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### Theater review: 'South Pacific' at the Ahmanson Theatre

June 3, 2010 | 3:30 pm

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“South Pacific” has a way of making grown men cry. Kenneth Tynan started his 1951 review of the musical’s London premiere with the confession, “I wept, and there is nothing in criticism harder than to convey one’s gratitude for that.”

The tears shed for the beautifully sung Lincoln Center Theater production, which opened Wednesday at the Ahmanson, were mainly for the miraculous score by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. This expertly assembled hit parade of tunes from 1949 reveals the timelessness of music aimed at the heart by craftsmen who know the power of expressing profound longing simply. If “Some Enchanted Evening” doesn’t make your eyes mist during one of its reprises, please consult your doctor, as this may be a sign of a serious medical condition.

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Bartlett Sher's staging, given a purple-tinged sunset elegance by Michael Yeargan's set design, isn't as crisp or as polished as it was in New York, but it still has a joyous majesty where it counts most — in the musical numbers. Set on two islands in the South Pacific during the Second World War, the show springs to vibrant life whenever the jumble of characters — natives, merchants and American military personnel — vent their desires and frustrations in gorgeous, madcap song.

Too bad the bawdy delight of the Seabees anthem "There Is Nothin' Like a Dame," led by the comically conniving Luther Billis (Matthew Saldivar), can't be bottled. The exuberant effect on the audience (aided by Christopher Gattelli's choreography) is palpable — a collective lifting of the spirits that represents the American musical at full-strength dosage.

But "South Pacific" depends most of all on its leads, and Carmen Cusack and Rod Gilfry don't disappoint vocally in the roles of Ensign Nellie Forbush and Emile de Becque. I'd even say that Cusack transcends Kelli O'Hara, who was one of key sources of radiance in the original Lincoln Center Theater production. Comparisons in excellence are silly, but this Nellie reconciles more naturally the musical's peculiar mix of comedy and drama, and I'd pay to hear her perform "A Cockeyed Optimist" and "A Wonderful Guy" just about anywhere she wants to sing them.



The subject of racial intolerance — not your typical musical theater theme — runs through the book that Oscar Hammerstein II and Joshua Logan adapted from James A. Michener's "Tales of the South Pacific." But the starting point, of course, is the romance between Emile, a middle-aged French plantation owner, and Nellie, a Navy nurse from Little Rock, Ark, who's stationed on the island.

Wealthy, dashing and seemingly too good to be true, Emile turns out to have a few skeletons in his closet. Nellie can handle that he killed a notorious bully back home in France (the reason for his fugitive flight to this tropical outpost), but her small-town bigotry reveals itself after she discovers that the two adorable mixed-raced children trilling "Dites-Moi" in his oceanfront villa don't belong to the servants but rather to Emile and his late Polynesian wife. This self-described "hick" finds herself caught between her passion and her provincialism.

Written as America was trying to regain its bearings after the war, "South Pacific" tackles the issue of prejudice not just in Nellie's story but also in the parallel tale of Lt. Joseph Cable (Anderson Davis). He's a handsome Ivy League golden boy who's lured by the gruff Tonkinese peddler Bloody Mary (Keala Settle) into a romance with her beautiful daughter, Liat (Sumie Maeda). The young couple's first assignation takes place on Bali Ha'i, an island of seductive mystery that comes with its own theme song that Settle's Mary delivers like a battle-ax siren tempting sailors to their doom.

This production gets the look and sound right in its various subplots, but subtlety isn't one of its strong suits. Maximum vividness seems to be the goal — something Davis achieves through bare-chested crooning, Settle through uninhibited comic caricature. Saldivar's Luther, the Seabee with a sly hand in all story lines, plays the cutup for all it's worth.

Sher doesn't impose a modern perspective on a book that can seem awkward to modern audiences (one of the reasons a major Broadway revival took as long as did). The moral of the story is meant to be progressive — love leads the way to democratic enlightenment — but the musical is a product of an era in which sensitivities to difference are not equally distributed.

More enduring than the show's message is the rapturous score. The lush fullness of the orchestra weaves a spell that from the very first note begins to dismantle our emotional defenses. (Hats off to musical director Ted Sperling and conductor Braden Toan.)

