"You've Got to Be Carefully Taught": Reflections on War, Imperialism and Patriotism in America's South Pacific

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“You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught”: Reflections on
War, Imperialism and Patriotism
in America’s South Pacific

Jayna Butler

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

"You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught": Reflections on War, Imperialism and Patriotism in America’s South Pacific

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Master of Arts

Underneath the romance, comedy and exoticism, South Pacific is a story that questioned core American values, exploring issues of race and power at a time when these topics were intensely relevant—the original opened just four years post WWII, on the heels of Roosevelt’s aggressive expansionist response to domestic instabilities. Much has been written about the depiction of war and racial prejudice in South Pacific. However, examining such topics in the context of their cultural and political moment (both in 1949 and 2008) and through the lens of Terry Eagleton’s unique take on morality, is not only a fascinating study, but an intensely relevant and unchartered endeavor.

This work concerns the evolution of an American code of ethics as it has been reflected and constructed in both Broadway productions of Roger and Hammerstein’s South Pacific (c.1949, 2008). Specifically, it examines the depiction of WWII, America’s imperialistic foreign policy, and the function of American patriotism in light of Terry Eagleton’s theories surrounding an evolving code of ethics in 20th/21st century America. By so doing, this thesis uncovers answers to the following questions. What were the cultural and political forces at work at the time South Pacific was created (both in 1949 and 2008)? How did these forces influence the contrasting depictions of war, imperialism and patriotism in each version of the musical? In what ways were these productions reflective of a code of ethics that evolved from what Eagleton would classify as moral realism (prescriptive of behavior) to moral nihilism (reflective of behavior)? How did the use of this increasingly reflexive moral code make this politically controversial musical more palatable, and therefore commercially viable during the contrasting political climates of WWII and the recent war on Iraq? Determining answers to questions such as these enables us as a society to look back on our history—on our mistakes and triumphs—and recognize our tendency to find pragmatic justification for our actions rather than acknowledging the possibility of the existence of objective truth, which remains unchanged through time and circumstance.

Keywords: South Pacific, war, American expansionism, imperialism, prejudice, American patriotism, ethical, moral nihilism, moral realism, relativism, evolution, code of ethics, pragmatic justification, objective truth, historiography, World War II, war on Iraq, musical theatre, Broadway, New York, Terry Eagleton, Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein, Joshua Logan, Bartlet Sher, Mary Martin, Ezio Pinza, Kelli O’Hara, Paul Szot.
Dedicated to my parents
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Profound thanks to the Rodgers and Hammerstein organization, for their cooperation and support for this project. All original archived materials reprinted are done so with permission from the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization. All rights reserved.

A sincere thank-you to my Grandma Ellen Prince, my mother Janis Butler, and my sister Amy Hirsche, for instilling in me a love of music and theatre. The appreciation and enthusiasm I have developed as a result of their example and encouragement has filled my life with joy and meaning.

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Chapter I
Introduction

On a particularly fateful night in 1943, just off the island of New Caledonia, Lieutenant James A. Michener (author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel upon which the Broadway musical South Pacific was based) had a near death experience that would change the course of his life and literary career.

Having difficulty landing, the pilot of Michener’s plane had swooped around the airfield three times without any luck. It had gotten dark and visibility was limited, which was disconcerting as they were flying perilously close to an adjacent mountain range. Though they were eventually able to execute a safe landing, the close encounter had a profound effect on Michener, “As the stars came out and I could see the low mountains I had narrowly escaped, I swore, ‘I’m going to live the rest of my life as if I were a great man…I’m going to concentrate my life on the biggest ideals and ideas I can handle.’”

His wartime epiphany propelled Michener to action. After making his way back to his Quonset hut in Espiritu Santo, he rolled up his sleeves and began to type. The book he began writing, a collection of wartime stories entitled Tales of the South Pacific, would propel his literary career to new heights and impact American musical theatre in a monumental way. “No one knows the pacific better than I do. No one can tell the story more accurately,” he told himself. Thus was born one of the most time-honored, groundbreaking American classics of the 20th century.

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1 Laurence Maslon, the South Pacific Companion (New York: Schuster Publishing, 2008), 68.
2 Maslon, the South Pacific Companion, 68.
Since its 1949 debut, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific* has been widely esteemed not only as a masterful work of art, but as a landmark in the genre of musical theatre. Based on selected stories from Michener’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *South Pacific* confirmed Rodgers and Hammerstein’s command of the genre during what many have dubbed the golden age of the American musical. Along with worshipful reviews, it garnered ten Tony awards and became one of only two musicals in history to receive the Pulitzer Prize for drama. Frequently revived, released as a film in 1958 and again for television in 2000, it broke Broadway box office records, reaching audiences in the millions. However critically and commercially successful *South Pacific* was, however, it was much more than that.

As Bordman points out in his recent work, *American Musical Theatre*, “Rodgers and Hammerstein opened a space between operetta and musical comedy that could count on good music and grip at once. Their shows dealt in theme as well as story.” To be sure, *South Pacific*...

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Pacific, a musical written at a time when musical theatre was redefining itself as art, confronted controversial topics that were at the forefront of the American consciousness after WWII—namely ethical questions surrounding race relations, American expansionism and war-time politics. It has been honored for its insightful and courageous treatment of the issue of racial discrimination, in particular. Over sixty years later, the 2008 Broadway revival opened up a new discussion of these topics within a differing socio-political context. In light of this, I believe these timely issues warrant further exploration.

To this end, I have analyzed the evolution of an American moral code as it has been reflected and constructed in both Broadway productions of Roger and Hammerstein's South Pacific (c.1949, 2008). Specifically, I have examined its depiction of WWII, America’s imperialistic foreign policy, and the function of American patriotism in light of Terry Eagleton’s theories surrounding morality in 20th/21st century America. By so doing, my intent has been to reveal the socio-political implications of using an evolving code of ethics to tell this once groundbreaking story.

In contrast to the 1949 moral realist original, South Pacific 2008 takes a decidedly nihilist bent—both in terms of its reflection of society’s present day moral code, and its use of that code to accomplish what it sets out to do. Unlike South Pacific 1949, which sets out to confront racial prejudice and justify American expansionism in no uncertain terms, the relativist revival merely reflects our progressive contemporary politics in order to remain commercially viable in the midst of a struggling American economy. This ‘progression’ of moral ideology from the original Broadway production of South Pacific to the 2008 revival mirrors the evolution of American ethics in the 20th/21st centuries from moral realism to nihilism.
The cost of the revival’s compromising, reflective (and therefore nihilist) approach is that unlike *South Pacific* 1949, which played a part in constructing American post-war patriotism and deconstructing racial prejudice, the 2008 revival merely corroborates pre-existing values and ideologies. Thus, consistent with much contemporary theatre, this innovative, masterful work of art is rendered less effective as an instrument of political and social change. Despite this limitation however, *South Pacific*, and the musical genre at large remains a uniquely American art form with much to offer beyond mere escapism and entertainment.

1. **South Pacific as Cultural Archive**

   **Finding 'Justification' in South Pacific**

   Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* provides a valuable object of study for two reasons. First, it is esteemed as a critical and popular milestone of the musical theatre genre, and second, the timeliness of the racial and political issues it explores allow for the study of this American musical in a fascinating social context. *South Pacific* 1949 is a rich and complex historical document. A close reading of the text, music and performance elements of this acclaimed work illuminate the complexities of the form itself, as well as the cultural and political forces at work at the time it was created. Furthermore, doing so illustrates how theatre can both reflect and challenge ideas of cultural representation, and as *Theatre Journal*’s Andrea Most recently argued, “*South Pacific* is a hallmark example of theatre that accomplishes this.”

   One of the other exciting aspects of this study is the broad appeal and the relevancy of its subject matter. Underneath the romance, comedy and exoticism, *South Pacific* is a story

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that questioned core American values, exploring issues of race and power in a timely manner (the original opened just four years post WWII, and on the heels of Roosevelt’s aggressive expansionist response to domestic instabilities).\textsuperscript{7} The discussion of ethics surrounding war and racial prejudice continues to be meaningful today (although considerably less controversial), in light of the election of the first black president in 2008 and the U.S.’s questionable involvement in the Iraq war. Much has been written about the depiction of war and racial prejudice in \textit{South Pacific}, however examining such topics in the context of their cultural and political moment (both in 1949 and 2008) and through the lens of Terry Eagleton’s unique take on morality, is not only a fascinating study, but an intensely relevant and unchartered endeavor.

As Terry Eagleton points out in \textit{After Theory}, “Postmodernism of today neglects morality and politics and in so doing, sidesteps what matters most.\textsuperscript{8} He goes on to explain, “this is an awkward moment in history to find oneself with little or nothing to say about such fundamental issues.”\textsuperscript{9} Morality and politics are (or at least should be in Eagleton’s estimation) necessarily related, and neither should be neglected in a world where political missteps can have such serious ramifications.

Finally, despite the fact that “Until the last decades of the twentieth century, the American musical remained largely outside the realm of scholarly investigation,”\textsuperscript{10} there has been a resurgence of interest as of late in examining musicals from a scholarly standpoint.\textsuperscript{11} And although the study of war and imperialism in a genre which is often

\textsuperscript{7} There were few men who were more dedicated imperialists than Theodore Roosevelt. As president, he actively sought ports and colonies all over the world (including the Phillipines, Cuba, Panama, Hawaii, and Alaska, to name a few).
\textsuperscript{9} Eagleton, \textit{After Theory}, 36.
\textsuperscript{10} Perhaps due to the fact that many scholars viewed the genre of musical theatre as nothing more than a frivolous, mass-produced amusement.
\textsuperscript{11} Such dismissals of the genre of musical theatre are becoming less common, however, and the field of musical theatre studies is slowly becoming legitimized. Scholarly studies of American musical theatre now appear with increasing frequency. Until the late 1990’s, virtually all the books in the field were coffee-table books, or encyclopedias. Now, in 2012,
considered ‘light fare’ seems an unlikely path, many theatre scholars and practitioners would argue the contrary. David Savran, for instance, asserts that “because of their status as popular entertainments, musicals often take up more explicitly and pointedly many of the same historical and theoretical problems that allegedly distinguish canonical modernist texts.”\(^{12}\) This study will build on the growing assumption that musical theatre has a unique ability to present progressive and even controversial political ideologies to a large and diverse audience, by virtue of its conventional structure and commercial viability.

**Delimitations Inherent in the Study of Musical Theatre**

In his recent article, *The Do-re-mi* of Musical Theatre Historiography, Savran makes a case for a genre that until recently has been “The quintessence of middle brow art, exiled to the far reaches of the discipline, somewhere between Gilbert and Sullivan and flea circuses.”\(^{13}\) He points out the extent to which musical theatre scholarship has changed in the past thirty years, arguing that a genre once deemed beneath contempt has become ripe for analysis, despite numerous difficulties inherent in its historiography and methodology. Despite this trend, however, such limitations are worth considering here.

Many of these confines are logistical in nature. In many cases the libretti and orchestrations of early 20th century musicals such as *South Pacific* have simply disappeared. In instances like these, theatre scholars rely upon what Andrew Sofer, author of *The Stage Life of Props*, terms the ‘Production Analysis’ approach (defined by Sofer as “an interpretation of the text, specifically aimed at understanding it as a performance vehicle—

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reading it with a directorial eye”), in order to reconstruct the stage event.\textsuperscript{14} What results is nothing more than an improved understanding of the performance potentialities. Although this process frees the critic to pursue supposition and to imagine interpretive possibilities, the results are more conjectural and less reliable. As Sofer succinctly puts it, “A pitfall of this approach is that it is sometimes hard to draw the line between reasonable supposition and armchair fantasy.”\textsuperscript{15}

In addition, published texts and original cast albums often differ significantly from what was performed on stage, and even if there is an ample collection of materials available, what are we to take as the text? The script? Promptbook? Recording? Conductor’s score? What about improvised lines of dialogue and interpolated songs?

Despite these methodological limitations, however, when one relies on a multitude of informational sources such as contemporary journalism, stage illustrations, acting manuals, interpretation of the text, theatre history, production blueprints, directors notes, cast interviews, musical scores, and one’s own intuition as a theatre practitioner, this type of critical study is a legitimate exercise for scholars, and is surely “no less conjectural than an analysis of, say, Hamlet’s unconscious life or of Lady Macbeth’s past,” as Sofer points out. The value of it is it opens up a new field of investigation by providing valuable, and otherwise unattainable information about its performance history. It provides us with a “tightly focused lens through which to examine the dramatic energies of a specific theatrical period.”\textsuperscript{16}

At this point, I feel it practical to make mention of my personal background, in as much as it informs my perspective on this work. I am conscious of the fact that my status as a

\textsuperscript{14} Andrew Sopher, \textit{The Stage Life of Props} (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 4.
\textsuperscript{16} Sopher, \textit{The Stage Life of Props}, 6.
Canadian citizen qualifies me as somewhat of an outsider in the context of this study, which is very much centered on American political, social, and theatrical history. Although I concede that this presents a somewhat significant obstacle, I feel that the years I spent living in the U.S., my extensive, life-long study and passion for American theatre and history, and the notable similarities that exist between American and Canadian culture, language, customs, and ideologies allows me a certain advantage over other non-American outsiders looking in. I am also aware of the precariousness of analyzing and scrutinizing such ‘seemingly’ American historical issues as racial prejudice and imperialism as a non-American. In regards to this, I would submit that one would be hard pressed to name any country—Canada included—who has not, at some point in their history, grappled with similar issues.

Given this fact, it almost goes without saying that none of us is in a place to make personal judgments regarding the political or social missteps of a nation other than our own. On the contrary, I have come to marvel at the progress Americans have made over the past century, as a result of their willingness and determination to abandon old ideologies in favor of more progressive, inclusive ways of thinking. It is merely my intention then, to discuss such issues within the confines of this study, with the hope of uncovering answers to the aforementioned questions surrounding the efficacy of theatre in light of the evolution of a 20th/21st century code of ethics.

A Method to the Madness

Because of the aforementioned relationship between historical events and the themes tackled in American musicals, New Historicism, an inter-textual approach, is an interesting
and valuable critical tool for analyzing themes and topics of the American musical.\(^{17}\) This is especially true, since the practice of adopting musicals from a literary source has become an increasingly common trend in the musical genre, and according to Marc Bauch, “has been the single most important cause of the improving standards.”\(^{18}\)

In order to explore such complex topics as the historiography of two contrasting productions of *South Pacific* and their reflection and construction of an evolving American moral code, I examined these topics through multiple lenses. In order to do so, I employed the following methodologies.

