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Desegregation Through Entertainment: Rodgers and Hammerstein's South Pacific as an Instrument of Military Policy

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Cover Page Footnote

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Desegregation Through Entertainment: Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* as an Instrument of Military Policy

Leana Sottile
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Introduction

Upon seeing the Broadway musical *South Pacific* at New York's Majestic Theatre in 1949, Pacific War veteran Richard M. Young, felt himself "slip right back to 1944 and '45 and felt every emotion, as if [he] were living it all over" again and captured "those moments of beauty, of horror, of joy, of sadness" he experienced during war.¹ For many people across America, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's musical *South Pacific* was more than an average Broadway show or piece of World War II memory. The musical represented the dichotomy between the need for an escapist fantasy and the need to reflect on wartime and postwar America in mainstream entertainment. Whether it be in advertising, that utilized the show's songs ("Some Enchanting Eating" as a play on "Some Enchanting Evening") or the didactic use of "You've Got to be Carefully Taught" in classrooms and by activist groups, *South Pacific* was a popular culture phenomenon embedded in American hearts and minds.² The show was notably favored by the American military, which sanctioned productions by the United Service Organizations (USO) and Department of Defense, both domestically and internationally. Additionally, war veterans flocked to and connected with the show that "sent [them] back to those aching wonderful, heartbreaking months" of wartime service, and if they couldn't go to the theatre, the show was brought to them in veteran's hospitals.³

The collaboration between the American Armed Services and its related organizations and Surrey Enterprises Inc., Rodgers and Hammerstein's production company, was not a new

¹ Letter to Mary Martin from Richard M. Young, Box 50, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

² Letter to Mr. L. Spier from Paris & Peart Advertising, 1949, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. ; Letter to Oscar Hammerstein II from Miss Helen I. Davis, February 10, 1950, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³ Letter to Mary Martin from Richard M. Young.

phenomenon. The two groups had collaborated during World War II by getting service members to see *Oklahoma!* at the St. James Theatre before leaving for duty, but the scale of collaboration on *South Pacific* was unprecedented, both in the show's development process and the incentivization to get active duty service members and veterans to see the show once it premiered.⁴ This begs the question: why did the American military use the musical *South Pacific* in its postwar military entertainment? The mythologization and exoticization of military service in the musical, combined with its thematic promotion of racial tolerance concurrent with the military's changing culture made *South Pacific* an appropriate show to present to current and former service members. The show eased the shock of desegregation of the military by means other than physical action such as integrating units and color-blind hiring. In this case, a piece of morale-building, military-supporting theatrical entertainment was used as a soft power to socialize the military towards tolerance.⁵ The show's anti-racist sentiment, cloaked in the veil of wartime nostalgia and mythologization of service in the Pacific Theater of Operations, fit well into a military culture under racial integration following Executive Order 9981.

This project highlights how *South Pacific* serves as a composite of postwar American memory and history with a specific focus on the show's employment by the military and related organizations. While most research that is specific to *South Pacific* focuses on the show's role in promoting racial tolerance, the research forgets the musical's backdrop is the incredibly brutal Pacific Theatre. Instead of grappling with wartime realities and examining the rough interplay of war, myth, and memory, the show fosters the image of World War II as a nostalgic 'Good War,' an image that positively serves military and personnel popular opinion. This project illuminates

⁴ Tim Carter, *Oklahoma!: The Making of an American Musical*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 147.

⁵ The term 'soft power' refers to the act of shaping something else through attraction and appeal, as opposed to coercion and force. In political science and foreign policy the term usually refers to dissemination values and using things like culture and economic influence to achieve one's purpose.

why and how the musical was pervasive in postwar military entertainment by comparing the lived experience of wartime service to the show's mythologized history of the war. It also examines the show's complex racial politics and highlights the musical's collaboration with and utilization by the American military.

Background History

Based on the 1947 short story collection *Tales of the South Pacific* by James A. Michener and set in the Solomon Islands, the plot of musical *South Pacific* revolves around two sets of romances on islands in this geographic region during the Second World War. The primary plot follows a naïve Alabaman nurse, Nellie Forbush, who falls in love with Emile de Becque, a French expatriate and plantation owner. Played by Mary Martin and Ezio Pinza in the original Broadway production, the couple's main obstacle is that Nellie cannot accept de Becque's mixed-race children with a Polynesian woman. After Emile leaves near the end of the show for a scouting mission to prepare for Operation Alligator, Nellie realizes the folly of her racial prejudice but believes it is too late when she expects he has perished on the mission. Instead of leaving the island to participate in the next offensive, Nellie spends time caring for Emile's children, and is thrilled when he returns, alive and well. The second romantic plot concerns Lieutenant Joe Cable, USMC, who is in love with Liat, a beautiful Tonkinese islander. He doubts how his family and the greater society will react to him marrying an Asian woman due to deep-seated racism. Joe plans to stay on Bali'hai and away from American prejudice after the war, but he is killed in action during the scouting mission with Emile on a Japanese-held island. The show's side-plots follow the United States Naval Construction Battalion Members, or Seabees, in their comedic island misadventures before they, too, go off to battle on Operation Alligator.

It is important to note that while the United States Armed Forces did not fund or push for the creation of the book *Tales of the South Pacific* or the musical *South Pacific* in any way, two of its most important creators, James A. Michener and Joshua Logan, were both military men. The author of *Tales of the South Pacific*, James A. Michener, served as a Lieutenant Commander of the United States Naval Reserve in the South Pacific areas during the Second World War; his experiences inspired him to write the short story collection. Although he was not stationed in the Pacific Theater, Joshua Logan, the show's director and co-librettist with Oscar Hammerstein II, was a U.S Army Captain serving as an intelligence and public relations officer. Logan also directed several shows for the soldiers near the front lines, including Irving Berlin's *This is the Army*. Both men spent their formative years in the American military, which adds layers of authenticity to the piece which might have been lost in translation from page to stage. Oscar Hammerstein II, by contrast, wasn't a military man and according to Joshua Logan, "[Hammerstein] found it difficult to write military speech and slang."⁶ Without Logan's assistance the play might have looked a lot different, as he dictated all the scenes that had to do with the military. That being said, Michener's book established the nuances of service in the armed forces, but the worst horrors of warfare in some of the stories were not adapted in the musical. As opposed to leaning into more realistic accounts of the war, the musical instead writes out some of Michener's criticisms of the military and war and opts for romantic escapism. Additionally, while neither Rodgers nor Hammerstein served in the war, each still did their part in supporting the war effort, such as providing tickets to servicemen to the musical *Oklahoma!*⁷

⁶ Draft of Interview Answers for 20th Century Fox, Box 125, Folder 9, Joshua Logan Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷ The company provided a limited number of complimentary tickets, cheap standing room only tickets, and cheap-rate matinees for service members in New York. Carter, Tim, *Oklahoma!: The Making of an American Musical*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 149.

The latter show was also used to entertain American troops in the Pacific Theater with one of their international companies' USO unit in 1945.⁸

South Pacific was considered a critical and box office success.⁹ The original run of the show from April 7, 1949 to January 16, 1954 played a total of 1925 performances at New York's Majestic Theatre.¹⁰ The musical also received nine Tony Awards in 1950 and the 1950 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Additionally, it has been adapted for the screen twice, in 1958 and 2001, and was revived on West End twice in 1988 and 2001. The show also was revived on Broadway once in 2008 in a production staged at Lincoln Center in New York City.¹¹ More than just another musical on Broadway, *South Pacific* was a national and international phenomenon, making it an apt musical to examine.

⁸ Ann Sears, "The Coming of the Musical Play: Rodgers and Hammerstein" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical 2nd ed.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 150.

⁹ Throughout the original run of the production and the filming of the 1958 movie, the musical was mentioned almost daily in sources like the *New York Herald Tribune*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Post*, and *Variety*. It was the subject of rave reviews and the actors received paparazzi-like coverage. Additionally, the box office success of the show was so vast that it was almost impossible to secure tickets, making Rodgers and Hammerstein the recipients of copious complimentary ticket requests and disappointed fan mail from those who could not get seats. Letter to Oscar Hammerstein II from Mrs. Joseph C. Marody, December 20, 1949, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰ "South Pacific," Playbill, New York City, New York, Accessed 20 April 2020, <https://www.playbill.com/production/south-pacific-majestic-theatre-vault-0000007854>.

