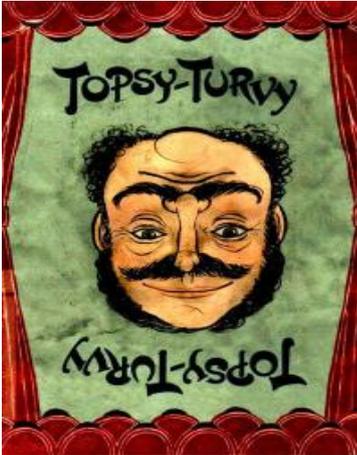


Topsy Turvy



Eden Court Cinema

Tuesday 21 April 2015 at 7.15pm

1999, U.K. - Drama

Running time: 154 mins.

Cast: Jim Broadbent, Allan Cordaner

Timothy Spall and Lesley Manville

Director: : Mike Leigh

Screenplay: Mike Leigh

Music: Arthur Sullivan, W. S. Gilbert,

Carl Davis

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[NM note 2015]

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geese might split up. A hot summer brings the run of Princess Ida to an untimely end and The Sorcerer is hastily revived to fill the gap. Above all, W.S. Gilbert (Broadbent) and Sir Arthur Sullivan (Cordaner), although the most successful authors of comic operas in the world, are racked by doubt and discontent.

The smooth, socially conscious Sullivan has been knighted by the queen and is courted by the aristocracy, but he wants to write serious music for the concert hall and the opera house, not make audiences laugh. Gilbert, a natural malcontent from a broken home, neither of whose parents take an interest in his work, wants to be taken seriously as a comic writer. He considers being called 'the King of Topsy-Turvydom' by the Times an insult.

Both actors look the part, down to the last well-coiffed Victorian whisker, and they provide rich, three-dimensional portraits. The privately sybaritic Sullivan has a devoted mistress in London and likes to 'take exercise' on the Continent, his euphemism for consorting with whores.

REVIEW EXTRACTS:

A. Philip French - The Observer

At the beginning of Chariots of Fire, the future Olympic sprinter Harold Abrahams passes the Cambridge University Fabian Society's recruiting booth at a freshmen's fair to sign up with the University's Gilbert and Sullivan Society.

No doubt Mike Leigh feels that, with his socially realistic plays and films, over the past 30 years, he paid his Fabian dues and could turn to Gilbert and Sullivan with a clear conscience.

Not that Topsy-Turvy represents a radical change of direction for him. For it's about the kind of collaborative theatrical enterprise Leigh loves and the kind of eccentricity, English and otherwise, to which he has always been attached.

Unlike Launder and Gilliat's 1952 movie, The Story of Gilbert and Sullivan, Topsy-Turvy is not a conventional biopic and doesn't touch on the absurd break-up of their partnership over the Savoy Theatre's carpets in the 1890s. Instead, it concentrates on the 15-month period between the first night of Princess Ida in January 1884 and the first night of The Mikado in March 1885.

Both were triumphant occasions and the film is an opulently mounted, warm-hearted celebration of two great artists and of a dedicated group of actors, backstage personnel and front-of-house figures working together at the D'Oyly Carte Company.

But this being a Mike Leigh picture, it isn't triumphalist in tone. All the performers have their professional worries, and in the case of the singer and future co-author of The Diary of a Nobody, George Grossmith (the excellent Martin Savage), the additional problem of being a morphine addict.

Richard D'Oyly Carte, on the point of building the Savoy Hotel with profits from the Savoy Operas, fears that his two golden

The married, childless Gilbert is devoted to his simple wife Kitty (Lesley Manville), but indifferent to her needs. In two brilliant scenes, their public selves are revealed: the kindly Sullivan tactfully corrects the orchestra after conducting a run-through; the brusque Gilbert undiplomatically distresses the company with his harshly comic comments after a dress rehearsal.....

Many members of Topsy-Turvy's wonderful ensemble cast have worked with Leigh before, Timothy Spall and Alison Steadman among them. While the performers in the D'Oyly Carte Company didn't create their roles in the way they do in a Leigh play, the rehearsals for *The Mikado* reflect the spirit of his enterprise.

As well as looking a rare treat, thanks to Dick Pope's photography, Eve Stewart's production design and Lindy Hemming's costumes, the movie has great music orchestrated by Carl Davis that draws on at least 10 Savoy operas as well as other works by Sullivan.

There are marvellous visual jokes, like the primitive telephone by which Gilbert receives coded message about box-office receipts, and the dialogue is consistently elegant and funny. '.....

B. Roger Ebert

Mike Leigh's "Topsy-Turvy" is the work of a man helplessly in love with the theater. In a gloriously entertaining period piece, he tells the story of the genesis, preparation and presentation of a comic opera-- Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Mikado"--celebrating all the dreaming and hard work, personality conflict and team spirit, inspiration and mundane detail, of every theatrical presentation, however inspired or inept. Every production is completely different, and they are all exactly like this.

..... Mike Leigh might seem to be the last of the modern British directors to be attracted to the world of the Savoy operas. His films, which do not begin with finished screenplays but are "devised" by the director in collaboration with his actors, have always been about modern Britain-- often about inarticulate, alienated, shy, hostile types, who are as psychologically awkward in his comedies as in his hard-edged work. His credits include "Life Is Sweet," and "Secrets and Lies"; nothing remotely in the same cosmos as Gilbert and Sullivan.

But think again. Leigh has worked as much in the theater as in film, and his films depend more than most on the theatrical disciplines of improvisation and rehearsal. In London his productions have often been in vest-pocket theaters where even details such as printing the tickets and hiring the stagehands may not have escaped his attention. He is a man of the theater in every atom of his being, and that is why there is a direct connection between his work and G&S.

The earlier reaches of "Topsy-Turvy" resemble in broad outline other films about theater: a flop, a crisis, a vow to never work again, a sudden inspiration, a new start. All well done, but the film begins to glow when the decision is made to go ahead with "The Mikado." This is not merely a film that goes backstage, but also one that goes into accounting ledgers, hiring practices, costume design, personnel problems, casting decisions, sex lives and the endless detail work of rehearsal: Hours of work are needed to manufacture and perfect even a silly throwaway moment, so that it is thrown away with style and wit, instead of merely being misplaced.

.....Many of the cast members are veterans of earlier Leigh films, including the pear-shaped, pouty-lipped Timothy Spall, whose character blinks back tears as his big song seems doomed in dress rehearsal. Broadbent makes a precise Gilbert, bluff and incisive, and Corduner's Sullivan is a study in the partner who cannot admit that his greatness lies always in collaboration. Leigh's construction is canny as he follows big musical numbers like "Three Little Maids" from rehearsal through opening night..

Not everyone is familiar with Gilbert and Sullivan. They don't need to be to enjoy "Topsy-Turvy", any more than one needs to know all about Shakespeare to enjoy "Shakespeare in Love"--although with both films, the more you do know, the more you enjoy. The two films compared are both British, about theatrical geniuses, and deal with theatrical lore. The difference is that "Shakespeare in Love" centers on a love story, and "Topsy-Turvy" is about love of the theater. Love of the theater, it reminds us, is somehow always adolescent--heedless, passionate, guilty. It is one of the year's best films.