I used Terry Eagleton’s ideas on the evolution of 20\(^{th}\) century morality (from moral realism to moral nihilism) as a springboard to talk about the depiction of war, imperialism, and the function of American patriotism as depicted in Rogers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific*. I compared and contrasted the original Broadway production in 1949 with the recent Broadway revival in 2008, and examined both from a historiographical standpoint, in the context of the political and cultural moments from which they emerged. I also examined the aforementioned issues from a Marxist bent, by taking into account contributing factors such as class/cultural conflict, and commercialism. Specifically, I looked at how the norms of right and justice were used as weapons of the oppressing class (or in this case, country), as well as how moral nihilism in *South Pacific* led to increased commerciality as it appealed to a wider audience.

In addition, I utilized or made reference to Nietzsche’s genealogical writings on the development of Slave and Master Morality theory (as the basis of all western morality),\(^{19}\) Adorno’s argument that “Society has been inscribed in music’s very meaning and its

\(^{19}\) Friedrich Neitzch, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (United Kingdom: Cambridge, 1997), 47.
categories,” so it “reflects and mediates the trends and contradictions of bourgeois society as a totality,” and Savran’s assertion that the musical provides a perfect laboratory with which to study artwork as commodity.

As there is no archived video recording of the original production, I made use of the critical approach Judith Milhou and Robert D. Humme have dubbed, “Production Analysis,” in order to piece together both the general spirit of the production and the more technical aspects of the show. I began by analyzing the book it was based upon (Tales of South Pacific), as well as numerous reviews, interviews, director’s notes, sheet music, photographs, and first hand accounts. In addition, I studied the 1958 movie version of the musical, also directed by Josh Logan. Recent reproductions can also offer important, but never definitive clues to original staging choices. I had access to an archived recording of the Broadway revival, as well as numerous cast interviews, reviews, director’s notes and articles chronicling the production. I also studied the historical contexts of these two productions from a political standpoint by examining scholarly articles, newspaper reviews, books, and video footage of these eras. I conducted this research in an effort to compare and contrast the depiction of WWII and U.S. Imperialism in South Pacific with the historical events themselves.

Literature Review: Searching the Source

Because South Pacific is primarily an adaptation of James A. Michener’s, Tales of the South Pacific (specifically, the chapters entitled “Our Heroine” and “Fo’ Dolla”), a knowledge of the underlying themes and general content of that work is critical to our understanding

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of how it was adapted into the production that comprises the object of this study. *Tales* is composed of 19 short stories, based on Michener's first hand experiences as a marine during the American occupation of the South Pacific (1941-1943). Rodgers, Hammerstein and Joshua Logan (co-writer and director of the musical), primarily used two stories from the book to weave together the plot and underlying themes. “Our Heroin” centers on the romance between Emile de Becque and Nellie Forbush, an American nurse (forming the main plot), and “Fo’ Dolla,” chronicles the love affair between Lieutenant Cable and the native girl, Liat (forming the subplot).

Any critical study involving Terry Eagleton’s discourses on morality must highlight his primary work on the subject, *After Theory*. This work contributes to this study in two ways: 1) It sketches a history of the evolution of cultural theory during the 20th Century, highlighting what Eagleton believes are its achievements and its defects, and 2) It constructs an alternative kind of theory which addresses timely issues such as truth, objectivity, morality and revolution—issues most contemporary theorists have deemed unworthy of discussion or research and which are, of course, of central importance to this thesis.

Several other scholarly works on the musical theatre genre have helped inform this work. Andrew Sofer’s *The Stage Life of Props*, for instance, is the most significant (and virtually the only) study of its kind.\textsuperscript{22} It focuses primarily on the stage property’s theoretical and practical possibilities in performance, and more importantly for this study, provides a thought provoking analysis of the delimitations associated with reanimating and contextualizing a live event after the fact—a process that has become a necessity in my analysis of *South Pacific* 1949, since the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

didn’t begin recording and archiving Broadway plays until 1951, and no other live video recording of the show is publically available today.

In a similar vein, Rosenberg’s *The Broadway Musical: Collaboration in Commerce and Art*, effectively addresses some of the issues inherent in the critical analysis of a genre as commercial as musical theatre, while David Savran offers a compelling argument for the opposite point of view in his article, *the Do-Re-Mi of Musical Theatre Historiography*—one of many articles archived in Marvin Carlson’s *Changing the Subject: Marvin Carlson and Theatre Studies*. More specific to the field of musical theatre, this book showcases a collection of notable theater scholars who discuss some of the primary developments that have occurred in the genre over the last 60 years, and in so doing provides a valuable context from which to base this study.

*The Catalog of the American Musical: Musicals of Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, and Lorenz Hart*, edited by Tommy Krasker and Robert Kimball, contains information unavailable in any other resource, regarding the whereabouts of both primary and secondary source materials relative to this analysis. Listings of personal papers and manuscripts, among other items allow access to information that would otherwise have gone uncovered. The Catalogue is designed for use by researchers and scholars, and was an invaluable place to begin my research.

In addition, *The Cambridge History of American Theatre: Volume 3 (Post World War II to Present)* is a solid contribution to a fascinating period in American theater history and an excellent reference work. Filled with scholarly essays, which shed light on American theatre’s evolution from the beginning of the twentieth century to present, it was extremely

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useful in the study of theatre as an expression of its historical and cultural context.

Other, more or less scholarly works on the genre abound, of course. Of particular use, was Marc Bauch’s book, *The American Musical*, in which Bauch analyzes three influential American musicals: *South Pacific* (1949), *West Side Story* (1957) and *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), provides historical overviews of the genre, and analyzes the dramatic devices utilized in each show. Bauch’s knowledge of musicals is encyclopedic. He is well versed in the language of critical theory, theatrical analysis and musical theatre history, and he utilizes his expertise in a comprehensive discussion of these shows that is essential reading in the historiographical study of musical theatre.

Less essential, but still valuable, not to mention quite readable, is Jim Lovensheimer’s *South Pacific: Paradise Rewritten*. Part of Geoffrey Block’s Broadway Legacies Series, whose impetus it is to write musicals that have impacted the genre in an important and meaningful way, the book skillfully teases out *South Pacific’s* postwar racial politics, gender constructions, and colonial discourse in its discussion of the potent social message embedded within *South Pacific*. He also analyzes the development of characters and plot points from Michener’s book to the musical production. Lovensheimer contributes original research to the cause, the most noteworthy source being his analysis of Hammerstein’s papers located within the Library of Congress, including numerous revisions of the script. He also makes use of Hammerstein’s personal annotations on Michener’s novel, something that has not previously been available, and which strengthens his arguments considerably.

Popular literature on Rodgers and Hammerstein is similarly not hard to find, and I have made practical, if careful use of it for this analysis. Most significant is Laurence

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Maslon’s *The South Pacific Companion,* which includes useful data about the reception and aesthetic characteristics of various productions, a popular history, and most notably, social and political contexts for the more noteworthy revivals of the show. It also contains helpful anecdotal information, though much of it remains undocumented.

Autobiographies and biographies of James A. Michener, Joshua Logan, and Rodgers, Hammerstein, along with collections of their materials found in the Manuscript Division of the New York City Public Library have been similarly valuable to this study, as they have offered insight, not only into their personal politics, but also their experiences in the military, their credentials and experiences in the theatre (Joshua Logan’s study of Stanislavsky’s methods for instance), and their political activism prior to writing *South Pacific.* All of this sheds light on who these men were, and what motivated them to embed such a controversial social message within *South Pacific.*

*South Pacific* was created during a critical period in American history, and cultural studies about post World War II America are plentiful. These works range from individual contributions such as John W. Jeffries’s *Wartime America,* to collections of essays such as *America At War: The Home Front, 1941-1945,* edited by Richard Polenberg. Without the contextual information these works provide, a historiographical study of *South Pacific* would not have been possible.

A number of scholarly journal articles exploring related topics were useful as well. A few of the more exemplary contributions include: Margaret Werry’s *The Greatest Show on Earth: Political Spectacle, Spectacular Politics, and the American Pacific,* Judith Sebasta’s *Strange Bedfellows: Musical Theatre and the Military,* and David Savran’s

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26 Explores Theatre and the Politics of representation and the power for influence theatre can have on systems of political dominion.
27 This article examines depictions of war and the military in the American Musical from 1914 to the present, exploring how
Towards a Historiography of the Popular. Though Savran and Margaret’s work is analytical and aesthetic in focus, providing little historical background on the musicals, it provides a scholarly, in-depth analysis on this evolving genre’s power for socio-political influence in American Society.

Also extremely informative were a variety of National Public Radio interviews with the production team and cast of the 2008 revival of South Pacific, as well as the live interview I conducted with Broadway actor Laura Osnes, who replaced Kelli O’Hara in the role of Nellie Forbush in the 2008 revival. Each afforded valuable insight into the productive team’s creative process, and allowed me either to corroborate or dispel assumptions I had made regarding the authenticity and deliberate nature of the themes imbedded within the show.

Given the challenges associated with attempting to recreate or reanimate a live theatrical event, a myriad of eyewitness accounts, cast interviews and theatre reviews of the revival have been a valuable part of my analysis as well. Sources about the original production of South Pacific and the critical and popular response to it include the 1949 cast recording, the published script, reviews of the initial production, scholarly articles written in response to it and the piano-vocal score. In particular, the articles and reviews provide an authentic point of view from which the initial production can be evaluated, and open a window through which post event information may be discovered through other witnesses. Letters and telegrams in the Rogers and Hammerstein collections supply revealing reactions from notable spectators who felt compelled to inform the creators of their thoughts on the thematic content of the work. Considering they were written just such musicals as Johnny Johnson, South Pacific and Hair have reflected changing perspectives on War in the United States.

28 A discussion of recent musical theatre scholarship which sets out to analyze how Wicked represents a remarkably appealing female protagonist, its careful handling of racial politics, and how it makes us of traditional musical theatre conventions to deliver a progressive message.
prior to the American civil rights movement, these telling responses to *South Pacific* occur within an interesting political context, which provides a useful backdrop against which the responses can be examined.

While this method of gathering information can be valuable in many respects, providing us with otherwise irretrievable information on the reception of historical theatrical events, caution needs to be exercised. One should not rely solely on the results obtained from first hand accounts, interviews and the like, but rather proceed with care, recognizing the limitations and subjectivity of such forms of data.

**South Pacific: The Story behind the Story**

Before proceeding with this comparative study, it seems useful to review the story of *South Pacific*, as well as a brief production history of both the 1949 original production and 2008 revival of the show. Set squarely in a war zone, this epic story takes place on a South Pacific island during the latter half of World War II. It focuses primarily on the Navy and Marine Corps, and their relationships with the native inhabitants of the nearby islands. The plot involves two love stories threatened by war and prejudice: The first, between a French Planter, Emile de Becque and Ensign Nellie Forbush, the optimistic navy nurse from Arkansas, and the second between marine corps Lieutenant Joseph Cable and Liat, a native island girl. When de Becque is enlisted to help Cable complete a life threatening reconnaissance mission (which claims Cable’s life), Nellie finds the courage to abandon her previous reluctance to marry Emile and accept his two children (who’s mother was an island woman), and they marry.

Drawn from Michener’s award-winning book, *Tales of the South Pacific, South Pacific* is widely regarded as one the finest contributions in American musical theatre history. Opera
star Ezio Pinza was cast as Emile de Becque, and the already established and widely esteemed Mary Martin played Nellie Forbush in the initial Broadway production, which debuted at the Majestic Theatre on April 7, 1949. The production was directed by Josh Logan, who also co-wrote the book along side Hammerstein. Rodgers, of course, composed the music. (See Figure 3)

![Fig. 3: From left: Joshua Logan, Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, Mary Martin, James Michener.](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cb/South_Pacific_rehearsal.jpg)

_South Pacific_ was an immediate hit, running 1,250 performances over five years. Besides the many awards it garnered, most of the songs in _South Pacific_ were commercially successful in their own right—so much so in fact, that the self-titled sound track topped the charts as the best selling album of the 1940’s. In addition, the show inspired a 1958 film adaptation along with an abundance of successful revivals, including the 1988 and 2001 West End revivals, and the widely acclaimed 2008 Broadway revival.

This 2008 Broadway interpretation of the musical was directed by Bartlett Sher, (who has gone on to direct the 2011 West End production as well as the U.S. touring production),

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30 The most successful songs on the album included: _Some Enchanted Evening_, _Younger than Springtime_, _I'm in Love With a Wonderful Guy_, _Bali Ha'I_, and _I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outta My Hair_.

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with musical staging by Joe Langworth and Christopher Gatelli. Paulo Szot and Kelli O’Hara stared as Emile de Becque and Nellie Forbush, though Laura Osnes filled the role of Nellie Forbush during O’Hara’s maternity leave, beginning in March of 2009. The production opened at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre on April 3, 2008 and was a critical success, winning seven Tonys, including Best Musical Revival. In a characteristically glowing review, Ben Brantley of the New York Times raved, “I know we’re not supposed to expect perfection in this imperfect world, but I’m darned if I can find one serious flaw in this production.”

August 22, 2010 marked the closing night of the production, which came after 37 previews and 996 critically and commercially successful performances. (See Figure 4)

![Fig. 4: From Left to Right, Paul Szot, Kelli O’Hara and Director Bartlett Sher](http://images.bwwstatic.com/upload/26661/tn-500_oharaszot_w140925.jpg)

**The Innovation and Influence of Rodgers and Hammerstein**

Any legitimate study of a ‘golden era’ musical like *South Pacific* would scarce be complete without at least a brief look at the legendary team who created it. Even before collaborating, both Rodgers and Hammerstein had established themselves as important

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creators for the commercial American stage. However, consistent with the old adage, ‘two heads are better than one,’ together, these two innovators were nothing short of legendary. Between the years of 1943 and 1959, Rodgers and Hammerstein contributed no less than nine Broadway musicals, one made for television movie, and one original film musical, garnering two Grammy Awards, fifteen Academy Awards, thirty-four Tony Awards and the first ever Pulitzer Prize awarded to a musical.

After writing *Oklahoma*, their first joint venture (not only the greatest hit of the war years, but a watershed for the advancement of the integrated musical), Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote a string of similarly successful entertainments including *Carousel* in 1945, *Allegro* in 1947, and finally *South Pacific* in 1949. The quintessential musical of 1949, *South Pacific* continues to be one of the most successful and influential musical plays of its time.

