COMMENT First, at some length, Topsy-Turvy writer / director Mike Leigh on W S Gilbert:

The inscription on Gilbert's memorial on the Thames Embankment in London reads: His Foe was Folly, and his Weapon Wit. This is too coy. Gilbert saw the world as a chaotic place, in which our lives are brutal accidents of birth, fate and human blunder, a jungle of confusion and delusion, where we all aspire to be other than who we are, and where nobody is really who or what they seem to be.

Power. Status. Rank. Duty. Hypocrisy and affectation. Youth and old age. Gilbert's obsessions inform all these operas, his greatest being the arbitrary nature of society's absurd rules and regulations. He was a failed barrister in his youth and a lay magistrate in his old age. He loved the English legal world, not least for its theatricality, and he himself was compulsively litigious. But, for all his appearance as the very model of conservative
respectability, his merciless lampooning of the heartless constraints of laws and etiquette reveal him, underneath it all, to have been a genuine free spirit and a true anarchist. Doubtless he would have denied these descriptions, but his subversive tendencies are beyond dispute, and he could hardly have been called a conformist.

The two principal elements of all the Savoy Operas are law and identity. Magic crops up in three of them, but material change caused by supernatural intervention is only a variation on the manipulation of laws and rules. There are love stories galore, but for the most part these do not drive the plot; taken out of context, they are sentimental and dull. As such, they are seldom distinguishable from the common fodder of ordinary light musical theatre, or indeed of Victorian melodrama.

If a key to understanding the operas is to see Gilbert as an anarchist, it may also be useful to approach them as the work of a proto-surrealist. With great fluidity and freedom, he continually challenges our natural expectations. First, within the framework of the story, he makes bizarre things happen, and turns the world on its head. Thus the Learned Judge marries the Plaintiff, the soldiers metamorphose into aesthetes, and so on, and nearly every opera is resolved by a deft moving of the goalposts.

But concurrently, Gilbert plays with different levels of reality, using para-theatrical conventions - that is, making characters refer implicitly to the fact that they are on a stage in a play, outside the framework of the audience's willing suspension of disbelief.

Am I alone / And unobserved? I am! / Then let me own / I'm an aesthetic sham!
Read the whole of this confession by Bunthorne in Patience. Gilbert's joke, of course, is that Bunthorne is not unobserved - the audience is watching him. And he can only be talking to the audience. He is not discovering something new about himself before our very eyes, unlike the soliloquies of Hamlet or Macbeth, or even Malvolio, who must be played as real people talking to themselves, with total psychological truth. When Shakespeare needs to talk to the audience as such, he invents a non-character, such as the Chorus in Henry V.

The most extreme exercise in surrealism in this series is The Mikado, a puppet show cheerfully devoid of any sense of the real world as we know it. The far-fetched nature of its abstraction - it has nothing to do with Japan - and the craziness of its logic surely account for its being the most durable and popular of the operas. It abounds with para-theatrical devices:

    Ko-Ko: Congratulate me, gentlemen, I've found a volunteer!

    Chorus: The Japanese equivalent for Hear, Hear, Hear!

The Mikado himself observes: "It's an unjust world, and virtue is triumphant only in theatrical performances."

"Comic operas" Gilbert and Sullivan called these shows. They are certainly not mere "light" operas, which are soft-centred romantic offerings; nor are they "operettas", which are frilly, frothy affairs, devoid of any shade of the dark side. It is their dark side, their hard edge, that so distinguishes the Savoy Operas. Perhaps they
may more usefully be described as grotesque operas. Or are they not absurd operas? Gilbert undoubtedly anticipated the Theatre of the Absurd, as did Alfred Jarry, whose Ubu Roi outraged Paris audiences in 1896. Ionesco's Rhinoceros is surely a magic-lozenge play, if a mournfully unfunny one, and it is no surprise that Samuel Beckett was a confirmed Gilbert & Sullivan aficionado.

