

Topsy-Turvy



Director/ Writer: Mike Leigh
Editor: Robin Sales:
Cast: Jim Broadbent, Allan Corduner, Lesley Manville, Ron Cook, Shirley Henderson, Wendy Nottingham
Year: 1999
Rated R
Parental Rating: Cautionary; some scenes objectionable
Country Of Origin: U.K.
Running Time: 161
Format: Color
Genre(s): Drama; Musical
Production Co(s): Film Four; Thin Man Films
Released By: USA Films/October Films

Director Mike Leigh is best known for gritty films about contemporary British life, and for letting their scripts emerge from collaborative improvisations with his actors. It's hard to imagine what drew him to the story of W.S. Gilbert (Jim Broadbent) and Arthur Sullivan (Allan Corduner) — England's masters of light opera — and the creation of *The Mikado*. But how marvelous that he was; this slice of ruthlessly genteel Victorian life is charming, witty and offers its ensemble cast a wealth of dramatic opportunities. *The Mikado*, considered one of Gilbert and Sullivan's best works, was their ninth collaboration. Although their names are inevitably linked, they were profoundly unlike; the robust Gilbert was a blustering family man, English to the core, while Sullivan was often ill, inclined to hedonism and widely admired for his charm and continental sophistication. In the wake of the relative failure of their previous collaboration, *Princess Ida*, the two men clash over their next project for theatrical impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte (Ron Cook). Though contractually obligated to produce another operetta, Sullivan wants time off to devote himself to serious music, while Gilbert is insulted that his partner doesn't like his new libretto, a variation on the "topsy-turvy" fantasies that have served them well in the past. Gilbert's wife persuades him to visit an exhibition on Japanese life and arts, and he's inspired to spin a tale set in Japan, an idea that also intrigues and energizes Sullivan. And so all that remains is to pull the thing together, despite temperamental actors (whose off-stage troubles include alcoholism, drug addiction and illegitimate children), vulgar choreography, costume crises and financial worries. A loving, gently funny and slightly claustrophobic tribute to theatrical life, Leigh's meticulously researched film requires neither knowledge of nor devotion to Gilbert and Sullivan, though it helps

--Maitland McDonagh