

The Mikado and Other Theatrical Match Safes

By Neil Shapiro



Fig. 1. Silver match safe made for the production of *A Midsummer's Night Dream*.



Fig. 2. Front and back views of the silver *Charley's Aunt* match safe.

Successful theatrical shows in the 1890s often distributed utilitarian objects, like inkwells, ashtrays, or match safes to their patrons featuring images and designs from the shows in order to publicize their productions. The show *Charley's Aunt*, for example, which opened in England on February 29, 1892, gave away a silver English match safe on December 21, 1895, as well as a spelter American inkwell on February 7, 1894, for its American run. *The Private Secretary*, a popular 1883 farce in three acts by Charles Henry Hawtrey,¹ had a silver and enamel match safe made to promote his play. In 1906, Otho Stuart²

had a silver match safe made for his production of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* (Figure 1).

The silver match safe with the stamped face of actor W. S. Penley, in the make up and costume of *Charley's Aunt*, was made by Walker & Hall (1853-1920), in 1895-96 and assayed in Sheffield, England (Figure 2). Engraved on the back of the case is a presentation, "From *Charley's Aunt*, Dec. 21st, 1895." Walker & Hall were noted manufacturers of electroplated goods as well as silver flatware and hollowware.

The silver and enamel match safe with the magnificent painted enamel

image of the Rev. Robert Spalding as played by W. S. Penley (Figure 3) was made by Sampson Mordan in London (1885). Penley is the same actor who played the lead in *Charley's Aunt*. The maker, Sampson Mordan (1882-1898), is probably the most collected English maker of match safes as his enameled safes are unusually well made and the enamel beautifully painted.

It may appear coincidental that W. S. Penley appears on both of these safes, but perhaps not so strange as Penley (1851-1912) was an omnipresent actor on the London stage during his career. In fact, he played at least two roles in the Richard D'Oyly



Fig. 3. Silver and enamel match safe depicting W. S. Penley as the character Rev. Robert Spalding.

Carte's productions of Gilbert & Sullivan's light operas; one of which has produced the finest known set of theatrical match safes, *The Mikado*.

The Mikado, which opened in London, England, on March 14, 1885 under the auspices of the theatre impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte, was created at a time when Japan's artistic influence was highest in the West. In fact, among a certain class of intellectual aesthetes and wealthy parvenus, the lust for Japanese objects had passed and the craze for Japanese culture and bibelots was ripe for satire.

The entire play is a withering look at England's moral hypocrisy, puffed-up, self-important politicians, and restrictive morality. One example is the song, sung by the Lord High Executioner about his "little list," which mocks the contemporary politician lists of potential victims or "people we are tired of hearing about." Another example is the vacillating moral and values code of the Pooh-Bah who could be any member of the English House of Lords. But perhaps the best fun is poked at the British people by the use of the

characters names, Nanki-Poo (really a baby's diaper), Ko-Ko (a chocolate drink for those too young to drink tea), Yum-Yum (what you tell a child when you want them to try some food), etc.

The Mikado or *The Town of Titipu* brought forth the idea that the West and in particular, England, had lost its historical moorings and had become a pale imitation of things Japanese. The show opens with the lines:

*If you want to know who we are
We are gentlemen of Japan
On many a vase and jar
On many a screen and fan*

And goes on to tell a story of Nanki-Poo, Yum-Yum, Ko-Ko, the Lord High Everything Else, Pooh-Bah, and the focus of this essay, Yum-Yum's schoolmates, "the three little maids from school, (Yum-Yum, Peep-Bo, and Pitti-Sing)," who manage to offend the Pooh-Bah and sing a pardoning song. This is the scene illustrated on the three match safes in Figure 4.

Despite the ridicule that Gilbert & Sullivan lay upon England, the fact is Japanese objects and culture held a deep fascination for the general population of England and the play was written to take advantage of that interest.

Gilbert, the lyricist, wanted his characters to carefully mimic reality

and to that end he hired a Japanese woman to teach his "... 3 little maids from school" how to use their fans. They were taught to furl, unfurl, flutter, and discharge or "pop" their fans.