Despite its captivating and timely story, it was Rodger and Hammerstein’s thematic innovation that made *South Pacific* remarkable, and set it apart from their previous contributions. For the first time, issues of prejudice and tolerance became the driving mechanism of character conflicts in both the primary and secondary plot of an American musical. In *South Pacific*, the “blocking figure” isn’t a person (as in the case of Judd, from *Oklahoma*), but rather the ingrained prejudice and racial bias within characters. As John Bush Jones points out, “Hammerstein thus shifted his abhorrence of intolerance from the incidental references in *Oklahoma* and *Carousel* to its central position as the source of conflict in both plots of *South Pacific*.”

Thus, *South Pacific* was the first Rodgers and Hammerstein production that contained any sort of overt political message. Despite this, they cleverly embedded it within stories

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that are plot and character driven, and although the underlying theme is a powerful
element of the musical, it is important to acknowledge—especially in the context of a
thorough analysis such as this—that the thematic message itself was not their primary goal.
They simply told stories that resonated strongly with the times in which they were
presented. Despite this, there is much evidence that Rodgers and Hammerstein were very
much aware of the ideology they had embedded into this story and that it was done
deliberately, with a specific purpose in mind. I will further explore such evidence in
subsequent chapters, however the following is one such example.

Rodgers and Hammerstein were acutely aware of what one might call the
‘orchestration’ of *South Pacific*: how it reveals its component parts to an audience, and how
it will affect them. By starting *South Pacific* in another language (a gutsy move, considering
how important it is for an audience to connect immediately to the principal characters),
they were telling the audience that this show would be about language, translation, and the
ways in which one culture communicates with another in the midst of seemingly
insurmountable obstacles. As Bauch argues, “The first scene between Emile and Nellie on
his plantation is a cultural transaction—each tries to help the other find the right way to
communicate his or her thoughts. After Nellie exits the first scene, Emile reverts to singing
in French with his two children, indicating a linguistic chasm that will be difficult for Nellie
to cross, a metaphor for a far wider cultural abyss that she will encounter later in the
musical.”34 If not to make this point, why would such experienced, savvy writers take such a
risk by opening their musical in this way?

According to Lead Actress, Kelli O’Hara (who played the role of Nellie Forbush in the
2008 revival), Artistic Director Bartlett Sher can be credited with the same: “I guarantee

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34 Marc Bauch, *The American Musical* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2003), 139
you, that all of the subtle staging choices are meant to be the way they are for a reason. That is just the way Bart Sher works. He starts from the beginning, from the history and from the book, from what the words mean." And in a recent Charlie Rose interview, Sher, himself corroborated O’Hara’s claim: “Finding the deeper rhythm, that’s always what I’m after as a director. That, to me, is where I live. The deeper rhythm is filled with metaphor, it’s filled with humanity, it’s filled with sound, it’s filled with joy, in all of it is the rhythm.”

It should also be acknowledged that the aforementioned uncompromising ‘simplicity,’ of South Pacific 1949 scarcely takes away from the complexity of Rodger and Hammerstein’s work. There was good reason behind South Pacific’s stunning success, and it had to do with more than Mary Martin’s star power or Rogers and Hammerstein’s trusted names. As Brooks Atkinson clearly articulates in his April 8, 1949 theatre review for the New York Times, “Rogers and Hammerstein culled the story from James Michener’s Tales of the South Pacific and incredibly, managed to retain sensitive perceptions toward the Pacific islands and human beings in the midst of the callous misery, boredom and slaughter of war.” This is just one of the many, unanimously positive reviews that raved unequivocally about the show after its opening. South Pacific was a masterful work of art, filled with multifaceted characters, artful and innovative production design, and no shortage of subtlety, sincerity and conviction.

As is characteristic of the best-integrated musicals, the score and the script are both remarkably strong in this show. With help from Michener’s novel, Logan and Hammerstein wrote an outstanding book. South Pacific is very much a play with music, and as Kelli O’Hara

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pointed out in a recent *National Public Radio* podcast interview, “The way they work together is the brilliance of Rodgers, Hammerstein and Logan teaming up. Even though you can take these songs out of context and make them anything, you can also talk your way right into them in the show which makes for better, heightened communication.” Thus, in *South Pacific*, music is a seamless extension of an already powerful script, and as such, serves to both heighten and lend validity to the underlying message of this story.

This true to life style of acting and writing lends the show a certain credibility that many stories of its kind lack. In short, *South Pacific’s* message is simple—in the sense that the overarching message is bold, unmistakable, and clearly defined. The subtlety and complexity utilized in order to communicate that message is much less so.

**Even Broadway has its Limits: Delimitations of the Musical Genre**

In his article entitled, *The Utopian promise of Musical Theatre*, German philosopher Theodore Adorno criticizes musical theatre’s “radical integration,” or as he puts it, “phantasmagoria,” on the basis that it pretends to be a quasi-religious experience in order to conceal its exchange value. In his estimation, the musical, *Lady in the Dark* is an allegory of the search for that ‘something’ that musical theatre alone can promise, but never actually deliver. “It refuses a happily ever after, bringing a resolution that does not actually resolve any real world problems.” In the same way, musical theatre in general has a unique ability to deliver a fantasy—an all consuming “phantasmagoria”—but in doing so it offers us a resolution that does not resolve, or move beyond a fantasy of completion. And yet, as Savran argues, is it not this ability that musical theatre has to transport us and to deliver the

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fantasy that we treasure most about the genre? Isn’t it likely that we are actually more receptive to progressive, controversial messages (such as those embedded within the island ‘fantasy’ of South Pacific), when we are entrenched in this kind of pleasurable experience—one that is so unique to this genre?

Indeed, as I will explore further in subsequent chapters, the brilliance of early twenty-first century musicals lies both in their entertainment value and subversiveness. Still reeling from war, Americans were not terribly receptive to the kind of hard-hitting themes offered up in South Pacific. During the post WWII recession they needed escapism, and they got it in the integrated musical. But it was escapism with a purpose; it had a point to make, and I would argue it is precisely the kind of frivolity and gaiety typical of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musicals, that paved the way for the positive reception of the ground-breaking, hard hitting messages that South Pacific, in particular had to offer.

Despite this, perhaps one of the chief criticisms of the musical as an art form is its commercialism. How can something so profit-driven also be art? As is implicit in the telegram below, sent from a business investor to Leland Hayward, (producer of South Pacific 1949) musical theatre has long been the collective product of business corporations, and has thus been restricted in many ways.  
(See Figure 5)

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It is true that musical theatre has been influenced by the necessities of a self-funding commercial theatre system since its inception. In America, there was no aristocracy to finance playwrights, actors and theatres. Theatre was self-funded, and therefore out of necessity, commercial, and arguably light entertainment. Even now, cultural institutions are seldom subsidized by the U.S. administration. Their “function conditions their form” (as James Bean points out in *The American Musical: Aspects of its Development, 1927-1967*). As a result, Bean contends, “Composers and librettists must be willing to cater the popular taste.”

Musical theatre is far more than just commercial, however. Its commercialism should not be seen as its defining characteristic, since, paradoxically, the American musical has improved in quality and has become increasingly complex and progressive (in terms of both its ideology and form) since its inception, despite its increasing commerciality. In Bauch’s estimation, this may have resulted, in part, from the desire of talented writers and composers to create a genre of theatre that could be distinguished as being uniquely

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American. The U.S. wanted to become independent (as per the Declaration of Independence in 1776), not only politically, but also with respect to the art and culture it had to offer. The development of the American Musical was, (and is) supported by patriots, and the genre has developed and blossomed independently as a result.⁴³

A musical like Stephen Schwartz’s Wicked, for instance, has a political message that is relevant, progressive, and, as a result of how well it’s been marketed and commercialized, reaches a global audience. In fact, its’ progressive topicality is one reason behind its overwhelming commercial success in America, according to Stacey Wolf, author of Theatre Journal’s “Defying Gravity: Queer Conventions in the Musical Wicked.” Such left leaning progressivism is a common thread that ties many successful contemporary musicals together, and it is hardly a coincidence. Relevant, timely issues, such as the critical examination of what constitutes ‘good’ vs. ‘evil,’ and the exploration of a queered central love story render this, and other forward thinking musicals much more marketable in this modern, politically progressive era. And inversely, it is because of its commercial success and resulting capacity to generate circulatory momentum that this form of theatre is capable not only of representing, but also of constituting the worlds it imagines.

2. The Evolution of Morality

Moral Realism: Absolute, Uncompromising Truth

Regardless of musical theatre’s potential for political influence or worthiness as a topic of scholarly investigation, my intent here is to analyze it through the lens of Terry Eagleton’s theories on 20/21st century morality. It is imperative then, that I establish a

clear concept of both moral realism and moral nihilism, according to prominent moral theorists throughout history, in addition to Terry Eagleton himself.

Essentially, moral realism is an observation about the nature of ethical concepts—specifically, as Eagleton explains, “that it is the function of all moral concepts to describe reality, and that such concepts may have truth values because they refer to normative entities that exist independently of those concepts themselves.” Thus, the purpose of a moral concept is to describe a piece of objective reality.”

Realists argue that moral claims report facts, and are true—as long as they get the facts right. In a sense then, moral realists see morality in black and white, right or wrong—regardless of perspective, cultural or political context, time or circumstance. Thus, although it is possible for new truths to emerge or be discovered as time passes, such truths are not culturally constructed, but objective facts that exist in the world, independent of any socio-political context. Simply put by Eagleton: "Moral value lies in the world, rather than in your mind.” Despite this seemingly straightforward outlook, it is worth noting that there are disputes among moral realists regarding which moral claims are, in-fact, true and what it is about the world that causes those claims to be true.

Many of the foundational ideas of moral realism can be traced back to classical Greek philosopher, Plato. In contrast to moral relativism, he believed that "Evaluative qualities belong to the object that is valued." Thus, “We call something beautiful not because we are pleased by it, but because it genuinely has, independent of being appreciated, the quality of beauty.” Since, according to Plato, values are natural and objective, he supposed that what is valuable can be assessed and calculated decisively.

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Plato believed that over and above sensible (perceivable through the senses) objects, there are “entities, which give absolute understanding of values.” He labeled these the ‘forms’: cognitively dependable, pure manifestations of value, which provide us with the prototype of what is best. He maintained that values are objective, and that they occur naturally in the physical world. Thus, it is possible to determine, definitively, what is best (or morally speaking, what is right).

Plato was a rationalist: in his conception of morality, the moral conflicts that exist in life are reasoned away. Plato made no distinction between matters of value and matters of fact, for it was his belief that “All qualities inhere in their objects.” Samuel Clarke’s discourse, Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion (published in 1706), contains the first definitive statement of the set of theories that have since been designated as moral realism. This moral code was initially defended by G. E. Moore against what Moore called the “metaphysical ethics” of Kant. Moore argued that value must be conceived as a fundamental, or innate, rather than relative property.

Richard Newell Boyd (American philosopher and graduate of MIT c.1970) is a leading defender of ethical realism in moral philosophy circles. His co-edited book, The Philosophy of Science is widely used in undergraduate and graduate philosophy courses. In Boyd’s assertion, moral realism dictates that ethical statements are (or express propositions which are) true or false. He argues that whether a statement is true or false is largely independent of our moral opinions—a concept which is consistent with Plato’s teachings. Boyd upholds that there exist objective, mind-independent facts that moral judgments are in the business of describing. Thus ethical facts are objective, in as much as they are

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47 Mary Margaret Mackenzie, Journal of Medical Ethics, 90.
48 Mary Margaret Mackenzie, Journal of Medical Ethics, 91.
independent of our cognizing them.\(^{50}\)

**Moral Nihilism: ‘Truth’ is Relative**

The term moral nihilism (also known as moral relativism, skepticism, or subjectivism) is understood in a number of contexts. Most often it is associated with the claim that there are extensive moral discrepancies and a meta-ethical notion that the truthfulness of moral judgments is not absolute, but relative to a specific group of persons. From this view, things can be immoral only from certain perspectives, thus nothing is universally moral or immoral. In short, moral relativists (nihilists), contend that established moral values are abstractly contrived—products of various cultures throughout history rather than objective truths—and thus, morality does not inherently exist.

Postmodernist philosopher, Lyotard for example, maintains that rather than making use of objective truth to substantiate their theories, philosophers rely on meta-narratives (stories about the world which are inseparable from the period and culture they originate from), to legitimize their claims. He defines the post-modern state as one distinguished by a dismissal of not only the meta-narratives themselves, but the use of them to legitimize truth claims.

Thus, moral nihilists (relativists) judge morality to be constructed, rather than intrinsic—an intricate system of rules that may afford its inherent a social, economic, or psychological benefit, but are essentially void of any universal, or even relative truth. In short, moral nihilism is the meta-ethical assertion that nothing is inherently right or wrong, moral or immoral, due to the fact that morals change and evolve with the world they reflect upon. Proponents of this view utilize morals reflectively, rather than prescriptively. Hence,

morals are shaped to reflect actions, which are chosen regardless of a pre-existing ethical code.

Though moral nihilism was not the presiding school of thought until well into the 20th century, its foundational ideas can be traced back further in history. This pragmatic moral code is often associated with German philosopher and self-proclaimed immoralist, Friedrich Nietzsche, who diagnosed ethical nihilism as a phenomenon of Western civilization, despite being a proponent of many of the tenants of moral nihilism himself. In the late 19th century, for instance, Nietzsche declared morality to be subjective, resting on an individual’s principles. He saw it as something created by mankind, rather than by a transcendent deity, and thus indivisible from the formation of a particular culture, similar to the present day postmodernist view. He thus believed we must reassess the validity of our morals in light of the fact that they are relative to our objectives and to ourselves.

Perhaps most notorious and influential is Nietzsche’s argument that there are primarily two types of morality: slave and master. While slave morality values sympathy, humility and kindness above all else, master morality values strength, pride and nobility. Many have argued that Nietzsche’s code of ethics provides the foundation for contemporary western culture.

