

## Grass Skirts Gone Galore

Easy Reader, 26 July 2007

How can a person go wrong with the great musical theater provided by a Rodgers and Hammerstein score? The answer is, you can't! Originally taken from James Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific*, the play "South Pacific" was first performed on Broadway in 1949 and was later made into a movie (1958) it is the quintessential timeless story of love and war and even though nearly 60 years have passed, its inspiring message still resonates with today's audiences.

There is a lot to like about this show as it offers a good plot and two great love stories. It also gives a serious look at racial discrimination and the heartbreak caused by war. But, it's really the music that hooks us. It's the remarkable score by Rodgers and Hammerstein that really sets this show apart from others. The stunning twosome enjoyed great success in writing for musical theater. Their partnership, beginning in 1943, ended with Hammerstein's death in 1960. Rodgers continued on, collaborating with others (Lorenz Hart, et. al.) and working solo until his death in 1979.

The story has a lot of charisma and opens with the wonderful love that springs between Nellie Forbush (Angela Asch), and the mature French landowner/planter, Emil de Becque (Ronald M. Banks) on that "one" enchanted evening.

Back at the naval base are hoards of bored Seabees. Enter fast-talking Luther Billis (Jeff Asch), a con artist intent on getting to the neighboring island of Bali Ha'i one way or another, even though it is under military restriction. It seems this is where Bloody Mary (Flora Morin) goes for grass skirts and shrunken heads (ugh). It also happens to be, by (ahem) coincidence, where all the island women have been secluded while the islands are occupied by U. S. forces. When young Marine Lt. Joseph Cable (Nathaniel Cowden) comes to the base, Luther's opportunity to visit the forbidden island arrives with him. Bloody Mary takes one look at Cable and determines that he is the right man to marry her beautiful daughter Liat (Meghan Penny), who resides on Bali Ha'i. It seems that Mary's dream will come true when the two meet and fall madly in love, but Lt. Cable must take into consideration that he has been especially sent to the naval base for an extremely dangerous assignment, one he feels obligated to carry out, no matter the outcome.

As parts of a huge and talented cast, Jeff Asch as Billis, and Flora Morin as Bloody Mary are standouts and almost steal the show as both give terrific, perfectly timed comedic performances. But, we also have, in the more serious role of deBecque, the attractive baritone, Ronald M. Banks. He is a compelling leading man starring opposite Angela Asch. As Nellie Forbush, she shows that is a capable singer and dancer and she doubles as the show's choreographer.

The full orchestra (conducted by Mark Aguero) sometimes drowns out the dialog. Still the orchestra shined in its performances of "There is Nothing Like a Dame," "I'm Gonna Wash that Man Right Out of My Hair," and the dreamy "Bali Ha'i". We were sad along with Emile when he sang "This Nearly Was Mine." Our thoughts were provoked as "You've Got to be Taught (to hate and fear)" responds to racism. On the lighter side, there were favorites such as "Happy Talk" and "Honey Bun." This is one of those musicals where almost every song is instantly recognizable.

In spite of a slow beginning and a few minor technical problems, The Aerospace Players seem to have a winner with "South Pacific." The play was long – almost three hours—but the show

moved at such a good pace that I honestly couldn't see where anything could be, or should be cut. It was all relevant and necessary to the story. The play really took off when Banks began singing the first magical strains of "Some Enchanted Evening."

As the performers gathered backstage after the show, I was able to grasp the full scope of their commitment. This company did everything from working on the sets to directing. There are also a couple of full-time acting professionals in the cast, Ronald Banks and Jeff Asch, both members of Actor's Equity Association.

Artistic Director is Jeff Asch and technical director / set designer is Chuck Gustafson. Costumer are by Pam McNulty and producer is JoMarie Rosser.

"South Pacific" is a first class musical and is playing through this weekend at the James Armstrong Theater