

South Pacific Song By Rodgers And Hammerstein

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Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* became one of the most successful American musicals of the twentieth century because it combined memorable songs, wartime romance, comedy, spectacle, and an explicit condemnation of racial prejudice. Yet Andrea Most's claim that its success requires investigation is persuasive because the musical challenges racism while also relying on familiar racial, gender, and theatrical codes. Its two interracial relationships do not receive equal treatment. Nellie Forbush, a white American nurse, is allowed a long emotional journey before accepting Emile de Becque and his Polynesian children. Lieutenant Joseph Cable recognizes that prejudice has been "carefully taught," but his relationship with Liat ends in separation and his death. Liat, unlike Nellie and Cable, has almost no spoken interior life. She is visually central to the romance but largely denied language, decision-making, and narrative authority. The musical's progressive message therefore coexists with conventions that make a white audience comfortable. Its success came partly from disrupting familiar beliefs and partly from placing that disruption inside recognizable romance and exotic-island formulas (Most).

Why Did the Musical Become So Successful?

South Pacific opened on Broadway in 1949 and was adapted from stories in James A. Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific*. It offered postwar audiences a setting connected to recent collective memory while transforming wartime danger into a sequence of songs, romances, comic routines, and moral choices. Rodgers's music and Hammerstein's lyrics made difficult subjects emotionally accessible. The show's success cannot be explained only by its antiracist message; audiences were drawn by stars, production quality, humor, melody, and the prestige of Rodgers and Hammerstein after earlier successes. At the same time, its racial argument was not a minor addition. The Library of Congress notes that the creators refused advice to remove "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught," and Michener later said the number expressed why they wanted to make the musical. The show brought racial prejudice before a broad mainstream audience at a moment when segregation and bans on interracial marriage remained powerful (Library of Congress; Michener; Rodgers & Hammerstein).

Reinforcement and Disruption of Familiar Codes

The musical disrupts a familiar code by declaring that racial hatred is learned rather than natural. Nellie and Cable are not portrayed as biological racists; they have absorbed assumptions from family and community. This framing invites audiences to imagine unlearning prejudice. However, the

production also reinforces familiar codes. The South Pacific islands are presented as beautiful, sensual, humorous, and culturally available to American military personnel. Polynesian characters often exist in relation to white desire, commerce, or moral development. The central speaking consciousness remains largely American or European. The musical can therefore criticize prejudice without fully transferring authority to the people who are racialized. Its challenge is real, but it is mediated through forms the dominant audience already recognizes.

The Cable and Liat Relationship

Cable meets Liat through Bloody Mary, who imagines marriage to an American officer as a route to security and status for her daughter. Cable is attracted to Liat and experiences Bali Ha'i as a space outside military routine and American social constraint. Their intimacy suggests that racial boundaries can be crossed personally. Yet Cable refuses marriage because he anticipates the judgment of his Philadelphia family and social class. He recognizes the injustice of his response but cannot overcome it before returning to danger. The relationship exposes how prejudice operates through expected future belonging: Cable fears losing family approval and social identity. His tragedy is not a lack of feeling but a failure to convert insight into responsible action.

Liat's Muteness and Narrative Inequality

Liat's limited speech is one of the musical's most important contradictions. She is the object of desire, the person most directly harmed by Cable's refusal, and the character whose future is being arranged, yet audiences receive little access to her thoughts. Her body, beauty, gestures, and tears communicate emotion, but other characters interpret and negotiate on her behalf. Muteness can create theatrical intensity, but it also reproduces a colonial pattern in which the Indigenous woman is visible without possessing a public voice. Cable's moral awakening receives language through "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught," while Liat's experience remains largely silent. The show asks the audience to sympathize with the white man's conflict more fully than with the Polynesian woman's restricted choices.

Does Liat's Silence Make the Musical Less Progressive?

Liat's silence does not erase the musical's opposition to racism, but it reveals the limits of that opposition. A work can challenge one hierarchy while retaining another. The production condemns the prejudice that blocks interracial love, yet it gives unequal dramatic agency to the lovers. Liat is not allowed to explain what marriage, family, culture, or separation mean to her. Her lack of language also makes the relationship easier to idealize because disagreement, cultural difference, and practical negotiation remain absent. A modern production can address this limitation through performance

choices, translation, staging, and contextual discussion, but it cannot pretend the original script gives Liat equal narrative power.

Bloody Mary's Role

Bloody Mary possesses more speech and comic presence than Liat, but she is also shaped by stereotype. She is a savvy Tonkinese trader who sells goods to American sailors and negotiates within colonial and military economies. Her humor, accent, and commercial energy make her memorable, yet the show sometimes treats her as exotic or manipulative. Her attempt to secure Liat's future through Cable reflects constrained choices. She understands that race and poverty limit her daughter's options and seeks advantage within the available system. Reading Bloody Mary only as comic relief misses the economic realism of her behavior. Reading her only as a victim misses her agency. The character embodies both stereotype and strategic survival.

Emile de Becque as a Foreigner

Emile is a French planter who has lived in the islands for years and has two children with a Polynesian woman who is absent from the stage. He is represented as cultured, wealthy, mature, and comparatively free of American racial prejudice. His foreignness allows him to question Nellie's assumptions while also making him a romantic outsider. However, his social position is complicated. He is a European landowner in a colonized region, and the absence of the children's mother leaves important questions unanswered. The musical treats his relationship with Nellie as a test of her tolerance, while the Polynesian woman's history is not explored. Emile's antiracism is admirable, but his privilege remains largely unexamined.