¹¹ The 1958 film was directed by Joshua Logan, starred Mitzi Gaynor and Rosanno Brazzi, and was distributed by Twentieth Century Fox Productions. The 2001 TV movie adaptation was directed by Richard Pearce, starred Glenn Close and Harry Conick Jr., and was distributed by the American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). On West End, the Prince of Wales Theatre's 1988 revival was directed by Roger Redfern and starred Gemma Craven and Emile Belcourt, and the Olivier Theatre's 2001 production was directed by Trevor Dunn and starred Lauren Kennedy and Philip Quast. The 2008 production at Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont Theater was directed by Bartlett Sher and starred Kelli O'Hara and Paulo Szot. This production was the subject of rave reviews, played 996 regular performances from April 3, 2008 to August 22, 2010, and received seven Tony Awards. There was an additional revival at Lincoln Center in 1967, directed by Joe Layton and starring Florence Henderson and Giorgio Tozzi, but many do not consider it an official Broadway revival. The show has also seen two United States national tours, in 1950 and 2009, and one in the United Kingdom in 2007.

Historiography

South Pacific has been the subject of musical theatre scholarship due to its popular success. The musical was one of Rodgers and Hammerstein's integrated musicals, utilizing musical numbers to forward the narrative, and was a notably progressive, crowd-pleasing show. Most of the discourse from musical theatre historians surrounding *South Pacific* lies in its portrayal of racial politics and gender roles. Whereas many musical theater histories acknowledge *South Pacific*, the foundational monograph on the musical is Vanderbilt professor Jim Lovensheimer's *South Pacific: Paradise Rewritten* (2010). Lovensheimer argues *South Pacific* "walked a fine line" between following society's expectations to become a "critical success" and tackling "political controversy."¹² Through the writing process, the show achieved the balance the creators sought by taking dramatic license with racial politics and gender roles.¹³ The musical draws attention to the irony Americans were fighting for equality and freedom during World War II, while simultaneously exhibiting dehumanizing racist attitudes at home and abroad. In fear of being deemed too leftist, Rodgers and Hammerstein made this paradox more palatable to audiences by adhering to the status quo regarding its depiction of traditional gender norms and colonialism.

Lovensheimer also builds off the work of several interdisciplinary scholars who have published works regarding the musical in their respective fields of study, such as literature or women's studies. Prominent University of Toronto professor Andrea Most's article, "'You've Got to Be Carefully Taught': The Politics of Race in Rodgers and Hammerstein's 'South Pacific,'" originally published in *Theatre Journal* in 2000, remains one of most defining articles on race in *South Pacific*. The article explores the paradox of the distant 'oriental' setting of the

¹² Jim Lovensheimer, *South Pacific: Paradise Rewritten*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

¹³ Lovensheimer, *South Pacific*, 3.

musical and “distinctly American” narrative regarding racial politics that allowed “the musical to redefine itself... instead as an art.”¹⁴ Most forwards the idea that the musical was not only entertainment but also served as a form of sociopolitical commentary on contemporary American society. Additionally, women’s and LGBT+ studies scholar Stacy Wolf, in her book *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (2002), dedicates a section to Mary Martin’s character Nellie Forbush, who transitions over the course of the play from working as a nurse in the public sphere to becoming a stepmother in the private sphere. Wolf argues that due to the “conservative, sexist, and homophobic” cultural norms of the 1950s, female leads in musicals had to submit to the period’s status quo of domesticity and heterosexuality, and Nellie Forbush is one of its victims.¹⁵

South Pacific has also been the subject of many articles in scholarly journals such as the *Journal of American Studies* and *Theatre Journal* and has been given dedicated sections in both monographs on Rodgers and Hammerstein, as well as larger surveys of musical theatre history of both the 1940s and past century. That being said, very little of the scholarly work regarding *South Pacific* emphasizes the show’s physical setting within the Second World War in the Pacific Theatre. There is a gap in the historiography in examining the musical’s important role as a piece of World War II memory which premiered four years after the war that is steeped in wartime nostalgia and romanticism. While the musical is set during wartime, little has been done to examine *South Pacific*’s interplay with war, myth, and memory, which is one of the points this thesis seeks to fill the historiographical gap.

¹⁴ Andrea Most, “You’ve Got to be Carefully Taught” in *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 155.

¹⁵ Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 9.

How *South Pacific* Mythologized World War II

“Let’s leap to a conclusion at the outset and establish the fact that neither the play nor the movie version of “*South Pacific*” was ever meant to be a documentary on what happened in those latitudes during World War II.”¹⁶

The military approved of *South Pacific* because the show mythologized World War II. The play underwent several revisions, and with every version, its narrative moved further away from the historical truth regarding soldiers’ experiences in the Pacific Theater. While the creators sought to make *South Pacific* as accurate as possible, the musical is still a piece of Second World War memory and historical fiction several degrees separated from historical fact. The work started off as memories and oral histories that were turned into a fictional short story collection by James A. Michener, which was reshaped by the edits of the Macmillan Publishing company. Next, it was then selectively adapted into a musical play, and finally was performed on stage by the show’s company led by a director’s vision. These gaps between each of the multiple degrees of separation are where losses in translation occur, turning actual history and primary source accounts into romanticized, sentimental fiction.

Historians have shown that the Pacific War for American armed forces was much more brutal and savage than the war in Europe. The Pacific Theater was, in large part, a race war. As opposed to the European fronts where people were fighting people of similar heritage, languages, and ancestral places of origin, the Americans fighting on the Pacific front saw themselves radically different from the Japanese they were fighting. Due to the differences in language, culture and race, it became easier for Americans to ‘pseudo-speciate’ the Japanese people as a subhuman menace, which was reinforced through rhetoric, propaganda, and the media.¹⁷ Due to

¹⁶ Frank Farrell, “Premiere of Emotions” *New York World-Telegram and Sun*. March 20, 1958.

¹⁷ John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 1-14.

the dehumanization of the enemy, savagery in warfare was easier to justify and carry out without hesitation. Additionally, the combat environment of the Pacific was characterized by disease, complicated foreign geography, and the harsh climate, making the combat experience both frustrating and exhausting. Compared to the urban and rural environments in Europe, the Pacific Theater was characterized by island hopping and a natural environment that needed to be mastered to defeat the Japanese.¹⁸ In conjunction and motivation with the idea of a race war, American soldiers destroyed the environment with weapons designed to wipe out soldiers, civilians, and nature alike, with a backdrop of modern industrial warfare.

South Pacific is effectively silent on the brutality of World War II as a whole, and even more notably, in the Pacific Theater. The lack of military action and wartime brutality in the show finds expression in the fact that it takes place in the war's rear areas and most of the featured ensemble military personnel are either nurses, members of United States Naval Construction Battalions, or Seabees.¹⁹ In this regard, the play accurately portrays non-combatants, but by focusing mostly on these groups, it distracts the audience from the far more brutal history of the war. More akin to a daily job than a traditional military one, when not on duty these men watched movies, drank Cokes, and explored the islands they were stationed on in their downtime, which was not a luxury offered to most combatants.²⁰ Most of the characters in

¹⁸ The Allies utilized the military strategy of island hopping in the Pacific Theater, which entailed the assumption of control and establishment of a base on a key island, and then using that island as a launching point to take over another island, and so on. This allowed the Allies to move defended areas of control closer to the Japanese mainland and work to help blockade Japan by cutting off their supply lines.

¹⁹ During World War II, United States Naval Construction Battalions, or Seabees were groups of militarized construction workers who built advanced base developments largely in Pacific warzones. Recruited from the Civil Engineer Corps and construction laborers, Seabees received military training and constructed over four hundred bases during the war. "Seabee History: Formation of the Seabees and World War II," Naval History and Heritage Command, US Navy, Washington, D.C., Washington, D.C., Accessed 4 April 2020, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/h/history-of-seabees/ww2.html>.

