
"South Pacific" Musical: the Power of Love, and Women's Caring Role

Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* opened on April 7th, 1949 at the Majestic Theatre on Broadway. This musical focuses on the romance between Nellie Forbush, a nurse and Emile de Becque, an ex-patriot Frenchman. Their romance is devastated by the revelation that Emile's children are half-Polynesian. Much of act two focuses on the aftereffects of this revelation and how Nellie and Lieutenant Cable must overcome their own and the perceived prejudice of society on interracial marriage. Rodgers and Hammerstein argue two common themes that I'd like to explore in my revival: the power of love can overcome the power of hate, and women's role is inherently caring.

While *Oklahoma* serves as a celebration of the individualism and adventure seeking Americans love, *South Pacific* shows off our problems. Our racism and prejudice towards others. Our inability to accept a strong woman. *South Pacific* is a product designed to be successful; it's based in a popular book and focuses on war-time in the Pacific which was very timely just following WWII. However, as a result of this it qualifies as sociologically deviant in today's society. Deviance is a culturally created concept that we use to deem things taboo or against the social beliefs of a given time. *South Pacific* in its time was completely common but in today's culture and society, performing the show as a traditional revival could serve as a breaching experiment to help expose injustice.

Nellie, an American everywoman character ends up being a racist that overcomes her hate with love. However, her lyrics seem to display her indecisive as to whether having a man is useful or necessary for her. In *South Pacific*, Hammerstein tried to move away from stock female characters and as a result played up gender stereotypes. In America, men are seen as the head of household, main breadwinners while women are meant to be subservient and homemaker-types. Bloody Mary serves as the strong and controlling head of Bali Ha'i while Liat serves as the submissive role, only having one line in the entire show. Nellie portrays Hammerstein's attempt to complicate femininity as her character sings both about tossing men in the ditch when you're done with them in addition to songs about how love and romance are incredible things that she couldn't live without.

In "Honey Bun" Nellie satirizes how men talk about women in euphemisms about their size and shape. Nellie sings, " My doll is as dainty as a sparrow/Her figure is something to applaud/Where she's narrow, she's narrow as an arrow/And she's broad where a broad ought to be broad!" In my revival I would use props being tossed across the stage upstage of Nellie to

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increase the ridiculous nature of the lyrics of the song. In this line, I would have a large barbie with wings, a bow and cartoonish arrow, and two mannequin dolls (one thin and one very curvaceous) and each of these props would be tossed during the line in which its mentioned. By doing this I would expect the audience to understand how absurd these statements are thus shifting the meaning from the perpetuation of focus on the female body to a commentary about how and how often we talk about the female body.

Throughout act one, South Pacific shows off the setting and Americana associated with this wartime story. By the end of act one the audience expects some grand scale proclamation of love between Emile and Nellie but are shocked when she instead reels after learning that he has two half-Polynesian children from his first wife. Nellie never exhibits any emotions aside from hyper-peppiness and allusions to love before this scene with makes it pivotal in their understanding of her inner conflict. In this section at the end of act one my revival would have Nellie say “coloured” after Emile says “Polynesian” to further show her prejudice and further shock the audience who have up until now, begun to like and identify with Nellie. Later, after Emile goes off on Operation Alligator, Nellie takes up the care of his children. By inserting herself into this family she perpetuates her caring feminine role and further detracts from the willful but naïve woman she was prior to meeting Emile. By the end of the show, Nellie and Emile are together with his children finishing the 1950’s era nuclear family although different because of the mixed-race nature of this new family.

In conclusion, my traditional revival of South Pacific would focus on both love overcoming racism and highlighting how female characters were written to partially overcome and expand upon their designated gender role. Since the norms and values written into South Pacific are indicative of the time in which it was written and not those common today, the production would be inherently deviant and thus be likely to draw crowds curious of why such a production would be put on. Overall, this revival should introduce and elucidate some problems in America today that are still present from the original time period and thus push the audience into understanding and more critically analyzing the world around them.

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