The Mikado

Delightful and colorful Cabrillo production turns Gilbert & Sullivan upside down

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There is a play running at Cabrillo College currently — a musical, actually. It is about politics and unfair laws and unjust punishments. People live in fear of being put on a list. The young rebel at the upper 1 percent and economic disparity. “American Idiot,” “Jersey Girls,” telephone solicitors, Viagra and Congress are disparaged.

It is “The Mikado,” Kathryn Adkins updated re-imagining of Gilbert and Sullivan’s “The Mikado,” with an Emperor instead of an Emperor, and three liberated Little Maids. Adkins has set out to turn this production upside-down, to the extent that it isn’t even set in Japan, it’s set in Napaj. Which rhymes with “vase.”

From the imaginative opening announcements to the curtain calls, I was enthralled with this production. Having worked on two others, I know the material quite well, but I kept having those “wait, what?” moments. Adkins manages to sneak in current references, make them rhyme and stay true to the patter of G&S.

What at first took to be a “spare, multi-level set” became, as the lights came up, another example of the genius of Skip Epperson. Musical director Don Adkins has incorporated elements of the set as musical instruments. Maria Crush’s costumes are perfection, as usual, from the schoolgirl uniform to the stunning Mikado’s robes, and the choreography, by Ms. Adkins and the actors, is original and fresh.

This is technically (pun intended) a student production, as it is built, lighted and performed by students in three theater arts classes. The cast also includes outstanding luminaries of Santa Cruz’s acting community, including Liz Hodgson Anderson as the wacky Empress, David Jackson in what I think is the best role he’s ever done, as the indecisive, couldn’t-hurt-a-flea Lord High Executioner Ko-ko, Mike Stark, familiar to Cabrillo Stage-goers as the multi-titled Poo-Bah, and Mindy Pedlar, last seen as the dulcet Glinda in “Wizard of Oz,” as the scheming and predatory Katisha.

Carl Dawson brings a legit tenor voice to the love-besotted Nanki-Poo, Tyler Perez is an officious Pish-Tush. Suzanne Wood is yummy as Yum Yum, the love interest. Teagan Trautwein milks the sidekick role of Pitti Sing delightfully, and Janie Durenbery is an adorably nerdy Poo-Bo.

Be sure to put this one on your list.