²⁰ Andrew Harman, "The Coney Island of the South Pacific." *Visions and Revisions*, v. 1 (June 2017): 10-12, <http://visionsandrevisions.cs.edinboro.edu/index.php/visions/article/view/1>.

South Pacific experienced this side of the war, as opposed to physical combat, but this does not excuse the silence on wartime savagery within the sectors of the play that deal with combatants. Non-combat and military support personnel have largely been sidelined in the World War II narrative because they do not depict tales of heroism and valor like combat memoirs do, so *South Pacific* is important in providing popular culture representation for these wartime experiences.²¹

By not discussing service experiences that aren't traditionally seen as heroic, there is no way to achieve a complete picture of wartime service in the Pacific areas, but *South Pacific*'s depiction leaves much to be desired. The benign depiction of wartime service finds expression in the musical's comedic moments, such as when Colonel Brackett discovers that the Seabees are "sitting around in sewing circles" to meet the demand for grass skirts on the island.²² During Act I Scene III, it is revealed that Bloody Mary, a Tonkinese woman, is stirring up economic troubles on the island because she is paying the islanders to make grass skirts instead of working for the French plantation owners, who are helping serve the war effort. The show's comedic relief, Seabee Luther Billis, reveals the Seabees are making the skirts so the islanders can return to their farm work, which appalls the island's commanding officers. Instead of highlighting physical construction work and hard labor these men would be performing as part of their service, they are pictured making kitschy island paraphernalia like grass skirts and poorly made shrunken heads out of oranges. While these men would have had free time, the fact they are spending their time so ridiculously effectively makes a mockery out of them for nostalgic and comedic purposes, which furthers the show from the realities of the Pacific Theater.

²¹ The other notable piece of media depicting Seabees is the 1944 film, *The Fighting Seabees*, which was directed by Edward Ludwig, starred John Wayne and Susan Hayward and was distributed by Republic Pictures. It fictionalized the story of how the Seabees came to be and, as it came out during the war, exhibited gratuitous patriotism and anti-Japanese sentiment.

²² Oscar Hammerstein II and Joshua Logan, "South Pacific," (New York: Williamson Music Inc., 1949), 25.

South Pacific works well as a war musical because it illustrates the idea that war is oftentimes large periods of inaction with bursts of action. However, the musical takes this to an extreme and relegates combat to a very minor role which poorly serves the play's historical accuracy and helps to further mythologize the war. One of the most striking elements in *South Pacific* is that for a play that centers around the Second World War, the war's physical action happens off-stage. The whole musical builds up to a single military operation, the fictitious Operation Alligator, which audience members never witness. All information given about wartime operations are relayed through radio messages and mission briefings on base, and Lieutenant Cable dies in combat off-stage, which downplays the emotional and plot impact of his passing on audiences.²³ Instead of seeing him die, audiences only hear about it in passing, which effectively silences the toll of death in a time of war. The play also leaves off with the Navy stationed on the island awaiting transport in battle uniform, indicating there is fighting still to be done, whereas Nellie stays back on the island to raise Emile's children, for the man she presumes is dead.

Similarly, the play glorifies World War II by showing a romanticized role for women in their roles as nurses. During World War II, while most women served in munitions jobs and supported the war effort on the home front, one of the largest ways women were actively involved was through the Army Nurse Corps. The popular and prevailing dichotomy was that women were meant to be the caretakers while men were meant to be soldiers, which the Second World War reinforced. Due to this, nursing remained a very gendered profession and thus the Army Nurse Corps (ANC) sought to keep men out of the picture as nurses, who were largely

²³ Hammerstein and Logan, "South Pacific," 87.

young, unmarried, female, white recruits.²⁴ The Army Nurse Corps served in both the European and Pacific Theatres and worked almost non-stop, serving as major factors in raising the morale of soldiers and sailors alike.²⁵ *South Pacific*'s nurse characters are cookie-cutter versions of the young, unmarried, female, white image that the ANC perpetuated.

The ANC's model nurse is fully realized in the main female lead, Nellie Forbush, a self-proclaimed cockeyed optimist who works tirelessly towards the morale of the Armed Forces. When Nellie is first introduced in the song "A Cockeyed Optimist," she proclaims that while people believe the war "[is] done and [they] might as well be dead," she "can't get it into [her] head" because she is full of hope and optimism.²⁶ As opposed to seeing the realities presented to her, Nellie believes that everyone can and will persevere through the hardships of war and that nothing can hold her back. This can-do attitude is paired with a devotion to military morale as the Master of Ceremonies and one of the organizers for the island's 'Thanksgiving Follies' revue for the troops. Nellie helps announce the performance to the G.I. audience and performs "Honeybun," one of the most notable numbers in the musical for Mary Martin's performance in a drag sailor's outfit. Richard M. Young, a Pacific Theater veteran, attended the show and later wrote to Mary Martin that her performance as Nellie "the kind of girl that [they] all dreamed of and thought about down there" during the war and how she "[was] America, [she was] home."²⁷ In ways, Nellie also represents the woman the veterans got to return home to as well. While women were employed members of the public sphere during the war, they returned to the

²⁴ Barbara Brooks Tomblin, *G.I. Nightingales: The Army Nurse Corps in World War II*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 10, Accessed 21 April 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jctds.

Charissa J. Threat, *Nursing Civil Rights: Gender and Race in the Army Nurse Corps*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 2-6, 24, Accessed 21 April 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt13x1ks4.5.

²⁵ Tomblin, *G.I. Nightingales*, 10; Threat, *Nursing Civil Rights*, 2-6, 24.

²⁶ Hammerstein and Logan, "South Pacific," 6.

²⁷ Letter to Mary Martin from Richard M. Young.

private, domestic sphere post-war. Nellie similarly takes this journey, starting as a model nurse and by the end of the show forgoes joining her fellow nurses for Operation Alligator and transitions to the model mother of Emile's children and woman of the plantation house. Even though Nellie is only an Ensign, she is a model nurse that represents exactly what an ANC nurse was meant to be and a snapshot of the idealized woman of the period.

The play idealizes the relationship between the American Armed Forces and the populations on the islands where the military was stationed. During the war, island populations helped the armed forces on both sides of the war. Some sought to free themselves from colonial rule and saw Japanese victories as inspiration that other Asian populations could stand up to the white colonizers. Some sympathized with the Japanese despite their harsh occupation regime, while others such as Filipinos helped the Allied causes through combat, shipbuilding, and agriculture.²⁸ In the Solomon Islands, where *South Pacific* is set, the Allies recruited islanders to serve in a labor corps and had contact with people they otherwise would have been segregated from during colonial rule. Additionally, people's engagement with American goods and values of egalitarianism inspired people to want self-rule post-war, which wouldn't become a reality until 1978.²⁹

In the play, more focus is placed on the enlistment of the colonial forces on the island, as opposed to the colonized who are relegated to a minor role. Colonel Brackett enlists Emile in the dangerous operation to go on a scouting mission with Lieutenant Cable and help "turn...the tide of the war in their area."³⁰ Brackett's proposal is an example of the United States Armed Forces

²⁸ Gary Y. Okihiro, *World War II, American History Unbound: Asians and Pacific Islanders*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 356-57, Accessed 20 April 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1wxqh8.

²⁹ Ralph R. Premdas "The Solomon Islands : Independence and Political Change / Les Iles Salomon : Indépendance et Changement Politique." *Civilisations* 33, no. 2 (1983): 230-231, www.jstor.org/stable/41803069.

³⁰ Hammerstein and Logan, "South Pacific," 46.

working with the local (often non-native) population during the war and recruiting them for help. While Emile is a Frenchman, and not a Polynesian, his involvement is still an example of how the war fostered globalization and often became integrated into local societies. The indigenous populations in the show, however, are largely dissociated from the war effort and are presented as people that are of service to or cause trouble in colonial society. The show has a “French colonialist presence...apparent” throughout, which is emphasized by the use of the French language by all of the local peoples, except for Bloody Mary, who is one of the show’s anticolonial models.³¹ Henry, Emile’s French-speaking native servant, has no agency within the play and is only there to serve the de Becque family of the plantation house, making him an example of a ‘civilized’ Pacific Islander who has acclimated to colonial society. He serves as a contrast to Bloody Mary, who constantly comments how the “French planters [are] stingy bastards” and stirs up trouble to get the islanders to work for her by making island paraphernalia instead of doing their farm work.³² While the island politics are treated largely as comedic moments, there is a clear expectation that the plantation owners and their tenants will be helping support the US military presence on the island, and those who disrupt this process are trespassing on Navy property.