A self proclaimed immoralist (hence his infamous ‘campaign against morality’), Nietzsche was a harsh critic of the leading moral schemes of his time (Kantianism, Utilitarianism, and Christianity), arguing, for example that “It is Christianity’s drive towards absolute truth that is its undoing.”51 As a result, Nietzsche contends, “Christianity eventually finds itself to be a construct, which leads to its own dissolution.”52 This self-dissolution comprises another form of moral relativism. Since Christianity was a religious

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52 See note 52 above.
interpretation that claimed to be the interpretation, Nietzsche stated that its dissolution leads beyond mere cynicism, to a dismissal of all meaning—a state wherein “absolute valuelessness reins and “nothing has meaning.” He argued that this brand of nihilism is “dangerous,” or even “the danger of dangers,” for in his words “It is through valuation that people survive and endure the danger, pain and hardships they face in life.” Thus Nietzsche believed that nihilism, or relativism deprives the world of purpose, meaning, and intelligible truth. Despite this, his indictment of absolute truth (a realist notion) and his relativist stance on morality (his claim that “Knowledge is always bound by perspective”), leave little doubt that Nietzsche subscribed to many of the tenants of contemporary moral nihilism.

Nietzsche wasn't the only German philosopher who advocated for this brand of ethics. Karl Marx was also a proponent of moral nihilism. Like Aristotle, Marx believed there is a relation between the state of the world and how we ought to act within it. More specifically, he believed that “Moral inquiry must examine all of the social and economic factors which contribute to a specific action or way of life, not just the personal ones.” He argued, for instance, that moral consciousness is an ideological illusion, determined by the class interests it sanctifies, and that “People are unaware of the social function fulfilled by the moral convictions they hold.” Thus, in his view the norms of morality are largely weapons of the oppressing class, and must be overcome for revolution to succeed.

It is no surprise then, that Marx rejected morality, especially since he confused it with moralism, which maintains that ethical questions are separate from political or social ones.

Moralism fails to see (as both Marx and Eagleton do), that ‘moral’ implies examining the

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53 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 152.
54 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 153
55 See note 55 above
quality of human conduct as sensitively and thoroughly as one can, and that such an endeavor is virtually impossible when one abstracts people from their social or political environment.\textsuperscript{58}

Despite the contributions of Nietzsche and Marx, it is eighteenth-century theorist David Hume who serves, in many ways, as the father of ethical nihilism. Ironically, Hume did not claim to advocate nihilism, on the basis that he believed that many, though not all of our sentiments, are universal. He did, however distinguish between matters of fact and matters of value, and suggested that “Moral judgments consist of the latter, as they do not deal with verifiable facts obtained in the world, but only with our sentiments and passions,” which he argued, the universe remains entirely indifferent to.

By the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the debate about the function of moral language had intensified. Many philosophers began to distrust whether ethical values contained what they termed “cognitive content” at all. This question arose primarily out of the well known “fact/value distinction,” and it ignited a discussion about what the purpose of ethical language is, if not to communicate objective facts. Prescriptivists argued that ethical language is essential and prescriptive in nature, while emotivists held that its function is merely to sustain or criticize actions, and that “moral judgments are no more true or false than cheering or booing are true or false.”\textsuperscript{59} As Christine Korsgaard (professor of philosophy at Harvard University) points out, by the nineteen sixties, this emotivist (comparable to the relativist/nihilist) view was the prevailing code of ethics in the western world.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{58} See note 58 above.
\textsuperscript{59} Christine M. Korsgaard, “Realism and Constructivism: Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy,” in \textit{Realism and Philosophy in America at the Turn of the Century}, (Charlottesville: Philosophy Documentation Center, 2003), 111.
\textsuperscript{60} Korsgaard, \textit{Realism and Philosophy in America at the Turn of the Century}, 111.
This idea that ethical norms cannot be justified by any logical or scientific standards (and hence, do not exist anywhere except in the minds of people), has gained momentum in the past 40 years. According to this meaning, it is arguable that moral nihilism is a prominent school of thought today, especially among philosophers. A great many people regard moral sentiments as arbitrary, arguing that they either do not stem from an infallible source (like God), or they cannot be grounded in indisputable logic and reason. Indeed, there are so many positions which can justifiably be equated with moral or ethical nihilism (more commonly referred to as ethical relativism), that to attempt to describe them all here would neither be possible, nor practical for this study.

**Eagleton’s Ethics: Objective Truth Lives On**

Cutting against the grain of postmodernist theory, Terry Eagleton, argues compellingly for the reality and knowability of absolute truth, maintaining, “The reality of objective truth (moral realism) has yet to succumb to postmodern thought.”61 Thus, he subscribes to a realist moral code—the very opposite of the postmodern notion of moral nihilism, or relativism. He defines moral realism similarly, as “The meta-ethical view in which the existence of ‘truth’ is accepted.” It claims, “Ethical sentences express propositions, some of which are true. Such propositions are made true by objective features of the world, independent of subjective opinion.”62 It is only in the absence of such truth (a.k.a. when the whole truth is not exposed or accessible to the public, as in the case of propaganda), that it is rendered ineffective.

According to Eagleton, many aspects of morality (for example, the concept that unjustified killing is wrong) are absolute and have not changed through time or

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circumstance. All that has changed is our perception of the reality of these events as a result of various socio-political contexts, such as war. He points out that if the moral relativist/nihilist (whose moral code evolves along with the shifting tides of politics) is right, than truth is emptied of its value.

In addition, Eagleton asserts that the fallibility of some truth claims “does nothing to undermine the category of truth itself,” an important distinction that many postmodernist theorists miss.\(^{63}\) He upholds the notion that there is an objective reality, and that morality is not just ideology, but a practical, prescriptive guide to living. Furthermore, he speaks of Christianity’s profound capacity to give meaning, value, morality and vision to the human experience.

In Eagleton’s view, the contrasting, contemporary code of ethics known as moral nihilism is a pragmatic, convenient brand of morality that nevertheless does not hold up in reality. Under moral nihilism, changes in behavior precede changes in society’s moral code, which it adjusts in order to validate or endorse that behavior—society’s moral codes surrounding war/racism changed drastically in the 60 years since WWII, for instance.\(^ {64}\) Thus it is reflective, rather than prescriptive, as Eagleton believes any legitimate moral code should be.

An interesting comparison made by Judith Sebasta, is a case in point. In her 2004 article, “Strange Bedfellows: Musical Theatre and the Military,” Sebasta draws a connection between George W. Bush and *Chicago*’s ‘heroine’ Roxy Hart, who, according to Sebasta, both made use of reflective moral justifications in order to defend their actions. At the historic White House press conference on 6 March, 2003, Bush justified his decision to go to war by making a causal connection between the war on Iraq, which he had initiated, and the 9/11

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\(^{63}\) Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, 104.

\(^{64}\) Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, 112.
terrorist attacks. Hart lied to reporters at the coaching of her attorney, Billy Flynn, reporting that she had acted in self-defense: “We both reached for the gun”. Both were a similar spectacle, in that both Bush and Hart used moral justifications in an attempt to validate their actions after the fact—that is, after they had been accused of bearing responsibility for the unjustified killing of another (or others).65

Eagleton also contends that cultures understand the world differently, and that what some societies interpret as fact, others do not. He concedes, that if truth simply means truth for us, than the likelihood of conflict between ours, and other cultures diminishes, since truth is equally just truth for them. This is tolerable, Eagleton argues, when it comes to the sacred status of elephants. However it doesn’t hold up when it comes to international politics, war, imperialism and the like—despite its pragmatism.66 He goes on to make a case that according to moral nihilists, there is no absolute force to values, which means there are no knock down arguments against them, creating a dangerous situation in which morality is in a constant state of flux, and history becomes its own justification for morally reprehensible behavior.

Eagleton maintains that as a result of the postmodern tide, many people/theorists today see truth as rigid and uncompromising, and so, want little to do with it. In his words, “These people are rather like people who call themselves immoralists, as they believe essentially, that morality simply means forbidding people to go to bed with each other. Such people are inverted puritans, in Eagleton’s estimation. Like the puritan, they equate morality with repression: To live a moral life is to have a terrible time.”67 Unlike the puritans, they do not see living this way as a character building experience, and thus many

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reject morality entirely. Likewise, those who are skeptical of truth are often inverted dogmatists, Eagleton says: “They reject an idea of truth that no reasonable person would defend in the first place.”

Eagleton’s final argument concerns the instability of morality today. He believes that there is far too much change (a state characteristic of nihilism), in our modern day world. In Eagleton’s description,

Whole ways of life are wiped out almost overnight. Men and women must scramble frantically to acquire new skills or be thrown on the scrapheap. Human identities are shucked off, reshuffled, tried on for size, tilted at a roguish angle and flamboyantly paraded along the catwalks of social life. And morality—which ought to be a solid anchor—a guiding force in our lives, changes and warps with the tides of fashion and modern day cultural theory.

Thus in Eagleton’s view, nothing is sacred in today’s society and little can be depended upon, morally speaking or otherwise. We are continually in a process of re-crafting ourselves, as well as our belief systems.

**Eagleton: Problems with Postmodernism**

Also a prominent mode of thought for the past forty years, has been postmodernism: The contemporary movement, which rejects historical narratives, universal values, and the possibility of objective truth. Cynical of unity and progress, postmodernist theory leans towards cultural relativism and advocates heterogeneity and pluralism. Postmodernists (such as Derrida, Lyotard, and Miller), subscribe to moral skepticism (similar to nihilism), in which the existence of unchanging, universal, moral ‘truth’ is rejected.

Though he respects the thinking of Derrida, Kristeva, Barthes, and others like them, Eagleton insists that postmodernism is in need of considerable revision. He isn’t opposed to

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68 See footnote 68 above.
theory in its entirety—on the contrary. In his own words, “If theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever.”\textsuperscript{70}

His chief complaint derives from his belief that postmodernism is focused, for the most part, on trivialities instead of more meaningful issues like justice and truth. He affirms,

Cultural theory as we have it promises to grapple with some fundamental problems, but on the whole, fails to deliver. It has been shamefaced about morality and metaphysics, embarrassed about love, biology, religion and revolution, largely silent about evil, reticent about death and suffering, dogmatic about essences, universals and foundations, and superficial about truth, objectivity and disinterestedness. This, on any estimate, is rather a large slice of human existence to fall down on.\textsuperscript{71}

Thus, as Eagleton argues, Postmodernism has sidelined the very issues that religion and philosophy have examined for millennia, largely because it sees moralism as a mysterious, unknowable law.

On this viewpoint, there are moral judgments, but they lack any sort of criteria or rational basis. There is no longer any relation between the way the world is and how we ought to act within it, because the way we and the world are, for these thinkers, is no way in particular. Thus, they cannot serve as a basis for moral judgment. For Derrida, for instance, ethics is a series of absolute decisions—all of which are necessary and crucial, but nevertheless ‘utterly impossible,’ and which fall outside all given norms and modes of conceptualization.\textsuperscript{72}

Eagleton argues that this mode of thought forgets the sheer banality of the ethical, seeing it more in relation to the eternal than to the everyday. Hence, a result of what Eagleton sees as postmodernism’s evasiveness, he dubs it “a kind of anti-philosophy—a veto on profitably pondering on the things that matter most.”\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{71} Eagleton, \textit{After Theory}, 63.
\textsuperscript{72} Eagleton, \textit{After Theory}, 153.
Eagleton's Pledge: Morality and Politics—‘Indivisible under God’

Traditionally, cultural theorists have considered politics the business of public administration and morality, a personal affair. “Politics belonged to the boardroom and morality to the bedroom,” says Eagleton, who cleverly points out that, “This led to a lot of immoral boardrooms and politically oppressive bedrooms.” Indeed, politics has been redefined by many in recent times as a calculative and pragmatic endeavor, essentially the opposite of the ethical.

In contrast to this, Eagleton contends that moral philosophy has had an enormous impact on political events throughout history: “Plato’s ideas determined Christian views on God, John Locke’s notions were utilized during the creation of the U.S. government, and Nazi Zealots took Nietzsche’s beliefs on Jewish morality to violent extremes.” The opposite is also true. Major world events such as WWII, the Nazi Holocaust, the Apartheid, race riots, the Korean and Vietnam wars, and the advent of 9/11 have impacted not only public perception of later events (ex. the U.S. War on Iraq), but also America’s moral code as it applies to war and issues such as race and imperialism. Essentially then, morality and politics are, and should be related. Morality is, after all, about excelling at being human, which is next to impossible in isolation.

Aristotle considered morality to be a practical, rather than theoretical study, and Eagleton, amongst others, agrees. Indeed, his chief criticism of contemporary philosophy is that it has gone astray because it has not been political enough, and thus has fallen short as a catalyst for positive change in society. Dean Duncan, Associate Professor of Media Arts at Brigham Young University supports this claim. He argues, “There are only two important topics in this world: morality and politics. Morality is just theoretical. Politics is the

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74 Eagleton, After Theory, 148.
75 See footnote 75 above.
enactment of morality, or “morality in action.” Following the lead of philosophers such as Aristotle, Marx, Hobbes and Kant, Duncan is of the opinion that moral philosophy can be practical when applied to politics, or put another way, that political practice can be reflective.

With this in mind, it behooves us to gain a deeper understanding of the increasingly nihilistic moral code that has driven pivotal and catastrophic political events throughout the twentieth century (such as those depicted in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific*). This will enable us to look back on our history—on our mistakes and triumphs, and recognize our tendency to find convenient moral justification for our actions instead of acknowledging the possibility of the existence of objective truth, which remains unchanged through time and circumstance. Equipped with this informed perspective, it seems less likely that we will, by default, follow the morally questionable missteps of our predecessors. And thus, we will have (as Aristotle taught), “done good, rather than merely knowing it, for its own sake.”

Few would contest that we live within a social order, which urgently needs repair. Like many before me, I believe that moral theory must be harnessed to practical, political ends. For, as Korsgaard argues, “It is in this practical conception of moral and political philosophy, that both our significant historical achievements, and our hopes for making progress in the future can be found.”

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Chapter II
“Cockeyed Optimist” or Bloody Mary? The Depiction of War in *South Pacific*

Once upon a time, America dreamed of itself as a singing fairy tale for grown-ups, with a happy ending. Norman Rockwell painted this storybook country, and Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein wrote its songs. More than just pop confections, they added up to a kind of secular catechism that sweetly but firmly instructed people on the rules of behavior in a world where America knew best and good triumphed over evil.77

*-Stephen Holden, "A Grand Night for Singing”*

Such was the fare of the original Broadway production of *South Pacific*. This image of mid-century America and the pop culture that paid homage to it is remarkably congruent with Rodgers and Hammerstein’s idyllic depiction of WWII in *South Pacific* 1949. This landmark production was unique in that it depicted a historical experience the entire nation had just lived through. *South Pacific* told of those who fought in what is commonly referred to as “the good war.” Adapted from James Michener’s collection of WWII stories, entitled *Tales of the South Pacific*, the musical was set on an exotic Pacific island which became a moral testing ground for two of the central characters in this story. In contrast to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma*, which rejected the topical and instead embraced a sentimental look at bygone America, *South Pacific* dealt with contemporary issues directly.

