The year is 1884, and W.S. Gilbert is struggling to come up with a new concept for his next operetta in collaboration with composer Arthur Sullivan. While he, Sullivan and their producer, Richard D'Oyly-Carte, discuss the matter, they are continually interrupted by singers in their D'Oyly Carte Opera Company. Amidst the chaos, D'Oyly-Carte presents Gilbert and Sullivan with a gift—a number of Japanese artifacts from a London exhibition. A minor accident results in a concussion and Gilbert takes the audience with him into a fantastical dream blending his familiar London with his imagined Japan.

The Mikado by W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan

In the town of Titipu, a wandering minstrel named Nanki-Poo searches for his love, Yum-Yum. He is devastated to learn that Yum-Yum is betrothed to Ko-Ko, her guardian and Titipu's Lord High Executioner, who has never conducted an execution and doesn't plan to, because he's next on the list. He has been condemned to death for flirting!

When the Mikado proclaims that Titipu's status will be reduced to that of a village if the town does not conduct an execution, Ko-Ko looks for a stand-in for himself. His salvation appears in the unlikely form of Nanki-Poo, whose distress over the loss of Yum-Yum provides a solution: because Nanki-Poo is planning to end his life anyway, Ko-Ko convinces him to be the next person executed. In return, he may marry Yum-Yum for one month, after which time Ko-Ko will execute him and marry his widow.

What KoKo doesn't know is that Nanki-Poo is not the poor minstrel he seems, but rather the son of the feared Mikado. The young man has run away because his father has arranged for him to marry the much older, and decidedly unpleasant, Katisha.

At the end of Act I, Katisha appears and attempts to unmask his disguise. She is foiled by sympathetic townspeople, and Nanki-Poo and Yum-Yum prepare for their month of wedded bliss.

Act II opens with the revelation that when a married man is beheaded, his wife must be buried alive, prompting Yum-Yum to decide that, all things considered, she would rather not marry Nanki-Poo after all. Because the Mikado is already on his way to Titipu, Ko-Ko’s solution is to let the lovers run away together, and he’ll present a falsified affidavit declaring that Nanki-Poo has been executed.

The Mikado arrives, with Katisha in tow, and Ko-Ko, Pitti-Sing and Pooh-Bah enthusiastically describe the execution they claim has already happened. The Mikado announces the purpose of his visit is not to follow up on the execution, but rather, to search for his son. When the Mikado learns that Nanki-Poo is the subject of the affidavit of execution, he muses on the punishment for killing the heir apparent to the throne, striking terror in the hearts of Ko-Ko, Pooh-Bah, and Pitti-Sing.

Nanki-Poo, now married to Yum-Yum, suggests that if Ko-Ko were to marry Katisha, Nanki-Poo could come back to life without upsetting his former betrothed. Ko-Ko sets about using his flirting skills (remember them?) to seduce her. Once they are married, Katisha begs the Mikado to spare her new husband—a task made easier for the Mikado with the reappearance of Nanki-Poo and Yum-Yum. Ko-Ko then makes a compelling, if convoluted, argument that persuades the Mikado to spare him, and the story concludes with celebrations and good cheer.