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Public Affairs

South Pacific and Politics Today

by *Todd Purdum*

August 15, 2008, 11:59 AM



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The hottest ticket on Broadway—and the freshest show—is a 59-year-old musical comedy about war, honor, prejudice, interracial romance, and the promise of America. It was not surprising to see at Lincoln Center this week that *South Pacific* is terrific entertainment; its indestructible score of standards long ago worked its way into the national consciousness. But it was revealing, and enlightening, to discover that this old war-horse remains, as the song has it, “younger than springtime.”

Inevitably, the war in Iraq is on the audience’s mind midway through the show, when an American Navy captain tries to persuade Emile De Becque, the expatriate French planter at the heart of the story, that he should volunteer for a dangerous reconnaissance mission because, “We’re against the Japs.” “I know what you’re against,” De Becque replies hotly.

“What are you *for*?” For anyone who has read my friend Jane Mayer’s haunting new book, *The Dark Side*, which chronicles the Bush administration’s embrace of torture techniques in its war on terror, that’s not a rhetorical question.

But I was not prepared for the extent to which *South Pacific* would make me ponder the presidential election. I should have been. After all, the crux of the plot is the initial inability of Ensign Nellie Forbush, the pride of Little Rock, Arkansas, who is in love with De Becque, to accept that he fathered two mixed-race children with a Polynesian woman—and the parallel inability of Lieut. Joseph Cable, of Philadelphia’s Main Line by way of Princeton, to imagine a life with Liat, the beautiful Tonkinese with whom he has fallen improbably in love.

“It’s just that—people—I mean—they say it never works,” Nellie tells Cable, in explaining her fear. “Don’t they?”

“They do,” Cable replies. “And then everybody does their damndest to prove it.”

Those lines do not appear in my battered 1949 copy of the published play. Bert Fink, senior vice president for communications at the Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization, tells me that the R & H president, Ted Chapin, found them in a first-day-of-rehearsal script from the original production, and passed them on to the director of the current revival, Bartlett Sher.

Such sentiments were apparently too edgy for audience sensibilities in Jim Crow America. But they seem ripped from the headlines in a year when Barack Obama, that mixed-race son of the Central Pacific, is running for president and Mark Penn, the chief strategist for his fellow Democrat Hillary Clinton, pronounces him “unelectable, except perhaps against Attila the Hun.” Talk about self-fulfilling prophecies!

When *South Pacific* opened, many critics found “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught,” Cable’s cri de coeur against prejudice, to be preachy, an earnest, distracting aside. In 1953, when the national company of the play toured Georgia, a couple of state legislators tried to ban it, on the grounds that it had “an underlying philosophy inspired by Moscow.”

But Oscar Hammerstein knew that those words (“You’ve got to be taught, before it’s too late, before you are six, or seven, or eight, to hate all the people your relatives hate...”) were precisely the point of a play about the *United States*

of America in wartime. "It's no undercover propaganda," he told *The New York Times* when the Georgia gentlemen launched their broadside. "If they don't like it, that's too bad."

As circumstances have shown, Barack Obama doesn't have the luxury of uttering such unvarnished sentiments. But as he returns from his week in Hawaii with the white grandmother who helped raise him, I couldn't help wishing that his mother, a girl from Kansas who fell in love with a black man on a faraway island long ago, were still alive so he could take her to Lincoln Center, and make her proud.

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