The musical effectively glamorizes service in the Pacific Theater to an unrealistic extent. From the start of the show, there is a visual emphasis on the tropical, exotic, escapist nature of the play’s setting in a world painted with the colors of the “purple bougainvillea, flaming hibiscus, and the yellow and white blossoms of the frangipani.”³³ The show’s overtly gorgeous tropical setting and the allure of the beauty of Bali’hai is not only an escape for the audience but

³¹ Lovensheimer, *South Pacific*, 176.

³² Hammerstein and Logan, “*South Pacific*,” 21, 25.

³³ Hammerstein and Logan, “*South Pacific*,” 4.

also serves as one for the servicemen who believe “There ain’t a thing wrong with any man here, That can’t be cured by putting him near a girly, womanly, female, feminine, DAME!”³⁴ While many men facing diseases like malaria, and coping with PTSD and fatal injuries probably wouldn’t agree with this sentiment, the song “There Is Nothing Like a Dame” serves to downplay the war’s real horrors, for a comedic song on the struggles of not having easily accessible women for carnal purposes.

One of the most significant ways *South Pacific* serves to generate nostalgia is in the scenes at the top of Act II for the island’s ‘Thanksgiving Follies’ performance for the troops, evocative of the Soldier Shows and amateur theatrical performances put on by service personnel for service personnel. These shows had “inestimable therapeutic effect value” for both the audiences and participants and were different from the professional Camp Shows organized by the United Service Organizations (USO).³⁵ Extremely amateur, the revue in *South Pacific* is costumed in rope, newspapers, and comic books, and the GIs in attendance are sitting on ammunition boxes. Additionally, the crew struggles with problems like people forgetting to put gas in the generator to power the show, which speaks to the ragtag nature of the well-meaning entertainment.³⁶ However, as Colonel Brackett claims “It’s things...like this show tonight that keep [them] going” especially as the Allies are “having the hell beat out of [them] in two hemispheres.”³⁷ The revue serves as a way to uphold morale until things take a turn for the better and foster a sense of hope and community among the service members, nurses, and locals on the island as they try to make themselves a temporary home before they can return to the United

³⁴ Hammerstein and Logan, “South Pacific,” 20.

³⁵ Lowell Matson, “Theatre for the Armed Forces in World War II” in *Educational Theatre Journal* 6, no. 1 (1954), 5-7, Accessed 21 April 2020. DOI:10.2307/3204158.

³⁶ Hammerstein and Logan, “South Pacific,” 62-65, 70.

³⁷ Hammerstein and Logan, “South Pacific,” 70

States. The scene documents the entertainment experiences of the war while also celebrating the perseverance of the spirit and sense of fraternity that came with American military service during the Second World War.

Additionally, in scenes where characters discuss the war, hardships are mentioned, but often off-handedly. When Lieutenant Cable arrives on base on the directive from his Marine commanding officers, all of the Seabees whistle and are intrigued to hear that he's been "up where they use real bullets."³⁸ While the dialogue mentions in off-hand ways that there is fighting going on in nearby areas of the Pacific, the nature of this is never discussed in-depth and is instead glossed over to usher in a comedic scene, where there could have been more emotional depth. For example, in the second act, Lieutenant Cable is revealed to have contracted malaria on the island of Bali'Hai and has been hospitalized for it.³⁹ Instead of taking the illness seriously, he leaves the hospital without being discharged to get back over to Bali'Hai to be with Liat. While he is chastised, it poses no lasting impacts on his military record beyond a few lines in the show.⁴⁰ The show's mentions of combat and disease acknowledge there are more grisly things going on, but not enough so that it detracts from the show's major romantic plots and themes.

The song "My Girl Back Home", which was omitted from the original production and restored for the film and subsequent revivals, tries to acknowledge some of the more complex struggles of serving men, but ultimately still falls short. Cable sings about his girl back home, his family's plans for him and his future, and how they don't understand what he's experiencing as

³⁸ Hammerstein and Logan, "South Pacific," 21.

³⁹ Hammerstein and Logan, "South Pacific," 66.

⁴⁰ In the 2008 revival of *South Pacific* at Lincoln Center, Lieutenant's Cable's acting for a majority of the second act is informed by the malaria he's contracted, and acts physically unwell and dazed, which gives more gravity to the disease's reality. There is no stage directions in the libretto directing this, largely implying it is a choice potential choice that some actors or directors interpret for their productions, but brings *South Pacific* more accuracy in small ways than the original production presented.

they are so far away back in the States. However, when discussing some of what he's experienced as a USMC Lieutenant, it all comes back to "coconut palms and banyan trees and coral sands."⁴¹ As opposed to expressing longing for home or detailing his combat service, the song instead romanticizes Cable's experiences in the South Pacific, where he ultimately wants to stay after the war to escape the racism and pressure his family in Philadelphia places on him. This song is strong commentary on America's deep-seated racial views and serves the show's message about racial tolerance. However, in doing so it romanticizes the setting of the Pacific Theatre, helping further dissociate it from the grim realities of the war experience.

No matter what the context, be it drama or comedy, at points where the *South Pacific* could have nuanced discussions about the Second World War, it all comes back to the same notions of island escapism presented by the play. The musical, while an important piece of war memory that came in within five years post-war, is a piece of heavily glamorized historical fiction.

***South Pacific* and Pushing the Discourse of Race in America**

While *South Pacific* is set against the background of the Second World War, more than anything Rogers and Hammerstein saw an opportunity to make a statement about racial politics in contemporary America. The show was meant to critique the fact that Americans fought a war against enemies they perceived as racist when "their own racism remain[ed] unresolved" and continued even past the war's conclusion.⁴² In the late 1940s, America had complicated racial politics as tensions remained high, especially in the American South that still faced segregation

⁴¹ "My Girl Back Home" Sheet Music and Lyrics, Box 16, Folder 9, Richard Rodgers Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴² Lovensheimer, *South Pacific*, 1.

under Jim Crow laws. Additionally, there was a deep fear of race riots erupting, especially in cities, as white America struggled to face their racism and present America as a place of democracy and integrity.⁴³ In the heat of the Cold War, both America and the Soviet Union tried to emphasize equal worth and dignity of their respective peoples, and the United States was not practicing what it preached. The Soviet Union wanted to “prove to the world that America violated the human right rules” in its treatment of civil rights for people of color, and some Americans noticed this embarrassing discrepancy and were displeased.⁴⁴ Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II aimed to include the theme of racial prejudice in the United States in their musical steeped in tropical escapism and the values of the American spirit and militarism.

Due to its presentation of traditional gender norms and American values *South Pacific* would be considered an uncontroversial show would it not be for the cynical song “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught,” an open condemnation of racial prejudice. It caused a hotbed of discussion as to whether it was appropriate for Rodgers and Hammerstein to tackle such a divisive topic. The full lyrics of the song are as follows:

*You’ve got to be taught
To hate and fear,
You’ve got to be taught
From year to year,
It’s got to be drummed
In your dear little ear
You’ve got to be carefully
taught.*

*You’ve got to be taught to be
afraid
Of people whose eyes are
oddly made,
And people whose skin is a
different shade,
You’ve got to be carefully
taught.*

*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,
You’ve got to be carefully
taught!⁴⁵*

⁴³ Peter J. Kellogg, “Civil Rights Consciousness in the 1940s,” in *The Historian* 42, no. 1 (1979), 18, 40-41. Accessed 21 April 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24445286.

⁴⁴ John David Skrentny, “The Effect of the Cold War on African-American Civil Rights: America and the World Audience, 1945-1968” in *Theory and Society* 27, no. 2 (1998), 42, 45, Accessed 22 April 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/657868.

⁴⁵ Hammerstein and Logan, “South Pacific,” 77.

