

Topsy-Turvy

Written by Mike Leigh

Sequence 1

London, January 5th, 1884.

Sullivan is sick in bed, but insists on attending the opening night of his opera *Princess Ida*, which he conducts, to great acclaim. Backstage sits a taciturn Gilbert. Sullivan collapses while leaving the Savoy Theatre.

The following day, Gilbert reads a rave review of the show in a newspaper, but furiously insists that it's full of backhanded compliments.

Sullivan, in bed, meets with his producer Richard D'Oyly Carte, who tells him of all their successes. "New York can't wait for *Ida*!" says Helen, D'Oyly Carte's assistant. Sullivan explains that he has made some resolutions, including spending time on the continent and "to write no more operas for the Savoy... I have to write a grand opera. People expect it of me. I must not disappoint them. I can't waste any more time on these trivial soufflés. Do you know I haven't written a symphony in over twenty years?"

Sullivan, now in France, is enjoying himself while Gilbert broods at home, despondent and uninspired. Actor Richard Temple, one of the stars of *Princess Ida*, which is playing to small audiences because of insufferable heat, is concerned. Gilbert, he says, has run out of ideas. "I don't wish to be the prophet of doom, but one cannot help but have the distinct feeling that the Sword of Damocles hovers ominously over the Savoy Theatre.

D'Oyly Carte frets over the box-office receipts. He visits Sullivan in France and suggests that he let Gilbert know he doesn't want to write any more operas for the Savoy. Back in London, Sullivan does just this. Nonetheless, Gilbert tells Sullivan the plot of the new libretto he has written. Sullivan is unimpressed.

D'Oyly Carte and Gilbert meet. D'Oyly Carte has decided to close *Princess Ida* and revive *The Sorcerer*, an old Gilbert & Sullivan opera. Sullivan, meanwhile, is struggling to write his grand opera.

Gilbert, Sullivan, D'Oyly Carte and Helen meet. Helen explains that the two men are contractually obliged to supply a new work on request. Sullivan lets it be known that he cannot set Gilbert's new libretto to music, that the story is too much like previous work. Gilbert refuses to write another libretto.

Gilbert and his wife visit an exhibition in town, where they encounter all things Japanese: food, culture, theatre. Gilbert purchases a Japanese sword, which he places above a doorframe in his home. Later, the sword falls to the floor. Upon picking it up, Gilbert is struck with an idea.

Sequence 2

Gilbert reads Sullivan his new libretto: *The Mikado*. Sullivan is immediately enthusiastic.

D'Oyly Carte meetings with various actors from the Savoy Theatre, including George Grossmith, who asks for a salary rise, and Leonora Braham, about whom D'Oyly Carte is concerned because of her drinking.

Rehearsals, with Sullivan at the piano. Later, the actor Durward Lely insists that his costume, which he considers too short, is "obscene." Later rehearsals, with Gilbert, choreographer John D'Auban, and three Japanese women, and later still Gilbert working with three actors, including Grossmith. Sullivan rehearses with the orchestra. Finally, Gilbert and Sullivan give the cast notes. Gilbert cuts a song featuring Temple, who is distressed. The actors, in their dressing room, decide they should approach Gilbert on Temple's behalf and ask that the song be reinstated. Gilbert relents.

Sequence 3

Opening night. Gilbert and Sullivan wish everyone good luck. Grossmith is otherwise disposed.

The show is a great success.

At home, Gilbert sits with his wife, his usual despondent self. "I don't know how to take praise," he says. "It makes my eyes red." Mrs. Gilbert has suggestions for Gilbert's next libretto.

Sullivan with his mistress, who announces that she is pregnant.

Leonora in her dressing room. On stage, she sings "The Sun Whose Rays Are All Ablaze."