In contrast to the 2008 revival, which is a nihilist reflection of the complex, divisive present-day ideologies surrounding war morality, the 1949 original presented a simplified, romanticized, and therefore more palatable version of a very complicated event (complicated by racial prejudice and the fact that there were no easy answers or guiltless parties, among other things). In so doing, it exemplified a decidedly simpler American morality prevalent at the time, which tended towards Terry Eagleton’s definition of moral realism.

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1. **Mid-Century American Morality**

**Putting *South Pacific* in Context**

The romanticized, polarized depiction of war in *South Pacific* 1949 may have stemmed from the fact that Americans were able to maintain a certain physical and therefore emotional distance from the war, which was largely fought in Europe. Like the previous war, World War II was popular on the home front, supported by most Americans—particularly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on the 7th of December 1941. As Wilbur H. Morrison states in *The History of Twentieth-Century Wars in America*: "No single act could have so united the American people as Pearl Harbor."\(^78\) According to Eagleton, the opposition of good vs. evil in all home-front ideology surrounding the war was “clear and uncomplicated, untroubled by subtlety or nuance, let alone irony or skepticism.”\(^79\) It was a message of resolute hope, entitlement and justification. It was a world where good prevailed over evil and America knew best—where the norms of right and justice would be used as justification for drastic measures taken during and post World War II. There was an acute lack of variety of views that appeared in American popular culture during those years. It all conveyed the same resolute message about the war—one of unwavering optimism—if it conveyed any accurate information at all.

It was not until September of 1943, for instance, that Americans were exposed to even a glimpse of the slaughter and desolation that characterize World War II. The U.S. military made the decision to assemble combat footage of Operation Galvanic (the same battle depicted in Act 2 of *South Pacific*) into a newsreel and screen it for Americans back home. Along with a *Life* magazine pictorial released in September of the same year, “It was the

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first, and one of the only shocking glimpses that the average citizen had of the devastation and carnage in the South Pacific.”80 (See Figures 6, 7 and 8).

Thus, in spite of the fact that World War II was, in many ways, significantly more cruel and barbaric than any war before it, I would argue that Eagleton is not far off in his assertion that “The ‘true meaning’ of the war (specifically, the brutal, unrelenting battle with Japan, and the resulting moral compromises deemed necessary by the US military) was inaccessible to un-bombed America.”84

As we’ve established, major world events throughout history have shaped perspectives on subsequent world events. The devastation of the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941, for instance, helps explain the almost overwhelming show of support for the US’s entrance into WWII by the American people and in turn, WWII dampened society’s

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80 Laurence Maslon, the South Pacific Companion (New York: Schuster Publishing, 2008), 58
reception of the Korean and Vietnam wars (signing up for another war lost some of its appeal in light of the heavy price that was paid by Americans at home and abroad).

Conversely, the tragedy of 9/11 helped bolster support and solidarity among Americans heading into the Iraq war in later years. Just as the musical theater of the Great Depression suggests images of light, escapist entertainments (*Ziegfeld Follies, Anything Goes, On your Toes*), contemporary politics, as well as the aforementioned historical events, impacted the way WWII was depicted in both versions of Roger and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific* during two contrasting political climates in America.

**Us Vs. Them Ideology**

Consistent with the “clear and uncomplicated” message of optimism that pervaded American politics and popular culture during and after WWII, *South Pacific* 1949 reflected and utilized a decidedly bolder American morality prevalent at the time, which tended towards Eagleton’s conception of moral realism. In *After Theory*, Eagleton calls a number of fundamental postmodernist ideas into question, insisting: “The reality of objective truth has yet to succumb to postmodern thought.”85 It is not surprising then, that when *South Pacific* opened in 1949, many Americans had not yet abandoned their belief in objective truth as the foundational principle of any worthwhile code of ethics. Such modes of thinking became particularly significant during WWII, when the American Government endorsed the “good vs. bad,” “right vs. wrong,” “us vs. them” approach to wartime propaganda, in order to rally the American people behind the troops. According to moral realism, moral reasoning lies in the world, not in your mind, and therefore morality is not conditional upon one’s perspective. Something is either right, or good for everyone, or it is universally wrong, or

evil. Thus, for many Americans it was simple: If it was true that America was fundamentally good and moral, then by extension the enemy must be fundamentally evil and immoral.

It is also interesting to note that in the early part of the 20th century, a phenomenon which Friedrich Nietzsche terms "cultural sophistication" arose, which enabled people to regard fellow human beings as their "other," somehow less human counterparts. In *The Dawn of Day*, Nietzsche contends, "Human morality arises from the natural evolutionary history of animal life." He further explains, "The beginnings of justice, as of prudence, moderation, morality—in short, of all we designate as the *Socratic virtues*—are *animal*," rooted in the human body, and its capacity to feel compassion for others of its kind.86 He argues, it is our culture which convinces us that certain human beings are undeserving of our empathy and respect. The phenomenon, referred to by postmodernists as *culturalism*, goes a long way towards explaining how such a one sided, simplistic view of the world was not dismissed outright. On the contrary, it had the validity and staying power to impact the American psyche in a powerful way (just as it did—perhaps even to a greater extent—for the Japanese, Germans, Italians, and all other nations entrenched in the war).

According to Eagleton, modern cultural theorists tend to feel uneasy with moral questions because they seem to pass over the political for the personal. It is no surprise then, that in recent times, morality has often been a way of ducking hard political questions by doing just that—reducing them to the personal. In the so-called "war against terrorism," for instance, the word "evil" really means, don't look for a political explanation. "It is a wonderfully time saving device," Eagleton points out. "If terrorists are simply satanic, then you do not need to investigate what lies behind their atrocious acts of violence. You can ignore the plight of the Palestinian people or of those Arabs who have suffered under

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86 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Dawn of Day* (London: Dover Philosophical Classics, 1911), 16
squalid rightwing autocracies supported by the west for its own selfish, oil-hungry purposes.”

Eagleton also points out that since 9/11, an array of anti-theoretical terminology such as “evil,” “freedom-loving,” “patriot,” and “anti-American” has been en vogue in the U.S. These terms are anti-theoretical in the sense that they are essentially invitations to shut down thought. The danger in using such labels is that they suggest in no uncertain terms that there is no more to be said. To theorize or investigate what lies beneath them or what may have motivated the behavior which inspired them is considered unpatriotic. Such an approach to understanding others (or ‘the other’ in this case), is an example of the way *South Pacific* uses moral realism in its ‘us vs. them, good vs. bad’ treatment of war, and more specifically in its depiction of America’s role in WWII. This simplistic method of providing easy answers to complicated questions was at the heart of mid-century American morality, and serves a specific purpose in Rogers and Hammerstein’s wartime musical, *South Pacific*.

**Word War II glorified**

In the years during and immediately following the Second World War, many came to see America’s mission to halt the spread of Hitler’s fascist empire as an admittedly difficult, but heroic, and noble affair. There were many reasons at the level of popular understanding, that Americans dubbed World War II, the most destructive war in history, “the last good war.” By the time it had drawn to a close, America had liberated the world from fascism and was the wealthiest, most powerful country on earth. In addition, unlike its enemies or its allies, the US had avoided economic and physical devastation. WWII ushered

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in an era of unparalleled prosperity, put a stop to the depression, and brought Americans together in a united effort against their enemies. Taking their cue from American media and pop culture, (including such classics as *Winged Victory*, the play/film by Moss Hart, produced by the U.S. Army Air Forces as a morale booster, the Pulitzer prize winning 1944 novel, *A Bell for Adano*, and 1944 biographical war film, *The Fighting Sullivans*), many ‘golden era’ musicals such as *South Pacific* glorified and romanticized war, rather than drawing people’s attention to the fact that war is a necessary evil with no true victors.

The use of new military technology capable of annihilating millions at the touch of a button is partly to blame. As Eagleton points out, “Technology is an extension of our bodies which can blunt their capacity to feel for one another. It is simple to destroy others at long range, but not when you have to listen to the screams. Military technology creates death but destroys the experience of it.”

As was the case during the First World War, U.S. soldiers and civilians were physically and emotionally removed from the bleak, visceral experience of World War II by both distance and military technology—creating the capacity for Americans to romanticize war. What many civilians did not quite grasp, and what they would come to comprehend more fully in the years following the Korean, Vietnam and Iraq wars, was that the reality of war is complicated and ugly, that the romanticized, polarized perspective perpetuated by both the U.S. Government and Rogers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific* was quite simply, off base.

During the second year of her run in *South Pacific*, Mary Martin was asked by the *New York Times* to recount her experiences in the show. A good deal had changed after the ebullience of her first year. She explained that the recent war in Korea had given the show “a sharp new meaning.” Under the impact of events, it turned a series of war recollections,

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softened by time and gilded by glamour, into a “picture of grim reality.” “Sometimes,” she continued, “when the news was bad I’d find it rather difficult to sing ‘A Cockeyed Optimist.’ But the qualities of strength inherent in *South Pacific* always lifted me again by the end of the performance.”

If Rodger’s songs had the power to lift Martin, it stands to reason they had a similar effect on the audience, who were in the midst of a similarly sober awakening. There are few lyrics by Hammerstein that represent his personal philosophy quite so well. In the early 50’s Ed Sullivan referred to Hammerstein himself, as a “cockeyed optimist,” to which Hammerstein replied, “There is no more validity to the belief that life is one great snake pit than to the idea it was all one huge sunlit meadow.”

Regardless, it is difficult to miss the healthful (or perhaps unhealthful) dose of sugarcoated optimism that Rodgers and Hammerstein injected into this story of war, love and loss. Robert Leckie (a former U.S. Marine) wrote his World War II memoir entitled *Helmet for My Pillow* after storming out of a Broadway showing of *South Pacific*. He explains, “I have to tell the story of how it really was. I have to let people know the war wasn’t a musical.” To their credit, Rodgers and Hammerstein aren’t entirely to blame. Although their romantic, simplistic approach to telling Michener’s wartime stories was undoubtedly chosen with a specific end in mind, it should be noted that they, themselves were not privy to all of the un-obscured facts.

According to its widely accepted definition, moral realism maintains that ethical sentences express propositions—some of which are true, and that those propositions are made true by objective features of the world, independent of subjective opinion. Even if one subscribes to this moral philosophy, it is predicated upon one’s access to objective truth in

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91 Maslon, *the South Pacific Companion*, 130.
the first place. In the absence of such truth, for example when ignorance and subjection to propaganda obscure what is real, it cannot permeate public perception or impact the moral code of a nation, for instance. One could argue that *South Pacific*, which shied away from reality in favor of a glossed over, polarized depiction of WWII is guilty of such an offence. However, as Eagleton points out, “You can only know how the situation is if you are in a position to know.” And unfortunately, despite Rogers and Hammerstein’s efforts, neither they, nor their audience were put in that position. After all, they themselves were victims of this type of propaganda, and neither one had experienced fighting in a war, first hand. Though both James Michener and Joshua Logan were war veterans, it was Rogers and Hammerstein who influenced the production most and who maintained the most creative control throughout the process.

I argue that despite their intentional efforts to imbue their story with a polarized American perspective and plenty of romance, thereby softening what we now see as the untidy truth about WWII, Rogers and Hammerstein made a sincere attempt to portray their honest, if obscured perception of the war in *South Pacific*. This would certainly be consistent with their earnest commitment to shed light on the battle Americans were fighting at the time with prejudice and racism back home.

2. Examples of Moral Realism at work in a War Torn *South Pacific* (1949):

But how, exactly did Rodgers and Hammerstein do it? How did they utilize each production element in this show to create what came to be recognized as a masterful work of art, and, most importantly for our purposes, communicate such a polarized, resolute (and therefore moral realist) message about America’s role in the quest to stop the spread of

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fascism? To begin with, they wrote it that way. In the earliest recorded literary analysis of
drama, *The Poetics*, Aristotle outlines the six elements of drama (theme, plot, character,
language, music and spectacle), teaching us that with the exception of theme and plot
(mythos), it is the characters in a play that can communicate most clearly and powerfully
with an audience.\(^{94}\) According to Maslon’s *South Pacific Companion*, Oscar Hammerstein
was always keen to point out that the first ten minutes of any musical determines its fate. In
*South Pacific*, it is almost immediately apparent that for all the exoticism of the setting, the
real key to the musical, and to communicating its uncompromising realist story of good
conquering evil, was persona.\(^{95}\) The writing team of *South Pacific* used multifaceted,
dynamic characters that the audience could—and did—identify with, to tell a compelling
story imbued with a clear, resolute, moral realist message about the politics of war. They
were thus able to reach their audience in a powerful way indeed.

The first scene in this stage version of *South Pacific* puts this into dramatic practice.
Almost immediately, Hammerstein and Logan take us inside the personalities of their
leading characters, Nellie Forbush and Emile de Becque, and what they have to say is clear.
Emile informs Nellie that he has killed a man, and matter-of-factly explains his motivation
for doing so: “My father said he was good, I thought he was bad. I turned and he said to me,
‘I am going to kill you now.’ We fought, I was never so strong. I knocked him to the ground.
And when he fell his head struck a stone and... *(shrug. Crosses to D.L.)*”\(^{96}\) Emile’s one-
dimensional, uncomplicated justification for his crime is an example of moral realism at
work. For him, it comes down to the fact that his enemy is “bad” and he is “good.” Clearly he
has the right, even the duty, to kill him. The fact that he feels comfortable asking Nellie to

marry him immediately following this admission, and the fact that she later accepts without undue hesitation speaks volumes about their perception of his murder, and by extension, the necessity to kill during war. Neither of them sees any shades of grey with regard to Emile’s crime. Since, in Nellie’s eyes Emile is essentially good, he is justified in eliminating any threat he deems to be bad. Any hesitation Nellie feels towards Emile after hearing his admission is silenced as soon as she hears his explanation. She is satisfied and ready to move full speed ahead.

