

British Theatre Guide

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Miss Saigon

Music by Claude-Michel Schönberg, lyrics by Richard Maltby Jnr and Alain Boublil

Adapted from the original French text by Alain Boublil with additional material by Richard Maltby Jnr

Sunderland Empire and touring
(2005)

It is eight years or so since I saw *Miss Saigon* at Drury Lane and, although I remember thoroughly enjoying it (as did two friends for whom this was their first introduction to stage musicals), I had forgotten just how powerful it is. Of course the combination of a moving and evocative opera like *Madama Butterfly* and its original inspiration, the French novel *Madame Chrysanthème*, which are both cited as sources of *Miss Saigon* by Boublil and Schönberg, and the tragic *mythos* that has grown around the Vietnam War, is a potent mixture, but it is the music which gives the piece its real power.

And what music! From the sex-laden coarseness of *The Heat Is On In Saigon*, through the yearning *The Movie In My Mind*, the joyful *Sun and Moon*, the poignant *Last Night of the World* and the thrilling but very scary *The Morning of the Dragon*, which is followed immediately by the heart-rending *I Still Believe*, to the almost unbearable *Bui Doi* and the whole mixture of conflicting emotions which make up the second half of the show, culminating in the satirical *The American Dream* (with brilliant animations by Gerald Scarfe), which leads finally to Kim's *Little God of My Heart*, it manipulates the audience's emotions unerringly.

This is a far cry from Andrew Lloyd Webber - even from *Superstar*, which I still believe is his best work - and even from Boublil and Schönberg's *Les Misérables*, which, perhaps because of its epic scope, does not have the same deep emotional impact, powerful though it undoubtedly is. Indeed, I would suggest that *Miss Saigon*, along with *West Side Story*, is probably the closest that the musical comes to tragedy in the true sense of the word.

This performance was the press night of the first stop on a long tour and you would expect the company to pull out all the stops, and so they did, and the impression was of a show with which they are all comfortable, as if they had played it many time before. We had an understudy - Eaton James playing Chris, instead of Steven Houghton - but this didn't matter a jot. He captured the slight gaucheness of the younger Chris with his almost Romeo-like exuberance when he falls in love with Kim and the agony on discovering that, not only was Kim still alive three years later but had his son.

As for Kim, the performance by Miriam Valmores-Marasigan was exemplary. It is, of course, a gift of a part but it would be so easy to play the poor down-trodden little girl card, a trap which Ms Valmores-Marasigan skillfully avoids: her Kim has steel within. And she sings beautifully.

As the Engineer, Jon Jon Briones (like Valmores-Marasigan) has played the part numerous times and it shows. He is in total control, and manipulates the audience with ease so that, after initially hating him for his exploitation of the girls in the first scene, they come to love him.

Hugh Maynard's John, Sebastian Tan's Thuy and Kerry Ellis' Ellen are totally believable, and there was no weakness anywhere in the whole ensemble.

The staging is complex, a combination of huge trucks, flown signs (and a large bas-relief of Ho Chi Minh), and film. The famous helicopter of the original production is replaced by film but, with the almost painfully loud sound, is almost equally effective. Possibly more so, in fact, for the "real" helicopter tended to jerk us out of the illusion and say, "My God, that's a brilliant effect!"

You don't come out humming any of the tunes (nor whistling the scenery!), for *Miss Saigon* works because *all* of the elements combine in equal proportions. Schönberg doesn't work a tune to death, although significant phrases are revived when emotionally necessary and reprises (not many at all) are there because the drama needs them to be.

In any terms, it's a powerful piece of theatre, and the fact that yesterday, in his inauguration speech, George W Bush said he intends to bring the "untamed fire of freedom to the darkest corners of the world", gives it a resonance which brings shivers down the spine.

"Miss Saigon" runs at the Sunderland Empire until 5th March, and then tours to Liverpool, Norwich, Milton Keynes, Cardiff, Woking and Nottingham.

This production was also reviewed by Steve Orme in [Nottingham](#) and David Chaddertoin in [Manchester](#)

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)