

Topsy-Turvy – A right way up portrayal of Victorian England's most accomplished musical double-act

Critically acclaimed director Mike Leigh presents a charming and unique account of the unstable musical partnership between the librettist William Schwenck Gilbert (Jim Broadbent) and the composer Arthur Sullivan (Alan Corduner), who collaborated to create fourteen comical Savoy operas during the Victoria era. This two-and-a-half-hour long biopic focuses on the genesis of *The Mikado* which significantly became a saving grace for the duo who were on the verge of a musical breakup.

As a straight musical drama, the film provides factual detail and dramatic entertainment that one would expect from a Hollywood composer film, but lacks any strong romantic or melodramatic concepts typically found in this genre. Resultantly, this cinematic depiction of Gilbert and Sullivan sits along the fine line between highly informative and lengthy; if it were not for the balance between dialogue and music, concentration may have been difficult to sustain. Undoubtedly, the music is the heart and soul of the film. However, as a soundtrack, the constant pleasantness of Sullivan's songs can only match a limited range of moods within the story. Nevertheless, the varied use of their music pays homage to the operas with many extended scenes of live performances. This became the filmmakers' golden opportunity to obtain well-deserved Academy awards for best costume design and makeup.

Topsy-Turvy's innovative use of scenes alternating between the two protagonists help viewers perceive a disparity between Grumpy Gilbert and Sweet Sullivan's personalities and their separate lives. The film opens with a rather ill Sullivan insisting on conducting a production of *Princess Ida*. The following morning, Gilbert's short temper is presented upon reading a negative review about the opera, contrasting to the bedridden Sullivan's declarations of his ambitions at composing a serious opera and presenting different approaches to their own talents. The double-act are seldom viewed in conversation with one another and their first on-screen encounter does not occur until half an hour into the film. Although they appear to admire each other, professional tension slowly builds up and results in an abandonment of a new collaboration, an agreement they come to in a humorously polite and passive aggressive Victorian manner.

Events take a turn for the better when Gilbert receives a dose of inspiration to write a Libretto called *The Mikado* after being dragged along to a Japanese exhibition by his estranged wife Lucy (Lesley Manville). His Japanese impression is amongst the funnier moments of the film in the manner of Victorian stereotypes, yet it is a mere example of the *Topsy-Turvy*'s attempts at depicting an English person's perspective on Japanese culture. Elongated scenes of the fussy actors complaining about the costumes in *The Mikado* present an amusing differentiation between the ways of the Victorians and foreign cultures.

The opera's production as a focal point enables more attention on the protagonists' professional lives than their personal ones. Gilbert's intimate issues unfold slightly with insight into his family matters through a visit from his senile father and his troubled marriage is hinted throughout the film. Without spoiling the ending, the film concludes in a bittersweet manner for the two protagonists and their partners. Nonetheless the limitedness of Gilbert and Sullivan's personal affairs only makes viewers yearn for more drama.

To enable audiences to get a clearer idea of the opera's process, the film also fixates on the lives of the people involved in the production of *Mikado* with aid from an impressive calibre of British actors. Aside from Broadbent and Curdoner's riveting performances, Timothy Spall presents a gripping and entertaining portrayal of the opera singer Richard Temple. Meanwhile, Gilbert and Sullivan's principal soprano Leonora Braham is convincingly personated by Shirley Henderson as a struggling alcoholic and a commendable singer. The assortment of characters also denotes how the operas were received by various members of the public. Critics ranging from the stereotypically melodramatic opera singers to Gilbert's dentist all throw in their opinions and draw comparisons between the Savoy operas.

The comedic characteristics of the film are embedded in the witty and eloquent screenplay and bring out the mannerisms of the Victorians. This is not just an ode to Victorian music but also to Victorian culture, formed through showcasing overpolite conversations, naivety about modern technology, and prudishness, which particularly differs to a stereotypical nude scene set in France.

To excuse the occasional prolonging of scenes, one must commend the accomplished combination of fine acting, polished scriptwriting and intriguing insight into the world of Victorian opera presented in *Topsy-Turvy*. Its light-heartedness correlates to the overarching moods of Gilbert and Sullivan's operas and would please any fan of the duo. The film is a must see for any lover of joyful and vivacious theatre and will guarantee admiration for both Gilbert's eccentric writing and Sullivan's catchy and playful melodies.