

THE MIKADO

This 1966 film (director Stuart Burge) of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company performing *The Mikado* is commercially available on BHE (2011), VAI (2003) and possibly elsewhere.



COMMENT First, some informed comment from others:

(1) Marc Shepherd:

Productions of the old D'Oyly Carte were filmed on only three occasions. The first, a 1965 television production of *Patience*, unfortunately does not survive. The third, a 1973 video of *Pinafore*, caught the Company well after its sad decline had begun. The second - this *Mikado*, dating from 1966 - captured the Company just before performance values started seriously to erode. One cynic observed that this was the last great *Mikado* cast D'Oyly Carte assembled, an assessment it's hard to disagree with.

Unlike the 1965 *Patience* and 1973 *Pinafore*, this production was shot on film and actually enjoyed a brief theatrical release. However, G&S was simply not a mass-market prospect, even in 1966, and the film soon closed. The production has frequently been shown on television and is available on home video/DVD.

That so little of the D'Oyly Carte output was preserved on film is both sad and curious - sad, in that their unique stagings are now lost forever, except in people's memories; and curious, in that it might have seemed an ideal way for the Company to increase its visibility, particularly among younger audiences. However, throughout most of the 1960s and 1970s, D'Oyly Carte management stubbornly believed that exporting their product to the television market would only diminish the market for their stage performances.



[Valerie Masterson as Yum-Yum](#)

By the 1980s, attitudes within the Company began to change, and when a video producer named George Walker suggested that the Company's productions be captured on tape, D'Oyly Carte management agreed. Unfortunately, Walker subsequently decided that the Carte name was no longer marketable, and he went ahead with his own independent production team. The result was a set of largely mediocre video performances (the Brent Walker videos) while, of D'Oyly Carte, this 1966 *Mikado* is essentially all that we have.

Having waxed nostalgic about lost history, I am forced to admit that this production admits of only modified rapture. It is a faithful representation of the D'Oyly Carte *Mikado*, but the

performance is *extremely* flat. One senses that the cast, lacking a live audience to interact with, are merely going through the motions. I've never been able to watch this video straight through without struggling to stay awake.¹



Philip Potter (with Masterson) as Nanki-Poo

(2) Chris Webster:

My feelings towards this film are quite different. I think the “flatness” that comes across is not from the performances but from the lacklustre style of filming, which makes the whole thing *appear* to be flat, though it is not. I watched this (again) only last night and was once again delighted by it. The cast is first rate, and the performances are superb. Ignoring the sets etc, I really do think this is to be considered the best *Mikado* we have on video, or for that matter the best we are likely to see. I think it would be very hard to surpass the performances of John Reed, Peggy Ann Jones, and Donald Adams in particular.²

(3) Dan Aron:

I just read [Marc's] comments on this film and could not agree more. In fact, it was a snore in the theater back then, and I forgot how boring it was until I bought a video to show my kids how

"great" G&S could be. Silly me. They made it through about 40 minutes before politely bowing out. The irony is that the DCOC was still in excellent form in the late 60's. The film is a foreshadowing of the decline of the company and, with all the close-ups, points up how "precious" Reed could be. This tendency unfortunately seemed to increase as time went on.³



John Reed plays Ko-Ko with effortless ease

(4) Dan Sullivan:

[This] *Mikado* ... is not a true motion picture. It doesn't claim to be. What it claims to be is a faithful film reproduction of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company's stage production of the Gilbert and Sullivan classic. It isn't that either.

True, the producers have set up their color cameras in front of D'Oyly Carte stalwarts like Donald Adams (*The Mikado*), Philip Potter (*Nanki-Poo*), John Reed (*Ko-Ko*), Kenneth Sandford (*Pooh-Bah*), Christene Palmer (*Katisha*) and Valerie Masterson (*Yum-Yum*) and let them go through their routines pretty much as they would on stage. And a semblance of cinema technique – close-ups, reaction shots, panning, etc – is used to give the viewer the variety of focus that his eyes would automatically supply at a live performance. But this technique is so misapplied to the kind of

performance given here that you almost wish the producers had simply planted a camera in the center of Row G and turned it on the stage. Monotonous as this would have been, it would at least have preserved a certain sense of theatrical illusion, without which a work as artificial as *The Mikado* can look painfully fake.



