

# The Asian Reporter

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Please send all correspondence to: The Asian Reporter  
922 N Killingsworth Street, Suite 2D, Portland, OR 97217  
Phone: (503) 283-4440, Fax: (503) 283-4445

News Department e-mail: news@asianreporter.com  
Advertising Department e-mail: ads@asianreporter.com  
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Website: www.asianreporter.com

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Publisher **Jaime Lim**  
Contributing Editors

**Ronault L.S. Catalani (Polo), Jeff Wenger**  
Correspondents

**Ian Blazina, Josephine Bridges, Pamela Ellgen, Maileen Hamto, Edward J. Han, A.P. Kryza, Marie Lo, Simeon Mamaril, Julie Stegeman, Toni Tabora-Roberts, Allison Voigts**  
Illustrator **Jonathan Hill**  
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**MY TURN**

■ **Dmae Roberts**



## The trouble with *The Mikado*

A few weeks ago, the Light Opera of Portland (LOoP) community opera group announced on Facebook that it is producing *The Mikado* in September. This Gilbert and Sullivan operetta has been one of the most extreme examples of Asian-American cultural appropriation and offensive stereotyping since it was first performed in 1885. The creators needed another big hit and they took advantage of the orientalism fad sweeping Europe at the time, when Gilbert attended an exhibition of Japanese art.

Using a fictional Japanese setting with horrific made-up names for characters (except for the actual Japanese word *Mikado*, which is a former title of emperors in Japan), the operetta was performed by white singers in makeup to look like a depiction of Asians — otherwise known as yellowface.

Purists who love this operetta will tell you that Gilbert and Sullivan only made use of the Japanese culture and setting as a “backdrop” and that it was really a satire of British society and government. That tired argument does little to remove the sting of the first popular use of yellowface which led years later to *Madame Butterfly* and *Miss Saigon* as well as an abundance of stereotypes found in Charlie Chan movies, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* with Mickey Rooney, and more.

For Asian Americans, and in particular Asian-American performers, there is a collective cringing whenever another production of *The Mikado* oozes into a community like a wound that just won’t heal. In some productions, such as the one by Seattle’s Gilbert and Sullivan Society in 2014, *The Mikado* — performed by white actors in yellowface and Japanese costumes — led to public protests. Other theaters reinvented the operetta, such as Theater Mu in Minneapolis setting it in Britain with an Asian-American cast playing Brits, and The Vortex in Austin, Texas, which was set in an incarceration camp with Asian Americans in a not-too-distant future.

For many who work as performing artists, we just wish the play would go away, like minstrel shows of old. But many opera aficionados and theatre people often just don’t understand why it’s a big deal to Asian Americans. It gets even more complicated when opera lovers say the “emperor of Japan loved it” or “Japanese in Japan don’t think it’s offensive.” That argument shows little respect for Japanese Americans who have endured a history of racism, exclusion laws, and internment camps. And it’s often up to Asian-American performing artists to once again have a difficult conversation with an artistic company about why this particular operetta

with its sullied past still stings us so.

As director and actor Lava Alapai said in a Facebook post, “As a Japanese person I am appalled that people are still doing this show anymore ...” And Jenna Yokoyama, a Japanese-American classically trained singer, made several scholarly comments on the LOoP Facebook page stating that there is a “problematic history of ‘Asian sounds’ in western classical music and how it still affects Asian Americans negatively today.”

When I, Alapai, and Yokoyama started asking LOoP specifically about their fall production of *The Mikado*, we were initially met with resistance and impatience. The musical repertory company said they modelled it after a 2016 production by San Francisco company Lamplighters Music Theatre, which was set in Milan with white actors.

Lamplighters held a town hall meeting and hired Asian-American theatre consultants to guide them through the process and show respect while acknowledging *The Mikado’s* racist past.

LOoP apparently consulted only with Lamplighters and did not follow its efforts to connect with the local Japanese-American community. They spoke only with Asian-American performers in their company — who are not Japanese American. But they did make an effort to change the setting from Japan to an “exotic” planet. The website, however, still used Japanese words, including the title, and gibberish that Gilbert and Sullivan used to mimic the Japanese language.

After trading several e-mails with David Smith, the president and producer of LOoP, which is a group of volunteer performers and producers in the community, he and I spoke on the phone for 75 minutes. Smith said the company took great pains not to be offensive and tried to erase much of the stereotyping. He was “mystified” that the company should talk with members of the Asian-American community or that it would still be a problem with the changes they made.

I recapped the history of yellowface and whitewashing (white actors playing Asian roles). I called attention to Oregon’s history of racist exclusion laws and explained how it was different than the discrimination Italian Americans faced at the turn of the century, which he brought up a couple times. I stressed the need for a cultural consultant to work with the company, which is something I believe every performing arts company in Portland should employ when producing cultural works. It took a bit of effort for Smith to understand that it would be respectful for LOoP to reach out to

*Continued on page 7*