Up until this point, the question of race in the show is handled rather subtly, but once the show reaches Act II, Scene IV, the show's message becomes more than clear. In this scene, Nellie, the American nurse from Little Rock, Arkansas, tries to find Lieutenant Joe Cable to talk about her transfer to a different base. She has doubts about her planned marriage to Emile de Becque due to her prejudice against the children produced by Emile's past interracial relationship with a Polynesian woman. Raised in Little Rock, Nellie has deep-seated racist beliefs, which the French character Emile de Becque is not able to comprehend. Lieutenant Cable explains to de Becque that racism is a learned, not inherent, behavior in America, which he wants to escape through the aforementioned song "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught."

The goal of "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught" is to highlight the ugly side of American racism and present it as a nature versus nurture issue, which is, in Rodgers and Hammerstein's opinion, a nurture problem. The song highlights how people are conditioned to have racist beliefs by their families and surroundings when they are children and will proceed to carry this sentiment through the rest of their lives. This refers to the racism harbored by white America against people of color, most likely in direct reference to Asians, implied through the stereotypical reference to 'oddly made' eyes as well as to African Americans, implied through the reference to a "different shade" of non-white skin. This song both chastises Nellie within the play and the audience members who may believe their racist beliefs are inherent, and thus are unable to be changed or altered. The notion racism is taught also means it can be unlearned so that people can be socialized towards tolerance, an important step toward empathy on the personal level and civil rights on the societal level. The song is the most overtly political statement in the show, because whereas the rest of the show is more subtle and nuanced in terms of racial discourse, its bluntness cannot be missed.

The song is the show's most overt attempt at conveying the creative team's message of racial tolerance to the audiences, and it was so progressive that it made some audiences very anxious. Yet it was problematic for some audience members, who saw the number as an "abrupt...halt...for a double-barrel three-minute commercial."⁴⁶ Several more conservative theatergoers were unable to enjoy that part of the show, and felt that a lecture on racial tolerance was being shoved in their faces. One of these was Lieutenant Commander McWorther, who was appalled that military characters had views on race contrary to his own. McWorther, like many other conservative audience members, thought most of the show cushions the dialogue about race "subtly and with good taste," however there was still an inherent problem with the show's explicit message.⁴⁷ Not even the tropical setting that exoticized war and depictions of traditional gender roles was enough to deter from the show stirring up controversy.

As opposed to giving in to the backlash and softening the message, Oscar Hammerstein II was fine with the song as written because he believed "prejudice exist[ed] and [was] a problem" in society and any progress was "being made only very slowly" in the direction of racial tolerance. The creators did not dismiss the focus on race in the play when it was met with dissension. Always, at the forefront of their minds, they took pride in attacking the issue head-on, deeming the musical progressive and leftist for the era. It is important to note that early drafts of the libretto for *South Pacific* were even more racially charged than the script originally performed on Broadway, such as Nellie's usage of the word "colored" and Cable claiming he would be thrown out of his family's home if he married Liat.⁴⁸ Some of these lines, cut for the

⁴⁶ Letter to Oscar Hammerstein II from Thomas McWhorter, April 2, 1949, Box 50, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁷ Letter to Oscar Hammerstein II from Thomas McWhorter, April 2, 1949.

⁴⁸ Tran Deip, "Broadway's yellow fever: from *South Pacific* to *Allegiance*, the American musical has traveled from well-intentioned Orientalism to something like authenticity" *American Theatre*. Nov 2015, Vol. 32 Issue 9, 60.

original production to soften the show's message, were restored for later productions of the show, including Bartlett Sher's 2008 Broadway revival at Lincoln Center.⁴⁹

While heralded by Oscar Hammerstein II, this leftism was seen as a threat during the Second Red Scare, a period from the late 1940s through the 1950s characterized by the fear of communism threatening American society. Due to perceived associations between Jews and communism, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II were potential targets of investigation under the House Un-American Activities Committee.⁵⁰ According to theatre historian Andrea Most, *South Pacific* was also a way for the creators to defend themselves against antisemitism and Red Scare paranoia by proving their Americanness through showcasing the link between "anticommunism and civil rights."⁵¹ *South Pacific* has roots in promoting racial tolerance and expressing American values of equality and democracy among all peoples. Due to this, the musical was framed as a way to combat communism, but as aforementioned, the show's message was still deemed too leftist by some people.

The song was not the only source of controversy. The show's implication of prior interracial relationships concerned some people, such as South African journalist Herbert Kretzmer, who was worried that a potential production of the show would be censored due to messages of racial tolerance. Kretzmer called these a "body-blow" to "South Africa's most sacred institutions" of government-sanctioned segregation.⁵² Because *South Pacific* directly

⁴⁹ Tran Deip, "Broadway's yellow fever," 60.

⁵⁰ While Richard Rodgers wouldn't potentially have been a huge target, Oscar Hammerstein II had published writing in the *Daily Worker*, a Communist Party newspaper in 1948, which could have been condemning evidence against him, should he have been investigated.

Most, Andrea. "'You've Got to Be Carefully Taught': The Politics of Race in Rodgers and Hammerstein's 'South Pacific'." *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 3 (2000): 309. Accessed 17 April 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/25068808.

Lovensheimer, *South Pacific*, 30.

⁵¹ Most, "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught", 309.

⁵² Letter to Mr. Herbert Kretzmer from Richard Rodgers, April 13, 1952, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

contrasted South African rule, life, and culture, the manner in which the show was handled was incredibly important news. However, Oscar Hammerstein II affirmed that regardless of the locale, the show's libretto and message would remain the same, further highlighting Hammerstein's commitment to the show's political purpose.

The show's progressive character found expression in an incident that occurred when the *South Pacific* touring production reached Atlanta, Georgia, in 1953. The musical faced a backlash, but not from the media or upset fans. Instead, it came from local government officials. In this case, there was an outcry from state legislators who declared the show as a piece of propaganda with "an underlying philosophy inspired by Moscow" due to its depiction of interracial marriage because the "halfbreeds [intermarriage produces were] not conducive to the higher type of society" the South intended to uphold.⁵³ The scalding criticism that made national news reflects the McCarthy Era in painting anything un-American as Soviet and communist. These Southerners believed promoting racial tolerance was un-American and contrasted their way of life, which lent well to making communist accusations. Additionally, these responses highlight the deep fear of integration and tolerance in the American South, which was perceived as a threat to the region's social hierarchy.

The show's creators knew they were pushing boundaries, and insisted on doing so, despite the backlash. In response to the Georgia incident, Oscar Hammerstein II once again proved how steadfast he was in not changing his show's message despite the protest, and he was not afraid to publicly denounce those who opposed it. In an interview, Hammerstein claimed he was "surprised by the idea that 'anything kind and humane' must necessarily originate in

⁵³ "Georgia Legislators Score 'South Pacific'; See Red Philosophy in Song Against Bias" *New York Times*, Mar 1, 1953, pg. 79.

Moscow” which earned him praise and support from the public.⁵⁴ After the incident, fan letters arrived “congratulat[ing] him for telling off th[e] pair of neo-Kluxers” and “help[ing] better the understanding between races” through his lyrics, proving that at least some people understood and respected the battle he was waging.⁵⁵ From all across different regions of the United States, there were people ready to support Rodgers and Hammerstein’s advocacy for tolerance. While some people were not prepared for this discussion, others were ready to condemn those who held more culturally traditional values which kept the hotbed issue of race a discursive topic.

Many people, both on the individual and organizational level, found comfort in the progressive nature of *South Pacific*. Some wrote to the creative duo on the merits of the song “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught” and the show in general for its discussion of racial issues. On the individual level, the show’s creators received numerous letters about how much the play impacted them and how “the moral of love casting out prejudice” the play perpetuated “touch[es] a warm spot in the American heart!” proving its resonance.⁵⁶ One school teacher, Helen I. Davis wrote to Oscar Hammerstein for a copy of the “You’ve Got to be Taught” lyrics because she felt the song’s “‘social significance’ [would be] useful for [her] classroom presentations during Brotherhood Week.”⁵⁷ This highlights she not only clearly understood the song’s message but also was taking up a call to action to promote racial tolerance among youths in her workplace. On a larger organizational level, groups such as the Los Angeles Interracial Chorus requested to perform the song, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

⁵⁴ Georgia Legislators Score ‘South Pacific,’ New York Times, pg. 79

⁵⁵ Letter to Oscar Hammerstein II from Richard Conn, March 4, 1953, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Letter to Oscar Hammerstein II from Harold Preece, March 1, 1953, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁶ Letter to Oscar Hammerstein II from Rachel Neely Parker, February 16, 1950, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁷ Letter to Oscar Hammerstein II from Miss Helen I. Davis, February 10, 1950.

