

South Pacific Song By Rodgers And Hammerstein

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Introduction

Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* remains significant because it combines popular musical theatre with an explicit argument against racial prejudice. Premiering on Broadway in 1949 and adapted from James A. Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific*, the musical situates romance, war, comedy, and political meaning within a setting still vivid to postwar American audiences. Its most famous antiracist statement, "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught," insists that prejudice is learned through family and society rather than produced naturally. At the same time, the work contains tensions that complicate its progressive reputation. Nellie Forbush receives a rich emotional journey in confronting her prejudice, while Liat, the Polynesian woman loved by Lieutenant Cable, is given far less language and narrative authority. Bloody Mary is both resourceful and stereotyped, and Emile de Becque's colonial privilege receives limited examination. The musical is therefore most productive when analyzed as a work that challenged mainstream racial attitudes while still relying on theatrical conventions shaped by race, gender, exoticism, and unequal control over who gets to speak (Michener, 1947; Most, 2004; Rodgers & Hammerstein, 1949).

Antiracism within a Mainstream Broadway Form

The success of *South Pacific* depended partly on its ability to place controversial ideas inside familiar theatrical pleasures. Rodgers's music and Hammerstein's lyrics offered romance, humor, spectacle, and memorable melodies while the story confronted interracial relationships at a time when segregation and legal restrictions on interracial marriage remained powerful in the United States. The creators refused pressure to remove "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught," demonstrating that the antiracist message was central rather than decorative. Yet the musical's argument is delivered primarily through white American and European characters whose emotional development guides the audience. This strategy made the critique accessible to a broad public because viewers could identify with Nellie's gradual change and Cable's recognition of learned prejudice. The same strategy also limited the work by making racialized characters more often the objects of moral reflection than the fully developed subjects of it. The musical's politics therefore combine genuine disruption with the reassurance of recognizable Broadway romance and character structure (Library of Congress; Jones, 2003).

Cable, Liat, and the Unequal Distribution of Voice

The relationship between Lieutenant Cable and Liat most clearly reveals the difference between condemning prejudice and distributing narrative power equally. Cable recognizes the injustice of his own assumptions and sings that hatred must be taught, yet he refuses marriage because he anticipates disapproval from his Philadelphia family and social class. Liat bears the consequences of that decision without receiving comparable opportunity to explain her desires, fears, or understanding of the relationship. Her limited speech can create theatrical intensity, but it also reproduces a colonial pattern in which an Indigenous woman is visible, desired, and interpreted by others without controlling the narrative herself. Cable's moral struggle is articulated in language and song, while Liat's experience is conveyed mainly through gesture and the responses of surrounding characters. This asymmetry does not erase the musical's antiracist message, but it exposes its limitations. The audience is invited to understand the white man's internal conflict more fully than the Polynesian woman whose future is directly affected by his inability to act on the insight he has gained.

Nellie, Emile, and the Possibility of Unlearning Prejudice

Nellie Forbush's relationship with Emile de Becque provides the musical's more hopeful interracial story. Nellie is energetic, sympathetic, and provincial, which makes her prejudice recognizable rather than monstrous. When she learns that the mother of Emile's children was Polynesian, she withdraws because she has internalized assumptions about race and marriage that she initially experiences as natural. Her eventual decision to care for the children and return to Emile dramatizes the possibility that learned prejudice can be unlearned. This transformation was politically important because it challenged audiences who might reject overt hatred while still accepting social separation. Yet the story also reveals unequal visibility. Emile's former Polynesian partner is absent, and her history exists mainly as information that tests Nellie's tolerance. Emile himself is a European landowner living in a colonized region, a position the musical does not explore deeply. The romance thus offers a meaningful challenge to racial hierarchy while leaving colonial power and the missing Indigenous woman largely outside the central emotional frame.

Bloody Mary, Colonial Economy, and Gendered Representation

Bloody Mary is one of the musical's most memorable characters because she combines humor, entrepreneurship, maternal ambition, and stereotyped theatrical framing. She trades with American servicemen and seeks security for Liat through Cable, demonstrating practical awareness of the economic and racial constraints surrounding her family. Interpreting her only as comic relief ignores

the strategic intelligence required to survive within a colonial and military economy. Interpreting her only as a victim, however, also understates her agency. Her representation is complicated by accent, exoticism, and the way the show uses her as a bridge between American soldiers and an imagined island culture. Gender intensifies these inequalities. Nellie speaks, sings, changes her mind, and directs her own choices, while Liat remains comparatively silent and the earlier Polynesian mother is absent altogether. The contrast shows that progressive representation requires more than sympathetic interracial romance. It also requires attention to who receives interiority, language, history, and the ability to shape events rather than merely symbolize the moral growth of other characters.

Music, Historical Context, and Contemporary Performance

The musical's songs gave its social argument unusual reach because ideas could circulate through recordings, touring productions, film, and popular memory beyond the theatre itself. Music made racial prejudice emotionally legible by linking abstract belief with longing, fear, and loss. The World War II setting also sharpened the contradiction between American democratic ideals and the racial hierarchy that persisted at home and within military institutions. Contemporary productions can preserve this historical text while making its assumptions more visible. Directors can avoid treating island characters as scenery, resist caricatured accents, consult cultural expertise, and give Liat's silences emotional specificity rather than presenting her as a passive ideal. Program notes and educational events can place the story within histories of colonialism, wartime migration, segregation, and interracial marriage law. Such choices do not need to rewrite the musical into a twenty-first-century work. They can reveal tensions that are already present and help audiences understand why a work can be historically progressive in one respect while remaining limited by the representational conventions of its time (Jones, 2003).

Conclusion

South Pacific became enduring musical theatre because it combined accessible entertainment with a direct challenge to learned racial prejudice. Rodgers and Hammerstein defended "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught," dramatized interracial relationships sympathetically, and allowed a mainstream audience to see prejudice as a social lesson that could be questioned rather than as an immutable fact. The musical's limitations are equally important. Liat receives far less narrative authority than Cable, Bloody Mary moves between agency and stereotype, and the absent Polynesian mother exists mainly as a device within Nellie's moral development. These tensions do not require dismissing the work or treating its achievements as insincere. They make the musical a valuable example of how cultural progress often occurs within forms that still carry older hierarchies. A responsible interpretation therefore asks not only whether *South Pacific* condemns racism, but also whose

experience is centered, whose voice is restricted, and how contemporary performance can preserve the historical work while making those inequalities visible to modern audiences.

Works Cited

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