



A Blog by the Editorial Writers of The New York Times

‘South Pacific’: Some Enchanted Quagmire?

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD

“South Pacific” is a musical theater classic, a mother lode of song standards from “Bali Ha’i” to “Some Enchanted Evening” — and, as of this month, a boffo revival on Broadway.

Is it also a geopolitical allegory? A visionary work of theater that anticipates and symbolizes America’s role in Southeast Asia during the Cold War and Vietnam?

That is one of the intriguing arguments made in “Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961”, by Christina Klein.

Professor Klein, then a literature professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, now at Boston College, writes that “‘South Pacific’s’ multiracial, multinational family” — she means Nellie Forbush of Arkansas, Emile DeBecque of France, and Ngana and Jerome, his two children by a Polynesian mother — embodies a variation on the U.S-French-Vietnamese relationship that was being forged at the same time. In 1950 — the year after the show opened on Broadway — Washington began openly financing its French ally’s colonial war in Vietnam and delivering aid to its puppet government in Saigon. After the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 — the year ‘South Pacific’ closed on Broadway — the U.S. took over their war against the communists in the North.

“South Pacific” evokes the French colonial situation in Southeast Asia directly when it identifies Bloody Mary and Liat as Tonkinese — that is, natives of colonial Vietnam whom French planters have brought to the Pacific islands as indentured laborers.

When ‘South Pacific’ opened on Broadway, Professor Klein continues, “audiences might not have been fully conscious of their nation’s emerging relationship with the French in Indochina. But over the course of its five year run and the years that it toured nationally, public awareness of America’s involvement in Southeast Asia grew.

Marshall & MacArthur, Johnson & McNamara, meet Rodgers & Hammerstein.

It’s the professor’s analysis of the final scene, where Nellie and the children have a happy reunion with Emile and they all sit down to soup, that may make it impossible for you to ever look at “South Pacific” the same way again.

The final scene figures this alliance as a product of American abundance and protection. At the end of “Dites-Moi,” Nellie gathers the French and Asian characters around her table. Generous and benevolent, she bestows her healthy sexuality upon the graying Emile and doles out soup to her Asian dependents. Like Washington’s aid programs in Indochina, this family invigorates an aging and weary France, gives provincial America access to the colonial sources of French wealth and prestige, and maintains the childlike Asians in a condition of security and dependence.

From “Show Boat” to “Hair,” writers of American musicals have long tackled difficult political themes. Give credit to Professor Klein — whose book also peels back the significance “The King and I,” “Flower Drum Song,” and other landmarks of midcentury popular culture — for finding more layers of meaning and portent in shows and show tunes than many people are willing to give the genre credit for.

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