(NAACP) requested to have the show's cast perform a benefit concert for the organization's 40th anniversary.⁵⁸ Both groups that strove for racial tolerance, and in some cases civil rights for minorities in America, acknowledged the cultural influence of *South Pacific*. They found the message presented in the musical resonated with their goals and wanted to utilize the show to “accomplish [their] purpose.”⁵⁹ The overwhelming support from members of the American population on the individual, communal, and organizational level speaks to the two natures of response to the show. While some sectors of America weren't ready to come to terms with changing racial politics, there were also many people on the same page as Rodgers and Hammerstein who were striving towards a goal of tolerance and harmony among the races.

***South Pacific's* Problematic Depiction of Characters of Asian Descent**

Although the show pushed boundaries by critiquing the American record on civil rights and advocating racial tolerance in general, it also reinforced and perpetuated racist caricatures and stereotypes of Asians.⁶⁰ *South Pacific* is not entirely a glowing picture of representation for non-European characters because while the songs and libretto may preach racial tolerance, several moments retrospectively are racist. The most significant victims of racist caricatures and stereotypes are the Southeast Asian characters, Liat and Bloody Mary, who are poorly treated by the libretto. Whereas in critical reviews the Asian characters like Bloody Mary are celebrated for

⁵⁸ Telegram to Oscar Hammerstein II from Walter White, May 5, 1949, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Letter to Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II from Pauline Mazer, Bus. Mgr, March 10, 1953, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁹ Telegram to Oscar Hammerstein II from Walter White, May 5, 1949. ; Letter to Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II from Pauline Mazer, Bus. Mgr, March 10, 1953.

⁶⁰ In the *South Pacific* libretto, the people of color are referred to as either natives, who are presumably Pacific Islanders, and others who are referred to as Tonkinese, who are presumably from the Tonkin region of Vietnam in Southeast Asia. For purposes of this paper, these are the two Western-imposed classifications that will be used. From the libretto, it is unclear if Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Logan were aware of or understood the nationalities or ethnicities of the people they were representing or the associated historical anthropology.

providing comedic relief, their heritage and culture become the show's punch line and serve as dangerous caricatures for people of color.

Bloody Mary is a Tonkinese woman, solely out to make money and sell off her daughter, Liat, to any American buyer. She speaks in incredibly broken English, such as "Hallo, G.I.... Grass skirt? Very saxy! Fo' dollar?...Saxy.... You buy? Where you go?"⁶¹ Additionally, Bloody Mary's character is described in the libretto as follows: "She is small, yellow with oriental eyes. Her teeth are stained with betel juice."⁶² Bloody Mary serves as a degrading picture of the non-whites encountered during the war, who will go as far as to threaten to marry Liat off to a rich drunkard plantation owner to guilt Lieutenant Cable into marrying her daughter.⁶³ Throughout the play, Bloody Mary is representative of the stereotype towards Southeast Asian women being either 'Dragon Ladies' or strong, domineering, manipulative, and deceitful women.

The character Liat, as well as the islanders of Bali'hai, do not fare any better for Asian representation in theatre. These highlight tone-deaf racist caricatures and language that was meant to be comedic or appropriate at the time the play was released. When Luther Billis describes Bali'Hai, he discusses the cultural ceremony of the boar occurring on the nearby island as "tribal, ceremonial, primitive, but astonishing," with a specific focus on the "coconut liquor and women danc[ing] around with just skirts on."⁶⁴ These lines exhibit the ignorance and racism sailors held toward the local population by seeing them as 'primitive' peoples, which mirrors greater feeling and gravity of racist propaganda during the Pacific War. If these people are not depicted as backward, they are presented like Henry or Emile's mixed-race children, who are

⁶¹ Hammerstein and Logan, "South Pacific," 12.

⁶² Hammerstein and Logan, "South Pacific," 12.

⁶³ Hammerstein and Logan, "South Pacific", 67.

⁶⁴ Hammerstein and Logan, "South Pacific", 24.

civilized, French-speaking people who fit neatly into the island's framework of French colonialism.

While the islanders are not dehumanized like discussions of the Japanese in the show, they are objectified and exoticized, which contributes to the media fetishizing Asian peoples. The best example of this can be seen in Liat's character, who does not speak throughout the play and is more than anything, a one-dimensional object for Lieutenant Cable to discover his own internalized racism, as opposed to a dynamic, multi-faceted character. Whereas her mother represents one-half of the traditional Asian female archetypes in media, her daughter fulfills the other half, as a submissive prop and plot point. Additionally, Joe and Liat's relationship "seems only sexual," which only further feeds into stereotypes that fetishize and exoticize people of Asian descent, especially when placed alongside the "distinctly non-sexual" relationship between two Caucasian people, Emile and Nellie.⁶⁵

Some racist elements towards Asian peoples, in general, reflect the era, such as the libretto's utilization of the racial slur 'Jap' eleven times throughout the course of the play by American military-aligned characters.⁶⁶ This slur was commonplace in wartime propaganda because "monosyllabic enemies are easier to despise than others" and could be used in catchy slogans like "Rap the Jap" or for quick-reference.⁶⁷ The usage of the term, while offensive, is period accurate to the widespread wartime anti-Japanese sentiment, especially in the Pacific Theatre, which was more racially charged than in the European Theater. During the war, both in military lingo and propaganda, the Japanese enemy was dehumanized into "dwarfish but vicious species" of sub-human but powerful animals that made "desirable trophies" when tortured and

⁶⁵ Most, "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught", 314.

⁶⁶ Hammerstein and Logan, "South Pacific."

⁶⁷ Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989), 117.

killed.⁶⁸ This anti-Japanese sentiment was subdued after the war and during the American occupation of Japan, where people realized the “subtle... and delica[te]” nature of Japanese people who were now democratized and committed to peace.⁶⁹ However, the fact that Americans rediscovered the humanity they lost sight of during the war does not undo the xenophobic damage that had been done. As to the usage of the ‘Jap’ slur in *South Pacific*, it is likely this normalized slur would not have been seen as a problem, especially because the fact that the Japanese were America’s enemies during the war was uncontroversial across all political leanings. From a political standpoint, it’s also arguable that if Rodgers and Hammerstein did not employ this hatred for the wartime Japanese in this musical, they might have been framed even more for pushing the limits as extreme leftists. The dehumanization of Japanese people was already embedded into the war experience, so this language locates the musical temporally and reflects American attitudes toward their former wartime enemy.

South Pacific is a racially charged play that aims to grapple with the tolerance of other races which is overshadowed by the brutality and dehumanization of the war and the American postwar climate.⁷⁰ For some people, *South Pacific* was a beacon of light and used as a call to action to build a more tolerant society, while for others it was a threatening piece of propaganda from a leftist and potentially communist artistic team that was only stirring up trouble. While the show should be acknowledged for its progressive nature at the time of its creation, it is also important to retrospectively reflect on some of its elements that contradict the very theme the show upholds and proves that it is not, and was never, a piece of perfect media presenting racial tolerance. Additionally, the musical reflects the racially charged ‘East versus West’ nature of the

⁶⁸ Fussell, *Wartime*, 120.

⁶⁹ Fussell, *Wartime*, 120.

⁷⁰ Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 6.

Pacific and reflects notions of Western superiority and civility and corresponding notions of Eastern inferiority and barbarity. Despite this, the show's overall message made it an unprecedented hit with both the American public and American military, making the show a good candidate for its later usage in American Armed Services entertainment, especially in the face of a changing military culture.

