

## *South Pacific*

### *Background*

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein first worked together in 1920, when they were respectively eighteen and twenty-five, and again in 1921, but the partnership did not resume until the early 1940s. At that point both of them separately had become interested in the potential for a musical setting of a popular folk-play, *Green Grow the Lilacs*, but neither of their regular collaborators (Lorenz Hart and Jerome Kern respectively) was inspired by the rural setting. Originally called *Away We Go!*, *Oklahoma!* was the spectacular and ground-breaking result of the reunion, running for over 2,000 performances and winning its creators a Pulitzer Prize.

*Carousel* followed, then *State Fair*, and then came *South Pacific*. The drama is based upon two short stories by James A. Michener, who was stationed as a naval historian with the rank of lieutenant commander on the island of Espiritu Santo, in what is now Vanuatu, during World War II. He travelled throughout the South Pacific Ocean on various assignments which he is said to have gained because his base commanders mistakenly thought his father was Admiral Marc Mitscher. This enabled him to draw on the observations and anecdotes he had collected for a 1947 book, *Tales of the South Pacific*, the focus of which is mainly on interactions between Americans and a variety of colonial, immigrant, and indigenous characters. It won him the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1948.

Rodgers and Hammerstein duly got to work, deciding to include two romances since their first choice looked rather too much like *Madame Butterfly* on its own, and shortening the title, since "Tales" was providing too many opportunities for risqué puns. Another difficulty was that Hammerstein had no military background, so theatre director Joshua Logan, a veteran, was asked to help with some aspects of the storyline. This was later to lead to legal disputes about royalties.

The musical opened on Broadway in 1949, starring Mary Martin, who had got the part following an audition in which she managed to sing the last twenty-six words of "Wonderful Guy" without taking a breath, collapsing off the piano stool as a result. She had also fallen off the stage in rehearsal attempting a cartwheel at the end of the same number, knocking out one of the musical arrangers. Her initial doubts about her ability to match the vocal power of her co-star, Met Opera bass Ezio Pinza, had been overcome by not including any proper duets for them.

*South Pacific* remains the only musical production to win Tony Awards in all four acting categories. It also won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for Rodgers, Hammerstein and Logan, who had directed the Broadway production. The London production opened in 1951 and included among the chorus Sean Connery, then 21, and Mary Martin's 20-year-old son Larry Hagman, who was to go on to achieve fame as J R Ewing in TV's *Dallas*. King George VI attended in January 1952 and died a week later, but other audience members were more impressed and the production ran for 802 performances. A film followed in 1958 and several revivals and recordings since then testify to the work's enduring popularity.

### *Synopsis*

Handsome hero Marine Lt Joe Cable arrives on a fictitious South Pacific island during World War II to discover that while it looks like paradise, the US Seabees there are less than content with the life in view of the absence of available women – all the locals have decamped to mysterious neighbouring island Bali Ha'i. This is off-limits to enlisted men, as are the Navy nurses, who are commissioned officers. There is some military stuff.

One such Navy nurse, Arkansan Ensign Nellie Forbush, has fallen in love with Emile de Becque, a middle-aged French plantation owner who sings (in the movie) with the voice of Ezio Pinza but looks like Rossano Brazzi; at 66, Pinza still sounded good but was too old, even by Hollywood standards, to appear as the love interest of a 27-year-old. Nellie overcomes initial doubts, sailing through Emile's admission that he is on the run from a murder charge, but then finds it more difficult to get past the revelation that he has two mixed-race children by a deceased wife (there were eight, by four different women but no marriages, in the book). There is some military stuff.

Meanwhile comic relief Luther Billis, who was improbably played by Alec Baldwin in a 2006 concert performance at Carnegie Hall, cons Lt Cable into a visit to Bali Ha'i. This is ostensibly to witness the indigenous Boar's Tooth Ceremony for the purposes of anthropological research, but with a poorly concealed additional agenda to see the women there. On arrival Cable is introduced, by crafty local Bloody Mary, to her beautiful and just-about legal-aged daughter Liat. Despite not being able to hold more than a rudimentary conversation across the language barrier, Cable obligingly falls in love and takes his shirt off. Rodgers and Hammerstein were uncomfortable with this stage direction, but in the event it turned out to be the only thing John Kerr achieves effectively in the movie; he does none of his own singing and precious little convincing. Despite motherly hopes, however, Cable refuses to contemplate marriage to Liat and Bloody Mary threatens instead to force her daughter to marry a middle-aged French plantation owner (not the same one). There is some military stuff.

Nellie attempts to improve military and her own morale by headlining in a cross-dressing holiday revue, providing Mitzi Gaynor in the movie with a further opportunity to show off the glorious voice and engaging presence with which she leaves other cast members in the distant dust (she was nominated for a Golden Globe for this performance). Afterwards Nellie, Cable and Emile confront and discuss the racist attitudes which are preventing them from finding true happiness in their respective loves (Liat does not get to say a word in any of this). This scene, particularly Cable's declaration that racism is a learned behaviour, got the touring production into trouble in Atlanta, Georgia where politicians proposed a bill to outlaw entertainment deemed to be inspired by Moscow. Emile and Cable bond in their disappointment and go off to do military stuff.

Cable is killed (we have to take Emile's word for this in the movie, since there is little perceptible difference in Cable's demeanour before and after the event) and Emile loses contact with base. Nellie is shocked by the news into overcoming her distaste and paying a visit to Emile's plantation to check on the welfare of the children, by whom she is charmed. Emile finds them there on his unlooked-for return from his mission, there is a joyful reunion and so - if we leave aside Luther and the other Seabees going off to face death in battle, and Liat (at best, we are not actually told) submitting to a marriage she does not want - we get our happy ending after all.

*Programme notes by The Jabbereer*