It is also worth considering the simplicity and neatness of the situation leading up to Emile’s crime. His enemy goes out of his way to pronounce his intentions to kill Emile (which seems unlikely), and Emile’s integrity is kept in tact since his murder was accidental and not premeditated, as opposed to in the 2008 revival of South Pacific, in which Emile physically strangles his opponent instead of indirectly killing him in a moment of rage. This is a much messier crime, one that is more difficult to justify or shrug off as Emile does in this version, which takes a distinctly moral realist bent.

Lieutenant Cable jumps to the opposite conclusion than Nellie upon crossing paths with de Becque, however, his judgment is no less definitive. After de Becque refuses to join Cable on a dangerous mission on the grounds that he is worried about Cable’s (and his own) safety, Cable snaps, “You’re worried about me! That’s funny. The guy who says he lives on an island all by himself and doesn’t worry about anyone—Japs, Americans, Germans, anybody. Why pick out me to worry about?”97 Here, Cable makes a gross assumption about Emile, who is misrepresented as someone who cares nothing for his country or his fellow civilians. The insinuation is that Americans have a duty to fight in the war, and that the U.S.

has a noble mission to protect the world from oppressors like the Japanese and the Germans. There are no two ways about it for Cable.

Contrary to Cable’s criticism of de Becque, Emile later champion’s Cable’s bravery, and does so, notably, with the same measure of definitive clarity. Reporting in to inform the officers that Cable has sacrificed his life in order to complete a dangerous reconnaissance mission, Emile pronounces, “Lt. Cable, my friend Joe died last night. He died from wounds he received three days ago. I will never know a finer man. The Japanese are pulling out and there is great confusion. Our guess is that the Japs will try to evacuate troops from Cape Esperance tonight.”98 The message here is that as a result of Joe’s Bravery and sacrifice, America has made great headway toward defeating the Japanese on the Pacific front. De Becque makes it clear that despite the hardships of war, Cable’s sacrifice was not in vain, and that he should be lauded as a hero. It is important to note, too, that despite the fact that in Michener’s Tales of the South Pacific, Emile himself is killed in battle, Hammerstein and Logan bring him back from his dangerous mission for a happy ending. The audience is left with a feeling that all’s well that ends well. Had both he and Cable died in battle, the representation of war would have been much harsher indeed. Instead, the death toll is kept to one and even then, for great gain. In this version of the story, we see no evidence of the needless suffering or barbaric violence that characterized WWII. Here, we are provided a mere glimpse of grisly wartime reality, but it is overshadowed by the glory and bravery attached to Cable’s sacrifice. And considering what Cable represents in the larger framework of the story (the bravery of U.S. soldiers who fought in the war), the plug for the necessity of war and for American wartime resilience, bravery and triumph is unobstructed, uncompromised, and hard to miss.

98 Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, South Pacific, (New York: Williamson Music Inc, 1949), 87
Likewise, Nellie Forbush's character can clearly and unmistakably be read as a symbol of the cockeyed optimism and resilience that characterized the U.S. in the face of huge obstacles during the war, and was symptomatic of the realist moral code in America at the time. Early on, she confides in Emile that she “doesn’t think (the war) is the end of the world like everybody else thinks,” and that she “just can’t work (herself) up to getting that low.”99 Her refusal to let anything dampen her spirits epitomizes the seemingly unsinkable determination, hope and pride felt by many Americans during and after the war. Nellie goes on to sing her anthem, “Cockeyed Optimist,” during which she proclaims, “When the sky is a bright canary yellow/ I forget every cloud I’ve ever seen/ So they call me a cockeyed optimist/ Immature and incurably green.”100 In this case, “yellow” refers to the morning sky, alluding to a new beginning for Nellie, and “incurably green” suggests that she believes there is hope for a better world. For her, and for postwar America, life is filled with “a thing called hope,” regardless of present circumstances.101 Though the character of Nellie is subtly layered and remarkably complex, what she comes to represent is not. She symbolizes a simpler, more resolute worldview than the one prevalent today—consistent with the equally unwavering moral realist perspective that served America well during a complicated period in history.

Rogers, Hammerstein and Logan also make clever use of language and dialogue in order to send a polarized message in *South Pacific*—one that is congruous with the notion of moral realism. The use of the racially prejudiced term, “Jap,” throughout the script sets the enemy apart in no uncertain terms, as an unworthy, almost less than human opponent, undeserving of respect or consideration. It is immediately clear how the U.S. soldiers regard

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their enemy, and by extension, how the audience should, as well. Though the use of this term was common in 1949, it was by no means respectful or even civil, and therefore would likely have been deemed by many to be less than suitable for the musical stage. Yet Rodgers and Hammerstein did not skirt away from making use of it in a public form. This is not only reflective of the mindset of Americans at the time, but also of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s deliberate attempt to villainize the enemy in this story and delineate a clear boundary between good and evil. This polarized perspective is further emphasized in Act 1: Scene 9, when Captain Brackett attempts to convince de Becque to enlist in the war effort:

Brackett: We’re asking you to help us lick the Japs. It’s as simple as that. We’re against the Japs.
Emile: I know what you are against. What are you for?102

Because Brackett believes whole-heartedly that the U.S. is morally ‘good’ and the “Japs” are therefore morally “bad,” he has no need to question it further. It is an absolute truth in his mind and nothing more needs to be said on the subject (or thought, for that matter). Though Emile raises an important question here and has an arguably more complicated, and therefore relativist perspective on the issue, the fact that no one bothers to answer it or entertain the thought any further speaks volumes about the mindset of the officers and the US military at large. Undoubtedly, Rodgers and Hammerstein also intended for de Becque’s challenge to serve as a critique of the U.S.’s involvement in the war. However, add de Becque’s refusal to carry out his duty as an American, and Cable and Brackett’s contrasting heroism and nobility as a result, and it is easy to see who the audience is likely to side with, regardless of whether or not de Becque’s question made them take pause.

Billis’ treatment in *South Pacific* sets these heroes apart in the same, clearly defined manner. Dressed in drag during “Thanksgiving Follies” and perpetually focused on women and material goods rather than serving his country, Billis is shown little to no respect by the other soldiers throughout the show. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s treatment of this character differs noticeably from that of Michener’s, in *Tales of the South Pacific*. Though he functions as comic relief in the musical, it is not his only function. His foolishness and irresponsibility sets apart the heroism and bravery of Lt. Cable and Emile de Becque, and the result is we respect—even revere them—and what they represent to a greater degree.

![Fig. 9: Sea Bee Luther Billis (Myron McCormick) in the “Thanksgiving Follies” Act 2 Opener. *South Pacific* 1949.](image)

Production elements too, were utilized to infuse *South Pacific* 1949 with wartime ideology that coincides with moral realist philosophy. With the help of acclaimed set designer, Jo Mietzner, the creative team behind the production used the sets to create a particular mood with which to tell their version of the story. Specifically, they infused Michener’s WWII stories with a sense of wistfulness and romance, so as to present a more

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palatable, one-sided version of an otherwise complicated and sobering story of war and sacrifice. That is to say, though timely issues were not skirted in this show, “bright colors made them friendly,” diverting attention away from the unpleasant complexities and cruelty of war.

According to a 1949 theatre review of *South pacific*, “Jo Mietzner’s sets were a blend of realism and romance. He recreates the Pacific islands in a sort of blue and brown duotone, which is a pleasant touch of poetic license.” The trees in the background, for instance, could never have been mistaken for real trees, but create an impression of a romantic jungle against which Nellie and Emile can conduct their romance. Richard Watts Jr. of the NY post explains, “Mietzner’s sets achieve the perfect mood for the narrative. And whether or not they look like the jungle edge, the gold and greens of Mr. Mietzner’s settings have an emotional effect of their own,”—one of serene tranquility; the calm before the storm of brutal warfare that awaits. His entrancing settings possessed a “fugitive, dreamlike quality.” The “luxuriant hilltop garden,” for example, where Emile sings “Some Enchanted Evening” to Nellie, fits this description particularly well. (See Figure 10, below).

The lap dissolve technique Logan used during transitions helped preserve the illusion, uninterrupted by reality. Logan described it so: “A scene is never really finished in *South Pacific*. There is never a blacked-out stage. The next scene starts before the preceding scene is finished” Logan’s use of this technique preserved and prolonged the idyllic setting and created the illusion of effortless motion. Marvelously swift and efficient, one scene dissolved into another by means of sectional lighting and a scrim curtain. The transitions

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were performed so artfully that the play’s momentum and its idyllic illusion went
uninterrupted.

Such seamless transitions added up to a production that could easily sweep the
audience away with it to an alternate reality—one in which the atrocity of war was
somewhat dulled in comparison with the unspeakable horror experienced by those in
closer proximity to the battlefield. Even when one considers that Rodgers and Hammerstein
deliberately avoided the depiction of active battle on stage in *South Pacific*, such a removed,
idyllic representation of the war was necessary in order to preserve the illusion of a world
in which war bespeaks honor and glory, and the decision to fight is justified and
uncomplicated by virtue of the fact that good must triumph over evil.

![Fig 10: Nellie and Emile in their hill top garden on the set of *South Pacific* 1949.](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/fb/South_Pacific_scene.jpg/220px-South_Pacific_scene.jpg)


Indeed, it is a show in which the barbarism of the war and the rowdiness of the
Marines blend seamlessly with the romantic story of Nellie and her adoring French Planter.

As Harold Prince recounted on the 50th anniversary of the show’s opening, “It was, and

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remains the most romantic musical I have ever seen.”112 And according to Richard Watts Jr. of the New York Post, “South Pacific is not only delightful in its humor and romantic narrative, but captures an enchanting mood of rueful, bittersweet sadness and even without forcing it”113

According to Prince, it is the music that matters most,”114 and in the words of Brooks Atkinson of the New York Times, Rodgers’ music “is a romantic incantation,”115 One can hardly speak of such romance or idealism without mentioning “Some Enchanted Evening,” one of the most influential love songs ever written. This anthem encouraged a generation of listeners to believe in the notion of falling in love at first sight, as the lyric promised: “you may see a stranger/Across a crowded room/And somehow you know.”116 If that isn’t a romantic, idealistic notion, I’m not sure what would qualify as one. Sung by renowned opera singer Ezio Pinza, and accompanied by a full size, 30-piece orchestra, one can only imagine the kind of sweeping effect it might have had on its listeners. No less affecting was the intoxicating ballad, “Bali Ha’i”—a song Robert Russell Bennett of the Boston Globe hailed as “powerful theatre magic.”117 For Logan, the Island was the emotional center of the musical—“a place so spiritual and mystical that it beckons Cable to come.”118 And indeed, the first three notes of the opening phrase are so powerful that they serve as the opening of the musical’s overture and set the emotional scene for the show—one that no doubt stood in sharp contrast with the gritty, horrific experiences of a soldier fighting on the Pacific front.

112 Laurence Maslon, the South Pacific Companion (New York: Schuster Publishing, 2008), 130.
118 Laurence Maslon, the South Pacific Companion (New York: Schuster Publishing, 2008), 76.
No music in *South Pacific* is more enchanting than the tune Juanita Hall sings to the young lovers, Liat and Lt. Cable. “Happy Talk’s” words and gestures are as universal and enticing as love (See figure 12 below). Despite the charm of Liat’s gestures and of the song itself, however, the fact remains that Bloody Mary is attempting to inveigle Cable into marrying her daughter. As *South Pacific Companion* author, Laurence Maslon astutely points out, “There is a method to her gladness.”\(^{119}\) Indeed, and to that of Rodger and Hammerstein’s intoxicating music in *South Pacific*. It is largely responsible for the kind of romance, naive simplicity, and unashamed optimism that characterizes the musical. More importantly, however, it has the power to distract its audience from the more sinister aspects of the battle that bring this couple together in the first place—to obscure and soften the harsh complexities of World War II in order to make way for a much tidier, polarized perspective on it—one that is reminiscent of the early 20\(^{th}\) century moral realism that this production promotes.

![Fig 12: Bloody Mary sings and gestures “Happy Talk,” in *South Pacific* 1949.](image)

\(^{119}\) Maslon, *the South Pacific Companion*, 76.

\(^{120}\) Bauch, Marc. Photo Courtesy of An American Musical “Happy Talk.” Photograph. 1949.
It is no wonder Howard Barnes described *South Pacific* 1949 as “a beguiling, heartwarming, amusing and rewarding spot to spend an evening.”\(^{121}\) This is not necessarily a description you would expect to be attached to a story driven by prejudice and the inevitability of World War II. In fact, according to Elinor Hughes of the Boston Sunday Herald, *South Pacific* 1949 "makes you forget previous discouragements, renews your faith in the theatre and replenishes your stock of optimism for at least six months."\(^{122}\) William Hawkins agreed: “It achieves a deliberate kind of “balance between hilarity and heartbreak”\(^{123}\)

This sense of cheerful frivolity is largely due to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s casting of Ezio Pinza and Mary Martin in the lead roles. In fact, they wrote the part of Nellie specifically with Mary Martin in mind. By casting a charismatic star like Martin, they had a leading lady who was intensely likeable and capable of adding a dose of romance, charm and sugary sweetness to the show that could permeate the dark shadow of World War II, during which it was set. Her unique ability to captivate her audience and thus divert their attention from the reality and brutality of a war that the nation had just experienced, was crucial. Miss Martin, who wore a feminine version of a crew haircut (which mirrors the show’s romanticized take on the war), received uniformly glowing reviews. Her ‘critical’ admirers described her as follows:

> Since we have all been more or less in love with Miss Martin for several years, it is no surprise to find her full of quicksilver, pertness and delight as the Navy Nurse. She is the girl who can make Nellie captivating without deluging her in charm.\(^{124}\)

And as Richard Watts Jr. gushed, “Nothing I have ever seen her do had prepared me for the loveliness, humor, gift for joyous characterization, and sheer loveableness of her

\(^{121}\) Robert Coleman, "South Pacific a Sold Hit, with Great Cast, Score," *the Daily Mirror*, April 8, 1949.
portrayal of Nellie Forbush. Here is a completely irresistible performance.”

Equally glowing descriptives such as “alive, believable, zestful,” “frolicsome, festive, and delightful,” were used to capture Martin’s “virtually inspirational” depiction of Nellie.

And likewise, Pinza was lauded by the *New York Post* as, “an expert and charming actor, possessing rare romantic style.”