South Pacific as an Instrument of Military Policy

*"The generous spirit which has prompted your offer of the wonderful production that is to be highly commended. The Department of the Army wishes to express its gratitude for your interest in the welfare and morale of the Armed Forces."*⁷¹

On July 26, 1948, President Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which desegregated the Armed Forces and established "equal treatment and opportunity in the Armed Services." This led to a period of integration that continued throughout the Korean War conflict.⁷² During these years there was considerable resistance from all sectors of the military. However, with many minority populations enlisted in the Armed Services and an emerging movement campaigning for civil rights, there was no choice but to cooperate with the executive order. This was exceedingly important during the early Cold War years as American leaders had to prove they were not secondary to the Soviets in terms of civil liberties. This integration predated the larger desegregation of American society, which would start in public education after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling in 1955 and was an important step in the American civil rights movement. In the face of armed forces that had yet to have mixed-race units, there also needed to

⁷¹ Letter to Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II from Major General William E. Bergin, USA, October 5, 1951, Box 124, Folder 1, Joshua Logan Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷² Executive Order 9981, July 26, 1948, General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11; National Archives, Accessed 4 April 2020, https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc_large_image.php?flash=false&doc=84

be a change in military thought and culture, and *South Pacific* was a way to ease this change through popular entertainment.

One of the most notable points about *South Pacific* is its deep connection with entertaining the American Armed Forces and usage by military-aligned organizations. The American military readily used *South Pacific*, whether through sanctioned productions of the show or encouraging service members to attend productions of it. In many cases, it was not just low-level members of the military engagement with the show's content, as Rodgers and Hammerstein's company, Surrey Enterprises Inc., had been requested to organize benefit concerts "for the personnel of the Pentagon and their families" or arranged for the "highest-ranking Generals of the Marine Corps" to see the show in New York.⁷³ This relationship is recorded in correspondence to President Truman regarding a "tour of Armed Forces Installations in the Pacific" during the Korean War and collaboration with Far East Command to make sure the show got to the men on the ground.⁷⁴ This collaboration with and acceptance by military elites demonstrates the relationship between *South Pacific* and the Armed Forces was pervasive through the entire chain of command, and the show's usage was not just accidental. When placed in historical context, the military's wish to utilize a show that emulated the changing military culture following the desegregation of the Armed Forces makes the musical arguably an instrument of military policy and cultural change through entertainment.

More than just mere entertainment, *South Pacific* served a social function in the military and helped socialize the military towards racial tolerance within the 'safe space' of a theatrical performance cushioned in luxurious, if wartime, island escapism. The musical's uniquely

⁷³ Memo to Oscar Hammerstein II from Howard E. Reinheimer, June 17, 1953, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁴ Letter to Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II from Major General William E. Bergin, USA, October 5, 1951.

moderate position, which could be attributed to Rodgers and Hammerstein's fears of being labeled as communists, worked well with a military that was not ready for radical change. If the show had not placed the military in as high esteem or worked to showcase some of the less heroic and more horrific elements of the Second World War, it would not have been as revered in sanctioned Armed Services entertainment. Alternatively, if the show was any more radical it would have likely been dismissed as being too discursive or progressive by the conservative-leaning military. *South Pacific*'s position on the military and race was shaped by the larger sociopolitical context of the 1940s, but in the end, it was perfectly suited to entertain service members.

As early as the show's conception, there was a connection with the American military and veterans that helped inform and bring the show to fruition. For example, Oscar Hammerstein II was in contact with the Director of the Training and Information Division of the Navy's Bureau of Yards and Docks to borrow materials such as copies of the Seabees News Service to help inform the creation and development of *South Pacific*.⁷⁵ Additionally, veterans like Harold M Esty Jr. were involved in helping finance the show, indicating former servicemen expected the show to succeed and were willing to invest to help the piece of war media reach the stage.⁷⁶ These examples highlight how even from before the show's premiere, the show was establishing a relationship and resonating with military associated personnel, which would continue throughout the show's lifetime.

Once the show reached the stage, the military had expressed much desire to utilize *South Pacific*, which was mutually beneficial to Surrey Enterprises, Inc. Endorsed military usage of

⁷⁵ Letter to Oscar Hammerstein II from S. F. Stowe, February 28, 1949, Box 50, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁶ Telegram to Oscar Hammerstein II from Harold M Esty Jr., February 21, 1949, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

South Pacific helped give the company credence as a patriotic one dedicated to upholding Armed Services morale. In memos to the company regarding United Service Organizations performances, there was an intent to serve by “furnish[ing] topnotch entertainment for the Armed Services.”⁷⁷ However, this did not discount the “excellent boost from a public relations point of view” the company would receive from sponsoring these performances that were “non-competitive” from a business standpoint.⁷⁸ While there were motives other than patriotic sentiment at play at times, the company allowed these shows to happen and fostered a close relationship with both the military and related service organizations.

While some motives of Surrey Enterprises were business and public relations oriented, it did not mean they let the military get away with any performances it wanted. The company had a deeply vested interest “in the welfare and morale of the Armed Forces” and that meant both enlisted men and officers.⁷⁹ At times, a number of the show’s benefit performances had been attended largely by officers, their wives, and families at the expense of enlisted men attending, which disturbed attendees and the show’s creators alike.⁸⁰ When the military tried to get shows sanctioned largely for the benefit of military higher-ups as opposed to the “unfortunate [veterans] who are confined to hospitals,” the company also exhibited large degrees of push back to ensure the military did not abuse their kindness.⁸¹ While Surrey Enterprises Inc. readily supported the

⁷⁷ Memo to Richard Rodgers from Howard E. Reinheimer, July 9, 1952, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁸ Memo to Richard Rodgers from Howard E. Reinheimer, July 9, 1952.

⁷⁹ Letter to Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II from Major General William E. Bergin, USA, October 5, 1951.

⁸⁰ Letter to Oscar Hammerstein II from Walter Masemetz, September 10, 1951, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. ; Letter to Richard Rodgers from Leland Hayward, September 25, 1951, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Memo to Major Perry H Burnham from Howard E. Reinheimer, June 17, 1953, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸¹ Memo to Major Perry H Burnham from Howard E. Reinheimer, June 17, 1953.

military, the company was not subservient to military wishes and shared a mutually constitutive relationship.

One of Surrey Enterprises' biggest goals was to ensure non-officer classes had as much access to the show as higher up officials, so the show's impact was not only limited to the military elites. Due to this, several ordinary veterans or servicemen reached out to Rodgers and Hammerstein regarding the show's impact on their own lives. Some of the performances of the show were put on in "god-forsaken areas" like the Alaskan Kodiak, enabling men with few options for entertainment "to see first-rate productions."⁸² At other points, the company took a special interest in certain units like the VR 781 Naval Air Squadron and enabled them to attend performances of *South Pacific*.⁸³ In some cases, if the show wasn't brought to them, former military men attended the show in New York or even requested to perform the show on their battleships.⁸⁴ The military embrace of *South Pacific* was not just a phenomenon among the elites, it was prevalent across all strata of the military machine, showing how integrated it was within the military culture.

The show's usage was also strategic at times and aligned with military operations, such as the USO scaled-down production of *South Pacific* throughout Armed Forces Installations in the Pacific during the Korean War.⁸⁵ These productions were by USO Camp Shows, Inc., the group best known for bringing big-name performers like Bob Hope and Marlene Dietrich to troops near the front lines during World War II and showcasing "diversified entertainment of the

⁸² Letter to John Fearnley from Ross Bowman, September 4, 1951, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸³ Letter to Oscar Hammerstein II from Michael H. Kernodle, July 22, 1950, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁴ Telegram to Howard Reinheimer from Oscar Hammerstein II, January 31, 1950, Box 50-52, Oscar Hammerstein II Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁵ Letter to Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II from Major General William E. Bergin.

best in show business” to the Armed Forces stationed abroad.⁸⁶ While at times Rodgers and Hammerstein sought to put on shows, USO Camp Shows, Inc. also reached out to Surrey Enterprises to make *South Pacific* part of revues put together alongside other popular Broadway shows like *Guys and Dolls*, *Pal Joey* and *The King and I*, highlighting the show’s importance to contemporary theater and military personnel.