Gilfry, a Grammy-nominated baritone rooted in opera (following the tradition of Ezio Pinza, who created the role in the original Broadway production), may not be the most agile dramatic actor, but he's remarkably expressive when in full vocal flight with a standard as lyrically piercing as "This Nearly Was Mine." He also has the suave silhouette that's necessary for this amorous fairy tale to get

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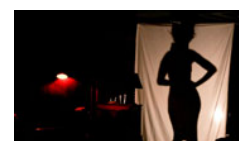
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off the ground. (David Pittsinger, another distinguished leading man on leave from opera, takes over from Gilfry on June 22.)

But this "South Pacific" is to be treasured above all for Cusack, whose interpretation of her character's embarrassment of Rodgers & Hammerstein riches is so stunningly suffused with heart that it was as if I were hearing the songs for the first time. Nellie vainly tries to "wash that man right outta" her hair, and watching Cusack helplessly succumb to love's "conventional dither" has to be counted as one of the theatrical highlights of the year.

-- Charles McNulty

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**"South Pacific,"** Ahmanson Theatre, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles Music Center. 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 1 and 6:30 p.m. Sundays (call for exceptions). Ends July 17. \$20 to \$120. (213) 972-4400 or [www.centertheatregroup.org](http://www.centertheatregroup.org). Running time: 2 hours, 55 minutes.

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*Photos: Top: Rod Gilfry and Carmen Cusack. Bottom: Sumie Maeda and Anderson Davis. Credit: Bret Hartman / For the Los Angeles Times*

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Saw this production last Thursday night, and more than once I heard people singing along with the score-- thankfully very softly and not for long. It has that affect. Great job done by all involved.

**Posted by: Mike | June 03, 2010 at 03:53 PM**

I didn't get through the whole review before I had to chuckle at the use of the word "reprisals" for what should be "reprises." Check your dictionary. I do miss the days when the LA Times seemed to have editors.

As to the show... deserves every rave it gets. An truly enchanted evening of theatre.

**Posted by: Robb Tracy | June 03, 2010 at 09:57 PM**

I saw the matinee performance on June 3rd. Carmen Cusack is absolutely fantastic in this production. It would be nice if her performance would be taped. This is a South Pacific to cherish forever. I saw the Lincoln Center production and enjoyed this one more.

**Posted by: jm | June 04, 2010 at 07:08 AM**

I will remember this production of SOUTH PACIFIC as the one in which the audience gasped at the word "colored."

The songs are amazing but the story feels extremely clunky in 2010: a working class white girl successfully overcomes her personal racism and is rewarded with a house, husband and servants -- while a privileged white guy who debases himself so far as to sleep with an ickily-underaged

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Polynesian girl must die as a moral comeuppance. Wait -- what just happened?

**Posted by: DP | June 04, 2010 at 05:55 PM**

I've already seen this production twice within opening week! The show is absolutely amazing and Carmen Cusack is fantastic as Nellie. There's this warmth about her that is completely contagious. Rod Gilfry's operatic background does wonders for his performance as Emile! And Anderson Davis is fantastic as Lt. Cable. Great production!

**Posted by: Krystle Hyder | June 05, 2010 at 02:50 AM**

See this show! It's awesome!

**Posted by: Darren | June 07, 2010 at 05:47 PM**

Terrific songs of course and well sung, but what a clunky storyline. Infused with liberal obsessions with skin color and sex. Unimaginative sets, particularly for Bali-Hi scenes. Carmen Cusack and Anderson Davis were excellent.

**Posted by: Paul | June 19, 2010 at 12:14 AM**

I only partly agree with this review. I saw the show last Saturday evening, and there are two reasons to see it: the music and Rod Gilfry. It's amazing to think how progressive the lyrics were, especially "You've Got To Be Carefully Taught". It's a treat to hear them sung within their original context. Rod Gilfry was phenomenal. Every time he sang "Some Enchanted Evening" (a lot) or another song, I got chills.

The problem is that he overpowered Cusack, the female lead. She was definitely overmatched. While she was OK, I thought she was nothing to write home about. I would much preferred to have seen Kelli O'Hara, whom I love.

Overall, a fine production--but go for the music.

**Posted by: Steven | June 19, 2010 at 07:58 AM**

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