The operas have often been misunderstood. They are referred to as satires, which they are not. There may be satiric elements in Iolanthe or Utopia Limited, but Gilbert's true intention is never to draw specific parallels. He merely holds up his mirror to the world and reflects on its madness. Similarly misunderstood is his much-criticised attitude to elderly women. He is not attacking them; he is doing no more than lament the way life is. We all grow old, and the plain and the ugly have a harder time than the beautiful.

If these shows have fallen into disrepute over the years, it is because directors have failed to understand their raw edge. This results in boring, bland, sentimental, self-conscious, often gratuitously camp productions, which entirely miss the point. What, then, is "Gilbertian"? The word has been in the English language for over a century, and to understand it we need to analyse the stylistic alchemy of Gilbert's art as a dramatist. His genius is to fuse opposites with an imperceptible sleight of hand, to blend the surreal with the real, and the caricature with the natural. In other words, to tell a perfectly outrageous story in a completely deadpan way. Indeed, to disguise a subversive anarchist bomb as bourgeois respectability.
That Gilbert was a good director is not in doubt. He was able to extract from his actors natural, clear performances, which served the Gilbertian requirements of outrageousness delivered straight.\footnote{1}

The Mikado was premiered in London on 14 March 1885, but fast-forward a century from Gilbert's ideal of "outrageousness delivered straight" and we find Jonathan Miller (in a case, perhaps, of familiarity breeding contempt?) producing a Mikado for English National Opera going "flat out for playing it as an English panto musical."\footnote{2} Writing online in 2006, Kerry Birmingham said of The Mikado:

\textbf{(It has) an understandable appeal: it's about as light and frothy a period piece about beheading as you're likely to find (with songs, no less). As such, its setting - an ancient Japan under the heel of The Mikado (half emperor, half god) - was never as important as its farcical elements and absurd plot contrivances, like a Victorian Benny Hill Show ...}\footnote{3}

\begin{figure}
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Robert Eddie (The Mikado) \hspace{1cm} Heather Begg (Katisha)}
\end{figure}

Panto, Benny Hill ... These terms tap directly into the surreal / farcical elements hard-wired into Gilbert's libretti, yet to turn away from his "outrageousness delivered straight" approach is surely to risk throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Miller's 1986 ENO Mikado succeeds (in so far as it does at all) despite rather than because of his makeover, and this 1987 Opera Australia production, too, is not afraid to celebrate full-throttle and to hell with the dark side. It's a fast, cheerful, knockabout pageant of fun, exuberant, inventive, lavishly costumed (see screenshots), occasionally spectacular and relentlessly energetic - but also, after Ko-Ko's entrance especially, as much a tongue-in-cheek, populist derivative of G&S as the real thing, verging at times on parody. Okay, so characters appear out of boxes and vases and disappear into cupboards - but we're in fantasy land, aren't we, so why not? Whether you'll like this or not will probably depend ultimately on what exactly it is you're
looking for - a more or less authentic, traditional G&S encounter, or mere
"entertainment". If the latter, then Opera Australia can, in my experience (see
also their Pinafore, Pirates, Patience and Gondoliers reviews), be relied upon to
deliver in spades. If, however, you prefer a more reverent, less revisionist take
on G&S, then this production, superficially seductive as may be, might not be
for you.

RUNNING TIME 150 minutes

SUBTITLES Yes

RATING A handsome and imaginative production performed by a uniformly
strong cast (though this Ko-Ko will not suit all tastes) makes for a fast-flying,
smile-inducing two and a half hours. 18. Recommended.

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Sources

1 Mike Leigh, The Guardian, 4 November 2006 - True Anarchists
2 A Source of Innocent Merriment, A&E Home Video, 2005 (see review of
Miller's 1987 ENO Mikado)
3 Kerry Birmingham, 18 April 2006, at www.dvdverdict.com

with thanks to all