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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Memorial Day at 'South Pacific'

By [FRANK RICH](#)

NEW YORK is a ghost town on Memorial Day weekend. But two distinct groups are hanging tight: sailors delighting in the timeless shore-leave rituals of [Fleet Week](#), and theatergoers clutching nearly impossible-to-get tickets for "South Pacific."

Some of those sailors served in a war that has now lasted longer than American involvement in World War II but is largely out of sight and mind as civilians panic about gas prices at home. "South Pacific" has its sailors too: this 1949 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical tells of those who served in what we now call "the good war."

The [Lincoln Center revival](#) of this [old chestnut](#) is surely the most unexpected cultural sensation the city has experienced in a while. In 2008, when 80-plus percent of Americans believe their country is in a ditch, there wouldn't seem to be a big market for a show whose heroine, the Navy nurse Nellie Forbush, is a self-described "cockeyed optimist" who sings of being "as corny as Kansas in August."

Yet last week one man stood outside the theater with a stack of \$100 bills offering \$1,000 for a \$120 ticket. Inside, audiences start to tear up as soon as they hear the overture, even before they meet the men and women stationed in the remote islands of the New Hebrides. Among those who've been enraptured by this "South Pacific" the most common refrain is, "I couldn't stop myself — I was sobbing."

This would include me, and I have been trying to figure out why ever since I first saw this production in March. It certainly wasn't nostalgia. I was born two months before the show's Broadway premiere in April 1949 and had never before seen "South Pacific" on stage. It was mainly a musty parental inheritance from my boomer childhood. My father had served in the Pacific theater for 26 months, and my mother replayed the hit show tunes incessantly on 78s as our new postwar family settled into the suburbs.

Like countless others, I did see Hollywood's glossy 1958 [film version](#). As the British World War II historian Max Hastings writes in "Retribution," his unsparing new book about the war's grisly endgame in the Pacific, "Many of us gained our first, wonderfully romantic notion of the war against Japan by watching the movie of Rodgers and Hammerstein's 'South Pacific.'" But the movie of "South Pacific," a candy-colored idyll dominated by wide-screen tourist vistas, is not the show. Its lush extravagance evokes the 1950s boom more than war.

In the 1960s, after the movie had come and gone, Vietnam pushed "South Pacific" into a cultural black hole. No one wanted to see a musical about war unless it was "Hair." Unlike its Rodgers and Hammerstein siblings "Oklahoma!" and "The Sound of Music," it never received a full Broadway revival.

Today everyone thinks they've seen the genuine "South Pacific" only because its songs reside in the collective American unconscious. "Some Enchanted Evening." "Younger Than Springtime." "There Is Nothin' Like a Dame." But few Americans born after V-J Day did see the real thing, which is one reason why audiences are ambushed by the revival. They expect corn, but in a year when war and race are at center stage in the national conversation, this relic turns out to have a great deal to say.

Though it contains a romance, "South Pacific" is not at all romantic about war. The troops are variously bored, randy, juvenile and conniving. They are not prone to jingoistic posturing. When American officers try to recruit Emile de Becque, a worldly French expatriate, in a dangerous reconnaissance operation, they tell him he must do so because "we're against the Japs." De Becque, who is the show's hero, snaps at them: "I know what you're against. What are you for?" No one bothers to answer his question. The men have been given a job to do, and they do it.

"South Pacific" isn't pro-war or antiwar. But it makes you think about the costs. When, after months of often slovenly idling, the troops ship out for the action they've been craving, the azure tropical sky darkens to a gunpowder gray. Their [likely mission](#) is to storm the beach at Tarawa, where in November 1943 more than 1,000 Americans and 4,600 Japanese would die in less than 76 hours in one of the war's deadliest battles.

This is a more fatalistic World War II than some we've seen lately. When America was sleepwalking on the eve of 9/11, the good war was repositioned as an uplifting brand. Nostalgia kicked in. Perhaps we wanted to glom onto an earlier America's noble mission because we, unlike "the greatest generation," had none of our own. The real "South Pacific" returns us to the war as its contemporaries saw it, when the wounds were too raw to be healed by sentiment.

That reflects the show's provenance. It was hot off the press: a nearly instantaneous adaptation of "Tales of the South Pacific," the 1947 novel in which the previously unknown James A. Michener set down his own wartime experiences in the Pacific.

Many theatergoers who saw "South Pacific" in 1949 had sons and brothers who had not returned home. Just 10 days after it opened at the Majestic Theater on 44th Street, The New York Times carried [a small story](#) datelined Honolulu. A ship had arrived there bearing "the bodies of 120 American war dead," the remains of men missing in action since 1943. "Thus ended the last general search for the men who fell in the South Pacific war," the article said.

Watching "South Pacific" now, we're forced to contemplate Iraq, which we're otherwise pretty skilled at avoiding. Most of us don't have family over there. Most of us long ago decided the war was a mistake and tuned out. Most of us have stopped listening to the president who ginned it up. This month, in case you missed it, he told an interviewer that he had [made the ultimate sacrifice](#) of giving up golf for the war's duration because "I don't want some mom whose son may have recently died to see the commander in chief playing golf."

"South Pacific" reminds us that those whose memory we honor tomorrow — including those who served in Vietnam — are always at the mercy of the leaders who send them into battle. It increases our admiration for the selflessness of Americans fighting in Iraq. They, unlike their counterparts in World War II, do their duty despite answering to a commander in chief who has been both reckless and narcissistic. You can't watch

“South Pacific” without meditating on their sacrifices for this blunderer, whose wife last year [claimed](#) that “no one suffers more” over Iraq than she and her husband do.

The show’s racial conflicts are also startlingly alive. Nellie Forbush, far from her hometown of Little Rock, recoils from de Becque when she learns that he fathered two children by a Polynesian woman. In the original script, Nellie denigrates de Becque’s late wife as “colored.” (Michener gave Nellie a more incendiary word in his book.) “Colored” was cut in rehearsals then but has been restored now, and it lands like a brick in the theater. It’s not only upsetting in itself. It’s upsetting because Nellie isn’t some cracker stereotype — she’s lovable (especially as embodied by the actress Kelli O’Hara). But how can we love a racist? And how can she not love Emile’s young mixed-race children?

Michener would work out this story in [his own life](#). In 1949, he moved to Hawaii, where he would eventually make a third, long-lived marriage with a Japanese-American who had been held in an internment camp during the war. “South Pacific” works through this American dilemma for the audience, too. Years before Little Rock’s 1957 racial explosion, Nellie moves beyond her prejudices, propelled by life and love and the circumstances of war. She charts a path that much of America, North and South, would haltingly begin to follow. (In the script, we also hear of racism in Philadelphia’s Main Line.) “South Pacific” opened as President Truman was implementing the desegregation of America’s armed forces — against the [backdrop](#) of Ku Klux Klan beatings of black veterans.

Then and now, the show concludes with the most classic of American tableaux: Emile, Nellie and the two kids sitting down to a family meal. It’s hard for us to imagine how this coda must have struck audiences in 1949, when interracial marriage was still illegal in many states (as it would be in 16 until 1967). But nearly 60 years later, this multiracial family portrait has another context. The audiences watching “South Pacific” in this intense election year are being asked daily to take stock of just how far along we are on Nellie’s path and how much further we still have to go.

And so as we watch that family gather at the end of “South Pacific,” both their future and their country’s destiny yet to be written, we weep for the same reason we often do when we experience a catharsis at the theater. We grieve deeply for our losses and our failings, even as we feel an undertow of cockeyed optimism about the possibilities of healing and redemption that may yet lie ahead.

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