



## Social Justice Mikado

Walter Olson

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*Chorus: Behold the Social Justice Warrior!*

*A personage of noble rank and title*

*A humor-free yet potent officer.*

*Whose functions are particularly vital!*

*Defer, defer to the Social Justice Warrior!*

News item: New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players has scrapped a production of *The Mikado* after criticism of its exaggerated depictions of Japanese characters and its use of, to quote *Playbill*, “a company of mostly Caucasian actors” to enact the operetta set in Japan. Actors’ Equity, the stage performers’ union, issued a statement to “commend” the cancellation: “We believe that the use of yellowface and blackface is offensive and that being ‘historically correct’ is not a defense for co-opting a culture or perpetuating stereotypes. Equity plans to be in the forefront as these issues are discussed and to move our industry forward.”

If it surprises you that “mostly Caucasian actors” are no longer deemed suitable to perform an operetta premiered in London in 1885 that lampooned the politics of that time and place, well, to quote the Chorus, You don’t understand these things / It is simply Court etiquette. The court etiquette in question is that of cultural appropriation, in which ideas about casting and performance that once worked to expand creative freedom (why not a black or female Hamlet?) get turned around to constrict it (how dare a white actor play Othello!).

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I could say *The Mikado* is the greatest and most beloved of all operatic works in English, and that it would be a shame to lose it. You could retort that like the rest of Gilbert and Sullivan, it mingles its clever lyrics, glorious tunes, and still-sharp satire with outdated viewpoints and occasional hurtful attitudes. Neither of us would be wrong, exactly:

Pish-Tush (rewritten): And I am right,  
and you are right; politically, we're  
quite correct.

Here's a how-de-do, though: According to a review published by the United Kingdom's Japan Society, *The Mikado* now seems to be received with amused tolerance in Japan, where a translation was a "runaway success" in 2001. Back at its time of publication it caused considerable friction, though often for reasons, such as perceived lack of proper respect toward the emperor, somewhat remote from those that vex Actors' Equity today.

But let's face it: If *The Mikado* is to survive at all, the whole thing will have to be rewritten, and to do that we need to call in the most sensitive and politically attuned among us, the Social Justice Warriors trained at American universities. They've got a little list:

Three Little Maids from school are we,  
Privilege-checked as we can be,  
Filled to the brim with outrage-ee,  
Three Little Maids from school!

Victorian audiences were fascinated by the delicacy of Japanese cultural taboos governing relations between the sexes, which means *The Mikado*'s severe ban on romantic overtures can carry forward into the age of Title IX with relatively slight alteration:

So he decreed, in words succinct,  
That all who flirted, leered, or winked,  
Without consent-form double-inked,  
Should forthwith be beheaded...

After I put out a call for lyrics online (#SJWMikado on Twitter), correspondent Corey Bean rewrote the emperor's great comic riff on retributive justice thus:

My object all sublime

I shall erase the line—

Between micro-

aggressions and crime—

Between mere offense and crime;

The Mikado proceeds to sing of innocent merriment, but that part will have to go; no such thing nowadays.

In our new callout culture, a key player is the sad or angry informant who calls out an offender. The sorrowful little bird who could only repeat one accusatory phrase again and again reminded me, of course, of Twitter:

On a branch of my tweet-stream a tweeter sighed, "I'm

Offended, offended, offended!"

And I said to him, "why are you all of the time

Offended, offended, offended"?

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