Nellie's Prejudice and Transformation

Nellie is introduced as optimistic, energetic, and provincial. She falls in love with Emile but withdraws when she learns that the mother of his children was Polynesian. Her prejudice is not presented as hatred expressed through violence. It appears as a deeply learned sense of social impossibility. That representation was strategically powerful because many audience members could recognize themselves in Nellie without first identifying as extremists. Her eventual decision to care for the children and accept Emile dramatizes the possibility of change. Nevertheless, the narrative rewards her with reunion and family, while Cable and Liat are denied a future. The contrast may imply that prejudice can be overcome when a white heroine is given time and favorable circumstances, but the racialized woman bears the cost when a white man fails.

“You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught”

Cable’s song states the musical’s moral thesis: prejudice is taught through family language, fear, and social repetition. The song was controversial because it denied the idea that racial hierarchy was natural. Georgia legislators attacked the production when it appeared in Atlanta, accusing it of justifying interracial marriage and promoting foreign ideology. Rodgers and Hammerstein refused to remove the number. Its directness remains striking because it connects personal feeling to social education. However, the song is sung by a character who understands prejudice intellectually but does not fully overcome it in practice. This gap prevents the number from becoming a simple declaration of virtue. Cable’s insight arrives too late to repair his relationship with Liat.

The Historical Context of World War II

The musical is set during World War II, when the United States mobilized a racially segregated military while claiming to fight tyranny abroad. Black service members faced discrimination, and Japanese Americans were incarcerated under federal policy. U.S. forces operated across Pacific islands inhabited by peoples with their own histories, cultures, and colonial experiences. The war created intense contact across racial and national boundaries but did not automatically dissolve hierarchy. John Bush Jones’s discussion of Broadway and the war helps explain how wartime musicals could affirm national purpose while questioning aspects of American society. *South Pacific* supports courage and collective struggle against the enemy, yet it asks whether Americans can claim democratic values while carrying racial prejudice into intimate life (Jones).

Postwar America and the Mainstream Audience

In 1949, the civil-rights movement was growing, but legal segregation remained entrenched. The armed forces had only recently been ordered to desegregate. Anti-miscegenation laws still prohibited interracial marriage in many states. A Broadway musical that treated learned racism as a moral failure was therefore not merely reflecting an already settled consensus. At the same time, the show’s critique was framed around sympathetic white characters, which may have made it more acceptable. The audience could condemn prejudice by identifying with Nellie’s improvement and Cable’s regret without confronting Black American political demands directly. The foreign island setting displaced the issue geographically while making its relevance to the United States unmistakable.

Romance as a Vehicle for Political Argument

Rodgers and Hammerstein use romance to make racial ideology emotionally concrete. Abstract prejudice becomes the reason two couples cannot form families. This method increases accessibility because audiences understand longing, jealousy, fear, and loss. Romance also narrows the politics.

Interracial equality involves citizenship, labor, education, housing, law, and power, not only the right of individuals to love. The musical's focus on couples can imply that changing personal attitudes is sufficient. Personal transformation matters, but institutions also teach and enforce hierarchy. The production points toward this broader truth when it shows that Cable's family and Nellie's upbringing shape their choices.

Music, Repetition, and Emotional Persuasion

The musical's songs allow ideas to return in memorable form. "Some Enchanted Evening" elevates immediate attraction; "Bali Ha'i" creates a dream of alternative possibility; "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught" names social conditioning; and reprises change meaning as characters change. Music makes the argument portable beyond the theatre. Listeners may sing a melody before fully examining its politics. That accessibility helped the show reach audiences through recordings, touring, film, and later revivals. Music does not automatically create peace, as the original essay suggests, but it can provide a shared emotional vocabulary through which difficult subjects are discussed.

Gender and the Distribution of Voice

The contrast between Nellie and Liat is also a contrast in gendered agency shaped by race. Nellie sings, speaks, jokes, makes mistakes, changes her mind, and chooses. Liat is watched and interpreted. Bloody Mary speaks but is frequently comitized. The absent Polynesian mother is reduced to a fact in Emile's biography. These patterns show that representation involves more than presenting interracial relationships positively. It includes who receives language, complexity, history, and the ability to affect the plot. The musical gives a white woman a rich transformation while treating Polynesian women more symbolically.

How Modern Productions Can Approach the Work

A contemporary production should preserve the historical text while making its assumptions visible. Directors can avoid treating island characters as scenery, provide culturally informed movement and design, resist caricatured accents, and use program notes or educational events to discuss colonial context. Performers can give Liat's silences emotional specificity rather than presenting her as a passive ideal. Translation or surtitles may clarify the meaning of non-English speech where the script permits. Such approaches do not rewrite the musical into a modern work; they reveal tensions already present within it.

Conclusion

The success of *South Pacific* resulted from both disruption and reinforcement. Rodgers and Hammerstein confronted a mainstream audience with the claim that racial prejudice is learned and morally destructive. They defended “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught” despite political criticism and dramatized interracial love sympathetically. At the same time, the musical uses familiar exotic, gendered, and colonial codes. Liat’s muteness allows Cable’s conflict to dominate the relationship, while Emile’s absent Polynesian partner and Bloody Mary’s comic framing limit Indigenous women’s perspectives. The musical remains important not because it offers a perfect model of racial representation but because its achievements and limitations are visible together. Its enduring value lies in the questions it forces audiences to ask: who is permitted to speak, whose prejudice becomes the center of the story, who receives redemption, and who pays the price when social lessons are not unlearned.

Works Cited

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