

MUCH ADO ABOUT "THE MIKADO"

Banned By Both Sides

(From a talk broadcast from 2YA on Sunday, December 28)



PUBLIC opinion in Australia objects to the playing of the famous Gilbert and Sullivan opera, *The Mikado*, so the piece will not be revived there. Thus the opera breaks a record of being banned by both sides. Thirty-four years ago it was banned from the stage in England at the wish of the British Government because it was thought that the Japanese, who were then our allies, would be offended by it. Now its performance has been stopped in Australia because we are at war with Japan.

About the time Gilbert was musing over his plot for *The Mikado* a company of Japanese had arrived in England and set up a little village of their own in Knightsbridge. By their strange arts and devices and manner of life, those chosen representatives of a remote race soon attracted all London. They did more—two of their principals agreed to teach the ladies and gentlemen of the Savoy how to walk and dance, how to sit down, and how to express their every emotion by the evolutions of the fan. They were flattered when they learnt that they had inspired England's most distinguished librettist with the basis of an opera.

This was in 1885. *The Mikado* was first performed on March 14 of that year, and it ran for two years. The Japanese Ambassador tried to have it suppressed on the ground that it ridiculed the Emperor of Japan, whom the Japanese regard as divine, but the run went on.

Question In The Commons

Then in 1907 Mrs. D'Oyly Carte began making plans to revive *The Mikado*. To her amazement, when preparations had been completed she received a notice from the Lord Chamber-

lain prohibiting the performance. The reason given when the question was raised in the House of Commons early in May, 1907, was that *The Mikado* might give offence to the Japanese Prince Fushimi, who was shortly expected to visit England. This explanation raised indignation, mingled with sarcasm. The press was scathing but one of the touring companies continued to play the opera in spite of all the hubbub.

This happened in Sheffield, where the opera was played twice in the same week. The manager of the Lyceum Theatre in the steel city said he knew nothing of the Lord Chamberlain's ban. He had read a great deal in the papers about the play being prohibited, but not a word had reached him officially. Mrs. D'Oyly Carte's manager said he had heard nothing from London on the subject and said that the piece was booked to run for some time and until he received definite and official information that the Lord Chamberlain had taken action he would carry on as usual. But evidently Yorkshire was in for it, because a new element was introduced into this storm in a tea cup, as it proved to be, when the Lord Chamberlain prohibited a performance of *The Mikado* by the Middlesbrough Amateur Operatic Society "owing to buffoonery in certain parts."

Gilbert Enters The Fight

This brought Gilbert into the fight in person. Writing to the *Daily Telegraph* he said that *The Mikado* had been leased to Mrs. D'Oyly Carte, and she was under contract to him not to permit any deviation whatever from the dialogue and "business" as settled by him on the occasion of its original production at the Savoy Theatre. "If," concluded W. S. Gilbert, "any 'buffoonery'

has crept into the piece during its long career in the provinces (which I have no reason to suppose to be the case) I submit that the Lord Chamberlain's obvious course would have been to suppress such buffoonery, instead of slaughtering the play outright, and by so doing deprive the public of a very popular entertainment, and the proprietors (the representatives of the late Sir Arthur Sullivan, and myself) of a property valued at £10,000."

Mr. K. Sugimura, the special correspondent of a leading Japanese newspaper, who was in London in connection with Prince Fushimi's visit went to Sheffield specially to see the opera. He saw nothing whatsoever to complain of in the piece and only found instead bright music, much fun, and no insults.

This did not deter the Lord Chamberlain. "Acting on his own responsibility" he withdrew the licence of the Sheffield theatre. However, the "show went on." After much friction, all came right in the end, the ban was lifted, and in April of the following year *The Mikado* appeared in all its glory. On the first night of the revival a large contingent of visitors from Japan went to see the opera about which there had been so much discussion. There were no serious after-effects.

The whole story is to be found in the files of *The Era*, where it was told with great gusto, intimate knowledge, and

sympathy by the brilliant Irish journalist S. J. Adair Fitzgerald. The joke of the whole affair was that the *Mikado* of the opera bore no resemblance to the Emperor of Japan. The scene of *The Mikado* is Japan. The dresses are Japanese, and the deportment of the characters is modelled on Japanese custom. But that is all that is Japanese in the opera. The fun is English. It is English institutions, habits and customs that Gilbert fires at with such success.

The Mikado is really King Gama in a kimono. He has King Gama's sadistic delight in grumbling, his self-same passion for social betterment. His song about making the punishment fit the crime is full of English references—the amateur tenor, the idiot who scribbles on window panes, the billiards sharp, the classical Monday pops. Koko's little list includes the nigger serenader, the judicial humorist, and the autograph-hunter. Pooh Bah's many officers are English. In no point does the story make any real contact with the life of Japan. It is a tale of fairyland, where English characters walk about in Japanese costumes just as the Athenian rustics of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are really Warwickshire types, and the wood in which the characters are lost is an English wood.

The war may put *The Mikado* off the stage, but it won't banish its melodies and humours and household words from our minds and lips.

"MADE IN NEW ZEALAND"

CBS Has Encouraged Local Talent

FROM the point of view of encouragement given to New Zealand talent, 1941 will go down as the biggest and busiest year in the history of the Commercial Broadcasting Service, and there is a prospect that 1942 will be even busier. Two events have contributed to this: first, the launching of the production department at the CBS head office in Wellington, and second, the opening of the new 12B studios with their facilities for producing flesh and blood shows.

The way was paved for the starting of the production department by a feature which was heard over the ZB station in 1940—*The Enchanted Orchard*. It was written and produced by Bryan O'Brien, and its success demonstrated to the CBS the possibilities which lay in features produced in the CBS studios with local talent.

The first child of the new department was *Station TOT*, and this was followed by *Radio Rotogravure*, *Aunt Jennie's Real Life Stories*, and many other productions. An important aspect of the department's work is the two educational sessions which it is sponsoring, the first a session of child psychology sponsored by the New Educational Fellowship and now heard from all the ZB stations every Sunday morning, and the second another Sunday feature entitled *Free Education*. This, which has just been released, comprises a series of four dramatisations giving publicity to the wide facilities for free education in New Zealand.



BRYAN O'BRIEN

The search for capable radio players, who are not as easily found as might be imagined, is going on all the time, and during the past year Bryan O'Brien, who produces for the CBS, has given auditions to some hundreds of people. A small percentage of these have made good, and one or two have proved "finds." This new year, Mr. O'Brien states, will see increasing use made of New Zealand written scripts.

Since Station 12B opened in October of last year, the Radio Theatre has worked overtime rehearsing and producing flesh and blood shows, both musical and dramatic. Evidence of the gratitude of Auckland musicians for the help given them by 12B was the baton recently presented by Theo. Walters and the 12B Orchestra to C. G. Scrimgeour, the CBS Controller.