Donald Adams' Mikado is broad and blustering

As it is, the viewer gets the odd sensation that he is prompting a performance, not attending one. The camera brings us close enough to worry about the loose thread dangling from the sleeve of Nanki-Poo's kimono, close enough to trace every painted line on The Mikado's pudgy face – far too close for comfort. And not only do the makeup, the costumes and the set look three times as stagy in this *Mikado* as they would on the stage. So does a lot of the acting. Mr. Sandford's world-weary Pooh-Bah is nicely gauged for the cameras: bigger-than-life but not incredibly so. The rest of the cast too often fall into gestures and expressions that look overblown without the reduction in scale that distance provides in the theater.

Occasionally, a scene comes off well enough to suggest what this *Mikado* could have been had its producers considered the problems involved in screen translation more carefully. In "Here's a how-de-do," for instance, there is a delightful shot of Mr. Reed

doing his little jig behind Mr. Potter and Miss Masterson as they expound on the confused state of things. It's theatrical, it's cinematic, it works. But it doesn't happen very often. Knowing how fine this cast can be in its proper medium, one regrets the impression this *Mikado* will make on those not fortunate enough to have watched the company in the flesh. The cameras have captured everything about the company's acting except its magic.⁴



[Christene Palmer's imperious Katisha](#)

Having read all of the above before acquiring this DVD meant that my expectations, on coming to slot it in, were not high. I anticipated a positive and perhaps illuminating historical experience, at least. Additionally, having previously so delighted in Valerie Masterson's singing on CD, I was undeniably curious to see how she would come across (presumably in her prime) on film. But I need not have worried, for what a delightfully rewarding two hours I spent with this enchanting *Mikado*, which, start to finish, is a treat. It's perfectly true that, without a live audience, something is lost. Imagine watching the Cup Final played in a deserted Wembley Stadium. No matter how good the two teams, the absence of atmosphere generated by a partisan crowd is bound to diminish the sense of occasion. So, yes, the film serves as a useful reminder of the important contribution that a responsive audience makes to the overall success of a stage performance and if, like Marc Shepherd and Dan Aron above, this essential difference makes *all* the difference and leaves you cold,

then so be it. But, miss this film and you'll miss fine performances from Reed (in particular - what a contrast to Eric Idle's one-trick ENO turn), also Potter, Palmer and the delectable Valerie Masterson. As Mr Sullivan notes above, some of the playing - Donald Adams the worst offender - is indeed overly broad. And the entire production has a certain stagy archness redolent of yesteryear. But that's only because, courtesy of this film, that's where we are, back in the days when the D'Oyly Carte name meant so much more than, sadly, mere footnote of history, it does now.



[Kenneth Sandford \(Pooh-Bah\) with Reed](#)

Some lucky enough to have seen these players in action in the flesh may find this digital record eclipsed by their memories. But, as for the rest of us, I can only say this: if you deny yourself this precious opportunity to peek back through the veils of time, the loss will be yours. DVD sound quality is short of great but good enough. Picture quality (see screenshots) is clean throughout, with the exception of the last seven or eight minutes, when some spangling (evident but innocuous) occurs.

RUNNING TIME 119 minutes

SUBTITLES None, though almost every word comes through clearly enough such that their absence is not a concern.

RATING Warmly recommended. 17.



Valerie Masterson with Thomas Round at the 2011 Buxton G&S Festival⁵

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Sources

¹ The G&S Discography at www.gasdisc@oakapplepress.com

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Dan Sullivan, *New York Times*, 15 March 1967: *An Awkward Movie Mikado: Copy of Staged Classic Doesn't Work Out*

⁵ www.savoyoperas.co.uk

with thanks to all