

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

South Pacific

Music by Richard Rogers, lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, book by Oscar Hammerstein II and Joshua Logan

A Lincoln Centre Theatre production

New Victoria Theatre, Woking

10–21 July 2012

Take an idyllic tropical island, add a boy-meets-girl story and embellish it with Rogers and Hammerstein's fabulous score, and you have the basis for a great musical. Bring to the mix the most talented cast and creative crew available and—well—if there is a fault in Bartlett Sher's exquisite production I have yet to find it.

From the moment the music begins (orchestra under the direction of Jae Alexander) we can tell we are in for something special, and the opening scene showing the verandah of Emile De Becque's beachside abode with its view of the blue sea beyond is so realistic I felt I could just walk through the open doors and onto the shore. Michael Yeargan's set has shutters and blinds which rise and fall, swing in and out and, with a few almost imperceptible movements of furniture and props, become a command post, a different island and, of course, the famous shower scene where our heroine "Washes that man right out of her Hair" every night.

I have sometimes had issues with the sound system in this theatre, over-amplification often distorting voices or overshadowing the singers. Here the balance is perfect.

This though is not a happy-go-lucky musical, nor even a happy-ever-after one, although it ends on a note of hope. Not only is World War Two raging in the South Pacific between the Americans and the Japanese, but the attitude to racial segregation inherent at that time (particularly prominent in people from Arkansas) means that love between the races can never run smoothly. As Daniel Koek's Lt Joseph Cable sings thoughtfully, "You Have to be Carefully Taught", referring to his own upbringing and the problem of taking a Tonkinese wife back home with him. A chilling moment too is the attitude of Commander Harbison and Captain Brackett (Dominic Taylor and Nigel Williams) casually dismissing the loss of the men they have sent to their death as a minor casualty of war.

Racism also plays a part in the romance between De Beque and Ensign Nurse Nellie Forbush, her delight at the two adorable children who open the show (Breanna Merritt and Brook Gibson) changing to shocked denial as she realises that the man she has fallen in love with had been married to a coloured islander. The children, incidentally, though appearing very young, perform totally naturally yet with charm and professionalism as they sing the French song "Dites Moi" for their father.

Matthew Camelle is Emile, handsome, charismatic, wonderful singing voice and with a sexy French accent. It was not the air-conditioning which sent shivers down my spine as he began "Some Enchanted Evening", and the emotion in "This Nearly Was Mine" was enough to bring tears to the eyes. Samatha Womack is a delightfully pert, pretty, sassy Nellie—with an equally gorgeous voice and a great dancer. Terrific and athletic dancing too from The Seabees, and one of their number,

the very versatile Alex Fern, shows exceptional comic talent as Luther Billis, the ‘Sergeant Bilko’ of the marines, wheeling and dealing at every opportunity and even hamming it up in a grass skirt at the Thanksgiving Follies.

Hawaiian-born Jodi Kimura, making her UK debut, and reprising her US role as Bloody Mary, is another one making a buck out of the war and is at turn hilariously comical selling shrunken heads to the sailors, wistfully yearning at thoughts of ‘Bali Ha’i’ island, and rising in desperation persuading Lt. Cable to marry her daughter. A third child actor, Katalina Pennycooke is her shy, but willing, assistant.

At over three hours, and not a minute too long, Nellie finally decides that she is perhaps really “In Love with a Wonderful Guy”. This spellbindingly sublime and perfect production touches every emotion—a truly enchanted evening.

Touring to Sheffield

Reviewer: [Sheila Connor](#)