrated teamwork, with its simple symmetrical set by Wesley Henderson-Roe, brilliant kaleidoscopic lighting by Ed Pagett, and astounding costumes by Terrie Cresswell, with bold modern Japanese motifs of masks and the slash-dyed hair of the yonkoma manga.

As a spoof of a pastiche (G&S's) of a lampoon (on Victorian infatuation with the Orient), it's OTT, but no one can deny that The Hot Mikado is cool!

Mark Aspen
Richmond & Twickenham Times

REVIEW

'Hot Mikado' is a parody of the popular Gilbert and Sullivan operetta 'The Mikado'. Set in Japan, the show features the inhabitants of a town called Titipu. A wandering musician named Nanki-Poo enters the scene, looking for his true love, Yum-Yum. Unfortunately for Nanki-Poo, Yum-Yum is about to marry her ward, Ko-Ko. What transpires is a rowdy tale that combines Gilbert and Sullivan's timeless style with a heavy dose of swing and blues added to a sassy sprinkling of gospel and jive.

This was a production which from first to last had the wow factor, just a pity that more people couldn't get in to see it. A 'Chicago' style of staging, with black split level surroundings, Japanese sliding doors and an upstairs band. Light emerged through what appeared to be Play School shaped windows - all in all a very black, slick modern feel to the set.

Clearly a lot of time and planning went into the preparation and execution of this production. The production numbers were totally infectious and had everything. From the original blank canvas that is the Hot Mikado, a Production Team have to decide what to do with it. The music steers you to some degree but you have to have a concept. Contemporary cinematic was the choice and it worked well. There were definite moments of true pantomime and a fair smattering of cheese as well. There are far too many good things to mention individually about Paul Kirkbright's and his fellow creators directorial touches. I had seen the vast majority of them before in various guises of 'The Mikado' but never in the same production and with such good comedy timing. Several examples; but we are Japanese, references to Chesterfield & Epsom Downs etc, Psst - I certainly am not, sound effect screams, the maids entrance on scooters and Ko-Ko's endless physical comedy. My interest in 'The Mikado' often wanes in Act Two with a seemingly endless amount of duets and trios etc but on this occasion I actually enjoyed them!

The choreography supplied by Caroline Smith can be summed up in one word - beautiful. Always interesting, imaginative, vivacious, flowing naturally, great angles, lines etc and the fan work was graceful and innovative. There was co-ordination, drilling and slickness about

all the routines.

In the role of Musical Director, we were introduced to BROS newcomer Shaun Critten. The music was well balanced and the excellent band tight at all times. There was good diction amongst the ensemble and the men, usually the Achilles heel in musical theatre, sounded great. I did feel though that Shaun could have been a little more charismatic up in his perch.

The lighting plot had plenty of thoughtful planning by the technical team with good execution. Spectrum colours added to stark bright white light enhanced the jazzy feel to the production. Thanks to the diction and the volume level of the band I could hear every word. This is to the credit of the sound engineer. I liked the echo effect in 'The Sun Whose Rays' number.

Costumes were well worked and right on the money. The ensemble were basically in black and wore coloured accessories - very effective. The younger ladies had shorter skirts than one or two of the more mature ladies - both elegant and sensible. Too often we see ladies in the ensemble wearing inappropriate costumes but not on this occasion. I liked the idea of the men colouring their hair - the only downside to that was Nanki-poo's colour ran through sweat and caused great amusement. The style of the girls' hair was well thought as well. A combination of funky options and girly pigtails etc helped create characters. The two costumes I didn't really feel blended were 'Nanki-Poo's tracksuit like attire and 'Pish-Tush's red and white deck chair effect suit.

To the principal performances, I shall start with the ladies;

Lucy Clement as 'Yum-Yum' was excellent, easily showing the beauty of the lovely 'Yum-Yum' but also the naive vulnerable side. In 'The Sun Whose Rays' Lucy had the audience in the palm of her hand and the vainness of her lib leading into the song was actually endearing. 'Yum-Yum' is quite often played by a one dimensional bland soprano nowhere near the true playing age but Lucy was a breath of fresh air.

In support and as the remaining sum of our three little maids were Sue Astbury as 'Pitti-Sing' and Faye Rogers as 'Peep-Bo'. Both performances showed strong individual characterisations, very pert and suitably girly. Sue had the more singing to do and was able to express her vocal range in these challenging songs.

The perceived villain of the piece is 'Katisha' and in the formidable presence of Robbin Pierce, this was always going to be entertaining. She sang her songs like a diva and performed like a vamp but could never believably be perceived as being unattractive as the lib suggests. The physical difference between 'Katisha' and 'Ko-Ko' was a dream come true for the Production Team.

Amongst the gents, we had Andy Clarke as 'Nanki-Poo' a seemingly wandering minstrel. I have already mentioned the unflattering costume but Andy played the part quite straight but with the right amount of cheese. Andy was able to show off his very pleasant singing voice in his opening number 'A Wand'ring Minstrel I' and then along with 'Yum-Yum' in 'This is What I'll Never Do'.

Edz Barrett as the devious 'Pooh-Bah' was suitably camp but showed off a very impressive versatile round of accents. Edz danced well and brought some much needed energy to the

part.

The often overlooked part of 'Pish-Tush' was well portrayed by Hamilton Faber. Hamilton blossomed in Act Two and we were entertained but his light tenor vocal.

Well what can I say about Carl Smith's 'Ko-Ko'. It was totally sublime. From his fantastic entrance to his courtship with 'Katisha' we were treated to one of the best comedy performances I have seen for a long time. Its not just his physical comedy which amused - he does have similarities to Bilko and Woody Allen - but his timing was superb. Even jokes I've heard dozens of times came alive. I shan't gush any more, a great performance.

Last and certainly not least was Martin Wilcox as the 'Mikado'. Another fantastic entrance was conceived and Martin assumed his Elvis character terrifically. His voice is much lighter than the Kings but he worked the comedy to great effect. Even down to the fantastic 'Aha'.

A hard working chorus deserve a large mention. All well rehearsed and word perfect they packed up the principal performers perfectly.

The souvenir programme was nicely presented and informative but in my opinion was a little bland. Tongue in cheek commentaries and the Japanese rock chick logo were interesting features.

Once again thank you for inviting me to your production of 'Hot Mikado'. To use laymans terms it really was a stonking piece of theatre. Best wishes for your next production, the little known but interesting sounding Oh, Kay!.

Stephen MacVicar
NODA

PUBLIC TESTIMONIALS

Fantastic!! You could simply lift BROS's Hot Mikado up and place it very easily onto a West End stage and no one would ever know that it was an amateur group performing. So if you haven't seen it, go....."

"Last evening, together with friends, I came to see this production. I have been going to the theatre now for upwards of 50 years, supporting professional, semi-pro, and amateur alike. (I first saw The M in Bournemouth in 1966, and overnight became a G & S fan).

I am simply writing now to say that yesterday evening was one of the most spectacularly entertaining shows I have ever, but ever, seen!

You were absolutely wonderful (and the band!) and frankly, if I had a free evening tonight or tomorrow (alas I do not) I would fight for another ticket to get back to see the show all over again.

So.... I hope this letter arrives before you are "evicted" from The Playhouse; I also ask, please, that the contents are made known to all and sundry, with my thanks for a super evening's music, song and dance.

I wish BROS every success in future ventures - I hopefully shall continue to support you"