South Pacific’s military usage was not just limited to usage in the Korean War and the years following its Broadway run, as it saw both non-official and USO productions in the 1950s and 1960s, highlighting its continual relevance in military entertainment. In 1955, a non-official production of *South Pacific* put on by the Honolulu Community Theatre was invited to perform for the US Navy at Central Pacific Bases in Guam, the Philippines, Midway, and more.⁸⁷ In this case, the “Pentagon approved special aircraft for [the] fifty-five members cast and crew for [an] eleven thousand mile trip,” which allowed the theatre to perform the show. This was a hefty accommodation, highlighting the lengths the military went to secure the show as entertainment.⁸⁸ In 1965, the Southwest Missouri State College members became USO Shows Overseas Unit #GA-181 and traveled to the Sondrestrom and Thule Air Force Bases in Greenland, the Keflavik Grindavik Naval Stations in Iceland, as well as other locations in Labrador, Newfoundland, Alaska, and New York City.⁸⁹ This tour of Northeast Command was sponsored by the USO and

⁸⁶ Letter to Richard Rodgers from John Effrat, Production Consultant USO Camp Shows, June 26, 1952, Box 124, Folder 1, Joshua Logan Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁷ Memo to Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, Leland Hayward, and Joshua Logan from Howard E. Reinheimer, February 25, 1955, Box 124 Folder 1, Joshua Logan Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁸ Memo to Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, Leland Hayward, and Joshua Logan from Howard E. Reinheimer, February 25, 1955.

⁸⁹ South Pacific USO Tour Program, Theatre and Dance Department Collection (RG 4/9), Productions Series, Box 4, Missouri State University Digital Collections, Missouri State University, Springfield Missouri, <https://digitalcollections.missouristate.edu/digital/collection/TaD/id/93>.

Letter to Dr. Leslie Irene Coger from Angeles Oleaga, Assistant to the Director of USO Shows, March 24, 1965, South Pacific USO Tour Correspondence, Theatre and Dance Department Collection (RG 4/9), Productions Series, Box 4, Missouri State University Digital Collections, Missouri State University, Springfield Missouri, <https://digitalcollections.missouristate.edu/digital/collection/TaD/id/58/rec/1>.

had travel provided by the Department of Defense and the company received several letters of appreciation for bringing entertainment to uphold “the morale of personnel assigned so far from home.”⁹⁰ These later productions that took place years after the show’s original run on Broadway highlight how the show had lasting impact and usage in military entertainment beyond the initial hype of the show.

Whether it be official or unofficial productions, *South Pacific* has had historical resonance in its closely-knit relationship with the Armed Forces that started in the face of armed forces that had yet to have mixed-race units. There also needed to be a change in military thought and culture, and *South Pacific* was a way to ease this change through popular entertainment because of the show’s easy to consume message. There were efforts to ensure the show’s influence was felt across all stratum of the military, be it military elites, enlisted men, or veterans across the United States and serving abroad. By perpetuating a show that was thematically resonant with the military’s move towards racial tolerance while still upholding American militarism, the widespread usage of *South Pacific* indicates the importance of the musical as a soft power to help spread these notions through entertainment.

Conclusion

Over a half-century since its original premiere on Broadway in 1949, *South Pacific* still finds meaningful new ways to comment on the nature of war in American popular memory. The 2008 Broadway revival of *South Pacific*, presented at the Lincoln Center in New York and starring

⁹⁰ Letter to Arthur L. Malloy, President of Southwest Missouri State College from James W Lancaster, Colonel USAF, May 17, 1965, *South Pacific* USO Tour Correspondence, Theatre and Dance Department Collection (RG 4/9), Productions Series, Box 4, Missouri State University Digital Collections, Missouri State University, Springfield Missouri, <https://digitalcollections.missouristate.edu/digital/collection/TaD/id/98/rec/36>.

Kelli O'Hara and Paulo Szot and directed by Bartlett Sher, was staged in the spirit of the original production with one major change, the tone of the "Honeybun (Reprise)." In one of the musical's final scenes, almost all of the US soldiers and nurses depart the island to participate in Operation Alligator, an offensive in which many of them will likely die. In the original production and the West End transfer directed by Joshua Logan, the troops are sent off to war triumphantly with cheering nurses, warm embraces, and rousing fanfare.⁹¹ In Sher's revival, however, the song is sung on a dimly lit stage while the soldiers and nurses sing the peppy tune as a somber, disheartened military march.⁹² This simple staging change in the revival sends a much more harrowing message, tempering nostalgia with war's gravity. While American popular memory looks back on the 'Good War' of World War II, the wars since in Vietnam and the Middle East have instilled a heightened consciousness about both war and war responsibility. This shift from triumph and celebration to hesitance and solemnity in just one number reflects how American war memory and *South Pacific* remain subjects of discourse and interpretation in the 21st century and will continue to be as Americans are shaped by their foreign wars. Whether it be four or sixty-three years postwar, *South Pacific* serves as a piece of Second World War memory with great importance in both history and mainstream popular culture.

While musical theatre has addressed the Second World War in greater depth more in recent years which merit further study, such as *Allegiance* (Jay Kuo, 2015) that confronts Japanese internment and *Bandstand* (Richard Oberacker, Robert Taylor, 2017) that is centered around the reintegration of veterans post World War II. While more nuanced, these musicals come with the benefit of retrospect and are born from a culture that either confirms or challenges the Greatest

⁹¹ "Honeybun (Reprise)", Act II, *South Pacific* at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, 1952, Date Accessed 7 April 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRou_Hlvmzs.

⁹² "Honeybun (Reprise)", Act II, "South Pacific," *Live at Lincoln Center*, 2008, Date Accessed 7 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4jj9EiJYYk>.

Generation discourse. *South Pacific* was born out of the war's recent aftermath, and Richard Rodgers, Joshua Logan and Oscar Hammerstein II found depth and importance in James A Michener's stories, motivating them to write the musical.

War memory and representation are never static; they are malleable and ever-changing products of history and myth, which *South Pacific* reflects. While some wartime representation is accurate, throughout the musical all mentions and instances of combat, such as the death of Lieutenant Joseph Cable, are mentioned in passing or take place off-stage, further disconnecting the show from the brutality of the World War II's Pacific Theater. Instead, the show seeks to glamorize the pleasantries, adventure, and romance of service in a tropical region surrounded by beautiful nurses and 'exotic' peoples without the shadow of post-traumatic stress and death to temper it. Overall, *South Pacific* is a piece of Second World War memory and historical fiction several degrees of separation away from historical fact which sought to mythologize the war with notions of island escapism within five years post-war.

While the Second World War is the setting for *South Pacific*, discussing the importance of racial tolerance and acceptance was the purpose of the show. The duality of the show in addressing racism challenges some notions of racial politics in Cold War America while also reinforcing other preexisting racist stereotypes and caricatures. For some people the show was a celebrated and much-needed call for a more tolerant society, while for others it was a threatening piece of leftist radical propaganda. However, the conservative-leaning support for the war allowed the show to be extremely progressive in pushing boundaries of racial discourse in the 1940s, while paradoxically exhibiting racism towards Asian characters within the show.

These elements made *South Pacific* uniquely suited to the postwar American military because it celebrated American militarism and war mythology, while it also socialized the military

towards racial tolerance. The show was integrated into all levels of the military, ranging from the lowest ranking men to Pentagon officials, indicating its pervasiveness and its resonance with those associated with the military. Its relationship to the military as a piece of thematic and historically important entertainment started before the show was created and continued beyond the hype of the show died down while also serving as a way to spread ideas of racial tolerance and pride for American militarism through contemporary musical theatre.

Due to the *South Pacific*'s emphasis on fostering World War II nostalgia while also encouraging racial tolerance, the musical was widely accepted by and utilized by the military and related organizations to help ease the blow of changing military culture through entertainment. While the show seems like yet another trend in popular culture, Rodgers and Hammerstein created a piece of theater that also has a place at the American cultural and military history table. By focusing on the interplay between wartime history, myth, memory, and popular culture in post-World War II American society, *South Pacific* is a piece of musical theater that's apt to examine the cultural legacy of American war and racial discourse. In the end, musical theatre is not solely about entertainment, but it is an instrument of supporting and upholding changing policy and culture, of which *South Pacific* is the perfect example.

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