However, Rodgers and Hammerstein didn’t stop there in their efforts to inject this wartime story with a healthy measure of lighthearted distraction. As Maslon explains, “Even when they’re stuck in the middle of war, sometimes musical comedy types just wanna have fun.” In a “shrewd” effort to introduce some musical comedy levity into a dark and emotionally trying second act, the creative team of *South Pacific* “indulged themselves in some good natured silliness.” Rodgers made use of the kind of cornball vaudeville music he spoofed for *Pal Joey*, Hayward (the show’s producer) insisted the costumes for the rousing number be constructed out of ‘found’ objects such as comic books, and Hammerstein himself taught Martin a goofy clog dance he had picked up during the 20’s. Thus, despite the fact that Rodgers and Hammerstein were “reconstructing existence on a spear point of our attack on Japan, the show was eye-filling and heart warming, as well as dramatic.”

But, as Howard Barnes pointed out in the April, 1949 issue of the *NY Herald Tribune*, “Perhaps the chief delight of this production is the manner in which it belies its intricacy.” According to Theatre Critic William Hawkins, “The story is related with the most direct simplicity, while the activities of the naval station afford a delightful variety of

130. Maslon, *the South Pacific Companion*, 144.
surrounding events.”¹³³ Hawkins’ description of the set of *South Pacific* is congruous with the simplicity and exactitude, which has long characterized moral realism: “The set is deceptively simple, because it is so exactly right. It is the product of consummate skill in the mastery of a myriad details.”¹³⁴ Mietzner conjured up two island settings, with a minimum of ornamental nonsense, using screens, sectional lighting, and a duo tone pallet of sea foam green and fuscia, to “recreate,” or rather construct a seemingly simpler time and place—A polarized world, of red and green, us and them, axis vs. allies, black vs. white, wrong vs. “right” (See Figure 13).

![Fig. 13: the duo-tone pallet of the set of *South Pacific*.1949.¹³⁵](image)

### 3. Making Sense of Moral Realist Ideology in *South Pacific* 1949 and Beyond

Two musicals stood out as exceptions to the musical comedy rule of the “golden” era of American musical theatre (which, similar to the presiding moral code of the day, called for

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plenty of naïve simplicity, along with a tidy moral to accompany every story): *Strike up the Band* (George and Ira Gershwin) and *Johnny Johnson* (Paul Green and Kurt Weill). Both were significant not in their popularity but in their satirical, cynical treatments of war, and both were grown from the seeds of anti-war sentiment that arose in the aftermath of WWI. These musicals were also unique in their bold criticism of American foreign policies of the time. However, Broadway audiences weren’t ready for musical theatre that challenged the status quo so fearlessly, offering up a left wing, pacifist solution to the problems America faced. *Johnny Johnson* closed in January, 1937 after only 68 performances, after which the military would not appear in another musical for six years. The musicals that did appear during and immediately following WWII—including two 1943 musicals, specifically intended as morale boosters for the American troops, “Thousands Cheer” (1943), and “This is the Army” (1943) were notable for being both unashamedly supportive of the U.S. military policies, and enormously successful.

*South Pacific* was no exception. Like the previous war, WWII was a popular war on the home front, partly because the home front was physically removed from the threat and bleak reality of the war. In *Retribution*, Max Hastings’ new contribution chronicling the World War II’s horrific endgame on the Pacific front, he writes, “Many of us gained our first, wonderfully romantic notions of the war against Japan by watching the movie of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific.*”136 Granted, the extravagant movie version of this story is not the show. However, in many ways it was remarkably true to it. Logan was one of the few directors given a chance to stage both an original play on Broadway and its movie version. So, as Maslon points out in his recently published review, *The South Pacific Companion*, “The

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movie remains a surprisingly faithful version of the stage musical; it is the only one of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s shows to make it relatively intact to the screen. “137

Rodger and Hammerstein took a distinctly different approach from Michener, who claimed he “knew the pacific better than (anyone) did.” In his words, “no one (could) tell the story more accurately.”138 Theirs was one marked by optimism and romance, more than ‘accuracy’. Although South Pacific 1949 was a show about loneliness, love, and finding ways to deal with war, in fact it was mostly about people waiting to go to war. Considering the show contained only one dead body and zero battle scenes that occurred on stage, it’s safe to say the harsh realities of war were sidestepped, or at least glossed over in this version of the story. In fact, Rodgers and Hammerstein (and James Michener, for that matter) wrote more about the fallout of war than they did about the war itself; about the life altering collision of cultures that took place in the wake of it, rather than the devastating business of fighting it out on the battlefield.

Regardless, South Pacific is, on the surface at least, a story which is set in motion by America’s involvement on the Pacific front during World War II. And with the help of their production team, Rodgers and Hammerstein told a glorified, romantic, and therefore less complicated version of a story that was in reality, none of those things. The New York Times’ Stephen Holden agrees. “With their stern, semi-operatic melodies, 30 piece orchestra, Idyllic sets, and know-it-all lyrics, (Rodgers and Hammerstein) offered an idealized mirror image of American middle-class morality in the heady afterglow of Hitler’s defeat.”139 Hence, at a time in American history when people understood what was meant by terms like “good citizenship,” “maturity,” and “mental hygiene,” South Pacific “helped solidify the

138 Maslon, the South Pacific Companion, 171.
notion of a national culture — one that was consistent with the kind of simplicity and clarity that sets moral realism apart from today’s counterpart.¹⁴⁰

Why Moral Realism?

But what, exactly was the point? Is it possible there is no real explanation behind Rodgers and Hammerstein’s unique approach to writing and producing this show beyond mere entertainment value? I think not. Hammerstein was heavily involved in politics, and was an active member of the *Writer’s War Board*. It is doubtful that a man with such political convictions would write a musical with nothing at all to say beyond, ‘let me entertain you.’ And given the optimistic, patriotic political sentiment prevalent in America when the show opened in 1949 (just four years after WWII), the state of American morality at the time, and the economic recession America was entrenched in, their approach is not surprising.

Take their idealistic depiction of war. As previously mentioned, this approach was made possible in the first place by the fact that Americans were physically and emotionally removed from the war, (despite the fleeting, and often patriotic war news reels that Americans had access to for the first time in history). What, to many Europeans, was catastrophic, was more disturbing, but transient to Americans. This, coupled with the advent of military technology, which blunted America’s capacity to experience and therefore comprehend death up close, help further explain why musicals of this period tended towards romance, rather than harsh realism.

And the “us vs. them,” “good vs. bad,” approach to wartime politics makes sense in light of the fact that the American government (and perhaps Americans in general) needed

justification for the difficult decisions the military was forced to make during the war, specifically, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Rodgers and Hammerstein's use of moral realism in the form of avoiding difficult political questions by reducing them to the personal (or, alternatively, focusing on the personal in order to lessen the difficulty of the political), instead of looking for a more complex political explanation, offered a straightforward solution to this problem. By adopting a simplistic, clear-cut stance, and by assigning hard and fast labels such as “Japs” to the enemy, such questions can be avoided and a sense of moral justification preserved. It should be noted that although in retrospect, such attempts at moral justification may seem questionable, given the volatile political climate during which South Pacific was written and the necessity for Americans to form a united front in order to defeat the seemingly insurmountable axis powers, it seems a reasonable, and justified approach—one that doesn’t detract from South Pacific’s value as an innovative piece of theatre.

Finally, South Pacific was written and produced during an economic downturn, and Rodgers and Hammerstein felt much pressure that it should be a commercial success. Though they were determined not to compromise their own code of ethics and to send their audience a clear message, they were also acutely aware of the importance of creating a piece of theatre that would resonate with its audience and thereby support itself financially during the post war recession. As Brooks Atkinson (of the New York Times) pointed out in 1949, “Although Mr. Rodgers and Mr. Hammerstein are extraordinarily gifted men, they have not forgotten how to apply the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair.” They understood that “when life gets messy,” as is often the case in a nation haunted by economic recession and volatile foreign entanglements, “people long for tidiness,” and as Ben Brantley explains in his recent review of South pacific, “the mainstream dramas of the
1950’s are, for the most part, as neatly tailored and unassuming as a cloth coat worn by Pat Nixon, the vice presidential wife for most of that decade.”

In this way and for these reasons, the romantic, definitively pro-war, us vs. them ideology that underlines *South Pacific* is an illustration of Rodger’s and Hammerstein’s use of moral realism to tell Michener’s WWII stories. Though they made use of moral nihilism as well, they did so only in the sense that the ideas perpetuated in *South Pacific* were in fact a reflection of a generation’s political and moral beliefs surrounding WWII. Thus, at a time when the American people were united in purpose against their enemy as never before, this romantic depiction of good triumphing over evil resonated well with its audience, and was not surprisingly extremely successful, both critically and commercially.

### 4. The Nihilist Revival of *South Pacific* in Context

In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle argued, “Our actions create the appropriate states of mind.” Ethics was more than a theoretical study for Aristotle. In his view, good behavior is a natural extension of good habits that in turn can only be attained by frequent repetition and correction, which makes morality a tremendously practical discipline. Terry Eagleton agrees. According to him, goodness is a matter of habit, not principle. “We become brave or generous by habitually doing brave or generous things, not by philosophizing about them.” Whether or not he knew it at the time, Aristotle’s school of thought endorsed what would later be labeled, moral nihilism—an ever evolving, reflexive code of ethics in America, in which established moral values are abstractly contrived, no action is inherently moral or immoral, and morality is shaped to reflect, rather than dictate behavior.

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Playwright David Hare’s commentary in *Stuff Happens*, a political satire, which traces events leading to the 2003 invasion of Iraq headed by the U.S. and Great Britain, sheds some light on Aristotle’s argument. He writes, “This war on Iraq is not about oil, faulty intelligence, geo-politics or any combination of such factors, so much as it is about moral fallibility. Most of all it is about our willingness to believe whatever suits us best.”145 This convenient approach to ethics lies at the heart of moral nihilism. Once it becomes clear that Bush has made up his mind to wage war, his more reluctant supporters, along with Americans who stand in opposition to his decision, have a powerful incentive to find reasons for the impending war that they can justify. “Facts” are shaped and sold for a single purpose. Since they cannot dissuade Bush, they are forced to rely on deductive reasoning in order to rationalize what is about to take place. (A war is inevitable, thus they must find justification to fight).

Is it possible that America’s irrepressible optimism during the post WWII years arose in part, to satisfy a similar need? The U.S. military was forced to make some difficult, controversial decisions during the war, which meant there was, among Americans a powerful need to justify the U.S.’s actions. The original *South Pacific* was one of many artistic influences at the time that helped support this cause, and one of the most effective ways to accomplish this was to present a polarized message of the triumph of good over evil, Allies over Axis, and in the case of *South Pacific*, America over Japan.

However, the overwhelmingly patriotic, pro-war message of the original resonates much differently in today’s anti-war climate. Society’s moral codes surrounding war changed drastically in the sixty years between the original *South Pacific* and its recent Broadway revival in 2008. Increasingly, changes in behavior have preceded changes in

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American morality, which was then adjusted in order to validate and reflect such behavior. The revival of *South Pacific* is decidedly on the fence—it is neither pro, nor anti-war—since the U.S. was fighting in Iraq when it was written, and yet the American people were overwhelmingly opposed to such action. Thus, if Bartlett Sher, director of *South Pacific* 2008, wanted to create a commercially viable show that would appeal to and appease his anti-war audience while providing justification for a country at war, he needed to tread carefully. With its decidedly reflexive, conciliatory approach, Sher’s revival did just that. And by so doing, it was a reflection of what had become the predominant code of ethics in America, moral nihilism. With this newfound philosophy came a much more complicated, two-sided approach to telling the story of World War II.

Upon entering the theatre in 2008, the audience saw a quote from Michener’s book projected above the stage. “I wish I could tell you about the South Pacific, the way it actually was, lovely beyond description...” However upon closer inspection of this production, it is clear that this was not Sher’s only intent. Taking a distinctly nihilistic approach, he presents his audience with a much more complicated, convoluted, mixed review of war—consistent with the post-modern notion that there are no easy explanations or solutions, and no objective truth in the world, independent of individual opinion or perspective. This sort of nihilism, or relativism, dictates that in order to be democratic or politically correct, all possibilities must be acknowledged and entertained, and none supported whole-heartedly. In short, it’s all relative. In present day America, morality itself is, as David Hare points out, “fallible.”146

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Justifying the Revival’s Nihilist Depiction of War

In the words of Brantley of the *New York Times*, "Weighty is not an adjective commonly attached to musicals, which were born to divert, to entertain." Nevertheless, there’s no doubt that Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific* was a highly acclaimed, widely celebrated and in many ways ground breaking piece of theatre. Reading the unanimously rave reviews of the 1949 production, which broke the record for the longest running show on Broadway, it is difficult to imagine how one could improve on such a stunningly successful adaptation of Michener’s wartime stories—which begs the question, why do a revival at all? Perhaps because it remains politically relevant in our day, or because it is likely to be a commercial success, given the familiarity of the story and the popularity and timelessness of the musical score.

However, you would be hard pressed to find an artist in any field who would disagree that unless there exists the potential for, and the need to re-imagine a work of art, it is futile simply to reproduce it. Doing so inevitably results in nothing more than recycled drivel. According to reviews, critics and audiences alike found the 2008 revival of *South Pacific* to be anything but. Brantley raved in a recent review, "What sets this production apart from other fine revivals of recent years is how true it remains to the spirit of the original, while exuding a new-born freshness."148

What is it then, that Sher adds to this story and how does he do it, considering he utilized the original script and musical score? Predominantly, what makes this version so “fresh,” is his decision to use the production elements of the show in combination with the original script (with a few notable additions) to illuminate, for the first time, some of the harsh complexities of war, while maintaining elements of the romance and whimsy of the

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original production. This show is undeniably romantic in many ways, however it is more than that. It strengthens our respect for the self-sacrifice of American soldiers fighting in Iraq, while simultaneously criticizing the fact that they are fighting there at all. Among other things, it is the careful intermingling of these paradoxical messages that elevates this retelling of Michener’s stories above a mere reproduction and renders it an innovative work with something quite distinctive to say. And though it does so, for the most part, covertly rather than overtly, when one considers the obvious political parallels that exist between America in 1949 and 2008 (post-WWII and the Iraq War), the message is unmistakable.

Sher’s reference to such parallels in a myriad of recent interviews quiets any residual doubt as to whether such connections were intentional. “Most of us don’t know people who are in Iraq,” he said. “Most of us don’t have a direct engagement of the experience of it. As an interpretive American artist, I see my job as staying in touch with the national memory which is in these stories.”