The costumes of *The Mikado* were created by Wilhelm (née, William John Charles Pitcher) a highly regarded costumer designer for the stage. They are illustrated on a poster from the period drawn by John Hassell for a traveling version of the show (Figure 5) and are similar to the ones on the match safes made by Horton & Allday in 1887, J. H. T. in 1886, and Lawrence Emanuel in 1886. Made of sterling silver and painted enamel, the match safes measure from left to right, 1 3/5 x 1 x 2/5 inches, 1 3/5 x 1 1/5 x 2/5 inches, and 2 x 1 2/5 x 2/5 inches (Figure 4).

There is scant biographical information about these makers, but what we know is that Lawrence Emanuel was a specialist in the manufacture of small decorative items in silver. His business was located at 14 Warstone Parade East in Birmingham, England, from 1874 until at least 1900. Stamped on the other side of the bezel of this safe is "H. M. Emanuel & Son / Ordance Row / Portsea" (Figure 6).

In 1878, a shop by the name of H. M. Emanuel & Sons was located at 12 & 13 Ordance Row, Portsea (in



Fig. 4. Mikado match safes. L to R: Horton & Allday (makers), J. H. T. (maker), and Lawrence Emanuel (maker).

Portsmouth). In *The Portsmouth Encyclopedia*, there appears this note:

It can be seen from the entries for 1865 that there was some rivalry with another firm of the same name. Henry M. Emanuel, silversmith, jewelry and pawnbroker, was at 12 Ordnance Row for many years, only a couple of hundred yards from the shop on the Hard [a street in Portsea]. It must have been extremely galling when, in 1887, the Royal Warrant, previously so proudly displayed by the Emanuels of High Street [another Portsea street] and The Hard, had apparently passed to this rival family of the same name: "H. M. Emanuel & Son, 12 & 13 Ordnance Row, jewelers and silversmiths to the Queen."³

The H. M. Emanuel & Son firm is the retailer on this match safe. Whether they are related to the maker of this piece, Lawrence Emanuel, can not be determined at this time.

Alfred George Horton & Harry Allday were manufacturing silversmiths beginning in the 1860s. They were located at 195 Warstone Lane in Birmingham, England, and were known for their ingenious patented work on cigarette cases and match boxes. Note that Horton and Allday worked yards away from Lawrence Emanuel. It would not be a stretch to say that one or the other influenced each other's products.

J.H.T. is likely Joseph Hayes Taylor, another Birmingham jewelry manu-



Fig. 5. Watercolor by W. Russell Flint. From the book *The Mikado or The Town of Titipu*, published by MacMillan and Co., Limited, St. Martin's Street, London, 1928. Similar to the promotional poster for the traveling *The Mikado* show.

facturer from circa 1876, until he disappears from the historical records in 1888.

The material for the original costumes of *The Mikado* was made by the famous London retailer Liberty's who researched the design and materials for the costumes by sending a team of designers to Japan to study the clothing actually worn by the Japanese.

As much as Gilbert tried to make *The Mikado's* costumes accurate and the player's gestures representative of Japanese mannerisms, his true feelings about the English emulating the Japanese may be best expressed in his own words:

*The idiot who praises with
enthusiastic tone
All centuries but this and every
Country but his own*

But the distain that Gilbert felt did not diminish the success of his work and quickly led to other stage pro-

ductions featuring Japanese backgrounds, such as the opera *Madame Butterfly*.

In the world of match safe collecting there are many presentational, advertising, and memorial match safes. The three known *Mikado* match safes are among the loveliest and the rarest.

Note: Two Mikado safes (by Horton & Allday, and J.H.T.) and The Private Secretary safe are from the collection of Nigel Ross, London. The other Mikado safe is from a private collection in New York. I am grateful to both collectors for allowing me to use the images of their match safes.

Neil Shapiro is a researcher, collector, and dealer in match safes. He has written numerous articles, two books, and is currently working on a book about Japanese match safes. He is a founding member of the International Match Safe Association, an organization open to anyone interested in match safes. He and his family live in Albany, NY. Visit his website www.matchesafescholar.com.

Notes

1. Sir Charles Henry Hawtrey (1858-1923) was an actor, comedian, director, and stage manager of the Globe Theatre.
2. Otho Stuart (1865-1930) was a theatre manager, including the Adelphi Theatre from 1904-1907.
3. The Portsmouth Encyclopedia. "A History of Places and People in Portsmouth," http://www.portsmouth.gov.uk/media/Portsmouth_ency.pdf (accessed November 1, 2010).



Fig. 6. Mark found on the *Mikado* match safe by Lawrence Emanuel.