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The Japan Of Pure Invention: Gilbert And Sullivan's The Mikado



Synopsis

Long before Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*, long before Barthes explicated his empire of signs, even before Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* presented its own distinctive version of Japan. Set in a fictional town called Titipu and populated by characters named Yum-Yum, Nanki-Poo, and Pooh-Bah, the opera has remained popular since its premiere in 1885. Tracing the history of *The Mikado*'s performances from Victorian times to the present, Josephine Lee reveals the continuing viability of the play's surprisingly complex racial dynamics as they have been adapted to different times and settings. Lee connects yellowface performance to blackface minstrelsy, showing how productions of the 1938 "39 *Swing Mikado* and *Hot Mikado*, among others, were used to promote African American racial uplift. She also looks at a host of contemporary productions and adaptations, including Mike Leigh's film *Topsy-Turvy* and performances of *The Mikado* in Japan, to reflect on anxieties about race as they are articulated through new visions of the town of Titipu. *The Mikado* creates racial fantasies, draws audience members into them, and deftly weaves them into cultural memory. For countless people who had never been to Japan, *The Mikado* served as the basis for imagining what "Japanese" was.

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Customer Reviews

Josephine Lee is associate professor of English and Asian American studies at the University of Minnesota. She is author of *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* and coeditor (with Imogene Lim and Yuko Matsukawa) of *Re/Collecting Early Asian America:*

Essays in Culture History.

An interesting book of its kind. While the author makes a number of thoughtful points, it nevertheless strikes me as yet another excursion into political correctness. This is "The Mikado", for heaven's sake, and not some racist, anti-Japanese 19th century rant. It was meant to be taken about as seriously as a Monty Python program - which reminds me, what does Ms.Lee think of Terry Jones and Michael Palin dressed up as fat, dowdy women? Is that supposed to be an anti-feminist statement on the part of English comedians? In all fairness, Ms.Lee, as an Asian lady herself, is probably sensitive to mocking ethnic stereotypes - but "The Mikado" is only a mockery of Victorian England using silly pseudo-Japanese characters in exotic costumes. This book takes one of my all-time favorites of English literature and kicks it in the backside, all the while wondering why everyone else loves it so much. To this I say, "get a life". One thing I do agree with is that Hollywood and Broadway have, until recently, made an unfortunate habit of casting white actors in major oriental roles. It never looked or felt correct, and mercifully we are moving away from such grotesqueries as Marlon Brando and Alec Guinness made up to look Japanese. Yet who doesn't love Yul Brynner as the King of Siam? And "The Mikado" is routinely performed by people of all ethnicities, often all mixed up in the same productions. Hello, this is a f-a-i-r-y-t-a-l-e. And why does she coin an odd word like "yellowface" to describe oriental characters played by white people? Doesn't it make more sense to just fall back on the old-fashioned terms, whiteface and blackface? Yellowface comes much closer to describing European opera being performed by Japanese singers. This does happen, but I don't know of anyone getting upset by it. In our world of hyper-sensitive political correctness, we don't need to be preached at over a 19th century Britcom, loved by millions of people around the world, including (as she notes) in Japan itself. Again, I say she needs to get a life.

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