In this way then, South Pacific 2008 cites the original without reproducing it. This period piece is approached with a serious-mindedness that keeps it relevant. Though questions about the way America engages with the world and the morality of war continue to resonate today, the overwhelmingly pro-war, moral realist message of the original does not. Thus in the revival, audiences are invited to consider their own contemporary moment and to experience the play through their own particular moral lens—which has evolved considerably in response to such different events as the Vietnam War and arguably, the War on Iraq. Both turned the tide of public opinion and changed forever the perception of war in, and out of America.

149 Bartlett Sher: Lincoln Center, i(YouTube video, 7:20), posted by Lincoln Centre Theatre, April 16, 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vd6zDa8tnhQ
The revival accounts for this. Its fresh new take on Rodgers and Hammerstein’s classic story reflects the fact that audiences have come a long way from their acceptance of the over simplified, glorification of the soldier and war as depicted in South Pacific 1949. In fact, as of 2011, a new film is in the works that is also indicative of this preference for realism over romance. With Aileen Maisel and Bob Balaban producing, it is reputed by Balaban to be “a tougher, more realistic retelling of the same classic story.”\textsuperscript{150} It’s no wonder Sher determined that South Pacific—a show whose heroine sings of being “as corny as Kansas in August,” and describes herself as a “cockeyed optimist,” needed to be roughed up a little. And according to Brantley, Sher accomplished just that. He argues that Sher’s interpretation of South Pacific finds a “haunting and haunted spirit of war time disorientation, a sense of a world unmoored.”\textsuperscript{151}

Given the current trend toward stories that dismiss the happy ending and easy optimism of the golden age of musical theatre, it’s no surprise that the revival isn’t quite as optimistic or sentimental as its 1949 counterpart. However Sher has his own motivations for approaching it this way, one of which he addresses in a recent online interview:

\textit{South Pacific} seems to have developed a performance tradition since its original production of becoming this light musical about guys, happy, wanting girls in the South Pacific, maybe during a war. And it really wasn’t taken as seriously as I think it should be. And that became an interesting motivation to do it.”\textsuperscript{152}

We can see here that Sher was at least partly motivated by the desire to take a sober look at these issues surrounding war, rather than shying away from controversy in the name of commercial success—not that he wasn’t concerned with selling tickets. However he must have been aware of the fact that questions surrounding war time morality, the

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\textsuperscript{152} Bartlett Sher: Lincoln Center, (YouTube video, 7:20), posted by Lincoln Centre Theatre, April 16, 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vd6zDa8nhQ
\end{flushright}
inevitable loss of lives, and America’s foreign policies continue to be relevant today, perhaps even more so than when the show first debuted in the years following WWII. Judith Sebasta is of the same opinion. In her article entitled, “Musicals and the Military—Strange Bedfellows,” she writes, “Audiences were ambushed by the revival. They expected corn, but in a year when war and race are at center stage in the national conversation, it turns out this relic had a great deal to say.”153

What it says, it says cautiously, however. From the beginning, this revival walks a carefully calculated line—flirting with anti-war ideology, yet expressing hope in the possibility of rising triumphantly above the challenges and cruelty of war. It isn’t anti-war or pro war, but it makes you consider the costs. Much like the song says, the audience of South Pacific 2008 “has to be carefully taught.”

This goes a long way towards explaining why, even in an era where Americans are overwhelmingly anti-war, Sher’s interpretation of South Pacific is not. It straddles the fence, resisting the temptation to fully embrace the anti-war political sentiment of the day, in order to preserve a measure of national dignity and avoid potentially damaging controversy that might offend or compromise the interests of its corporate sponsors. A large budget musical like South Pacific, which is funded by large corporations and thus closely tied to conservative, pro-war centers of power bears a certain obligation to tow the line and support their political ideologies. On the other hand, it avoided outright support of the U.S.’s aggressive international policies, in order to appeal to its overwhelmingly anti-war audience who were, of course, responsible for ticket sales. Its neutral positioning was a symptom of its need to avoid offending either party in order to ensure financial backing, and as such, is an example of moral nihilism at work. As is characteristic of this brand of

reflexive morality, the revival adopts a conveniently non-partisan position—a symptom, and reflection of the conflicting ideologies prevalent in post-war America today.

Sher’s approach to accomplishing this delicate balance is restraint. He embraces both romance and sober reality in order to maintain a balance between opposing ideologies in the telling of this story. In order to find that equilibrium, he maintains a measure of the romanticism from the original, while scaling up the implicit elements of “wartime disorientation and cultures in collision.”

5. Sher’s Nihilist Depiction of War in *South Pacific 2008*

Although his personal contribution to the show is limited in some respects by his decision to use both the original script and score, Sher makes masterful use of the production elements in the show, subtly and gracefully embedding fresh, new meaning into this sixty-year-old story. He also elicits wonderfully layered, compelling performances from his actors and reinstates both dialogue and music that had been omitted from the original—all of which supports his concept beautifully.

Sher points out that in preparing to direct this revival of *South Pacific*, he directed *Uncle Vanya* in the same venue during the summer of 2007, “partly to warm up for directing *South Pacific*, which he believes should be true to the original’s naturalistic approach.” As one watches this version unfold, it becomes apparent that this is an understated event. It’s an even keeled, layered approach to telling this story—one which is in keeping with modern day moral nihilism, by virtue of its inherent complexities and its refusal to succumb to the original’s simplistic, polarized stance on the politics of war.

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Sher cultivates the qualities of control, effortlessness and subtle interpretation in his singers as well, as opposed to the raw power and bravado, which seems increasingly popular today. All of this “serves to make the cumulative emotional power more overwhelming.”\textsuperscript{156} As Richard Jay Alexander of Masterworks Broadway Podcast Theatre points out, “It’s so subtle that it kills you, it hammers you. It’s so not selling it that it just is.”\textsuperscript{157}

Sher makes clever use of set design to support his layered concept in a similar way. The principle setting of this revival features an expansive sand dune punctuated by a single palm tree, invoking both isolation and paradise undergoing an unsettling military transformation.

![The “expansive sand dune” from the set of *South Pacific 2008*.](http://sfcitizen.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/link_1_4790-copy.jpg)

Michael Yeargan, the show’s set designer intermingles military trucks, misty tropical views, colorful, wistful lighting, and bomber planes to create a somewhat conflicting series of beautiful vistas. This serene beachscape is suggestive of dreamlike solitude in a world where civilized rules no longer apply. And though Yeargan’s “perspective-stretching” set


isn’t meant to be photo-realistic, “you somehow accept it as more real than real.” Here is an example of one of the many ingenious ways Sher manages to intermingle realism with romance in this multifaceted production.

Just as Yeargan’s settings lend a sort of vastness and romance to the show, Catherine Zuber’s carefully accurate costumes add a dose of reality, contributing to the sense that the audience is witnessing a piece of history, one scarred by the realities of war, that perhaps weren’t so simple after all. According to David Fick of Musical Cyberspace, “All of the supporting performances, including those of the ensemble feel precisely individualized, right down to how they wear Catherine Zuber’s carefully researched period costumes.”

And yet, the set becomes increasingly more ominous and dark as the play progresses and the inevitability of battle looms ever closer for the marines. Act 1 opens at Emile’s plantation, a homey oasis from the world, which overlooks a serenely beautiful ocean vista.

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http://www.forallevents.info/kedaradour /uploaded_images/South-Pacific-1-766348.jpg
161 David Fick. “South Pacific Review Roundup.” Musical Cyberspace, February 6, 2010
However as the action unfolds, the sinister underbelly of war is revealed and the look and feel of the set darkens to reflect it. Cheery blue skies are replaced with angry clouds and ominous artillery, and bomber planes roll on to disrupt the previously untainted beauty of the beach.

The horizontal blinds that initially adorn the windows of Emile’s home become a fixture on set, taking on new meaning as the show progresses. Initially a tasteful item of home décor, they seem to remind the audience that because civilians were removed from the fighting in WWII by distance, military technology, and the media, there was only so much they could see. They were blinded from, or at least not privy to much of the horrific reality of war. The insinuation here is that perhaps civilians need to let in the light and open their eyes to the fact that war is more complicated than it may have seemed from the perspective of the average American, during and immediately after WWII. Further, it suggests that there are no easy answers or guiltless parties in war, no airtight reasons to justify the atrocities of combat, and a hefty price to be paid for everyone involved. Hence, Yeargan’s sets give us a glimpse of the darkening and sobering reality of war as it descends upon the soldiers stationed in the South Pacific.

Sher also makes clever use of Donald Holder’s lighting design to send a series of mixed messages to his contemporary audience. Lighting color and intensity vary throughout the show, according to the intended mood of each scene. Deep reds and purples are used during upbeat, light-hearted moments, and dark blues and grays create a foreboding, heavy atmosphere during others. At times, Holder even breaks the rules. During the “Thanksgiving Follies” performance at the top of Act 2, the sky that envelopes the scene is menacing—dark blue, with angry, foreboding clouds rolling in, as if to say that the jovial performance taking place is only a temporary diversion from the bleak reality of the war that is encroaching.
Acting Style/Direction

Elysa Garner of USA Today recently summarized Sher’s use of acting style for a similar purpose in *South Pacific* 2008: “Bartlett Sher and a gifted cast fully engage both the gritty challenges faced by the characters and the romantic sweep of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s ravishing score.”¹⁶² In June, 2011 I had the opportunity to interview Laura Osnes, Kelli O’Hara’s first replacement in the role of Nellie Forbush. She addressed Sher’s directorial style and whether or not she felt he had adapted his approach in order to account for the anti-war sentiment that exists today. Osnes explained:

> Every impression I got was that we were trying to represent the realities of World War II as realistically as possible. There are several characters in the musical who do want to fight and proudly believe it’s the right and honorable thing to do. We fully embraced that. However, despite the pro-war sentiment at the time (of the original production), it was important to him that the harsh consequences of war were still represented.⁵³

Here again, we see evidence that in this production, Sher walks a fine line and maintains a particular balance between opposing ideologies surrounding War and the military.

Watching this revival, I couldn’t help but feel as though I was looking in on a far away world that is nevertheless filled with complex, fully realized characters. Brantley articulates this phenomenon perfectly.

> O’Hara creates a study in ambivalence that is not only subtly layered, but popping with energy. She doesn’t stint on Nellie’s all-American eagerness, but in a superbly shaded portrait she gives the character a troubled, apprehensive guardedness as well.”⁶⁴

Even when she is proclaiming she’s “in love with a wonderful guy,” she appears to be struggling with complex emotions that have caught her off guard. This thoughtful aspect

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¹⁶³ Osnes, Laura. Interview by J.Butter, June 16, 2011.
infuses the entire show. All of Sher’s performances “seep emotional anxiety,” and make us aware that all bets are off in times of war.\textsuperscript{165} Osnes also shed some light on how Sher approached characterization in the revival. She explained, “More than paying homage to the original production and how it was done, I believe it was more Bart’s intention to pay homage to the heart of this wartime story and to bring its characters to life in a real and vivid way.”\textsuperscript{166} It is evident that rather than attempting to merely recreate the magic and idealism of the original \textit{South Pacific}, Sher’s priority was to create a compelling, layered, true to life representation of life on the Pacific front during the war, the people who lived it, and the profound impact their sacrifices had on America.

Captain Brackett illustrates this point, when he responds to Lieutenant Cable’s news that he’s been elected to complete a dangerous reconnaissance mission for the U.S. military. In contrast with the original production, which indicates no sarcastic undercurrent, Brackett responds sardonically to this news with, “You’ve got quite an assignment son! How long do you think you could last there... sending out messages until the Japs found you?” To which Cable responds darkly, “I think I’d be okay.” Brackett’s definitively sarcastic tone here clearly indicates his less than optimistic state of mind with regards to Cable’s chances for survival. In his direction of this scene, Sher deliberately sidesteps the opportunity to deliver up an unmistakably pro-war statement of optimism, opting instead for a cynical, darker approach.

There is other evidence of acting choices, which support Sher’s two-sided approach to wartime politics. When Nellie discovers Emile has killed a man, her reaction is distinctly layered and complex. There is tension behind her response. It is not indicative of blind, or whole-hearted acceptance. She is very clearly torn between her new found feelings of love

\textsuperscript{166}Osnes, Laura. Interview by J.Butler, June 16, 2011.
and trust for Emile, and a sense that she doesn’t know the first thing about this man and must leave immediately so she can clear her head and process the startling news she has learned. Meanwhile, Emile’s obvious sigh of relief after Nellie leaves, followed by his playful body language indicates that despite being capable of murder, he is also capable of love, playfulness and even child-like innocence. These two contrasting qualities in Emile are juxtaposed in order to make a conflicting statement that reinforces the overarching message of the show—one which mirrors the complex, precarious nature of war.

**Staging/Transitions**

Despite the complexities and darker qualities of Sher’s restoration, he is careful to balance them with a healthy dose of idealism as well. As Brantley contends, “There is not an ounce of we-know-better-now irony in Mr. Sher’s staging. Yet the show feels too vital to be a museum piece, too sensually fluid to be square. It depicts the hardship of daily life and war, with all its crosscurrents and ambiguities.”167 Right off the top, Sher makes use of staging to subtly drive home his mixed message. The show begins with two young Polynesian children, (Ngana and Jerome) dancing and singing a charming French lullaby entitled *Dites Moi*, in the living room of Emile’s plantation home. However, their play ends abruptly when Ngana abruptly and unexpectedly pushes her brother off of the coffee table, just as Emile enters the room. This unexpected change of mood, and unseemly turn in her behavior seems to foreshadow the troubled waters ahead for Emile and his family, and by extension, all of the soldiers preparing for war on the Pacific front.

This production closes with a similar sentiment, albeit achieved in a much more dramatic fashion. Act 2: Scene 5, which is devoted completely to military activities and is

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absent of any dialogue, shows how overwhelming and menacing wartime preparations can be. As the music swells to a climax, the scene features a stark line-up of military personnel marching off to war in slow motion, while singing Honey Bun with a minor key accompaniment. This choice of song is ironic considering what awaits them, which suggests that war is no joke, not to be taken lightly. The scene is as filled with fear as it is with bravery. It reminds us how quickly things can be turned upside down during times of war—just a few days ago the same soldiers were performing “Honey Bun” in jest—and depicts the heavy undertones that accompany war preparations. The underlying music supports the Americans’ enthusiasm, and implies that the military operation is crucial and that in respect to military power, America has a powerful influence abroad. Simultaneously, it conjures up images from WWII and the Iraq war, and along with them the cruelty, devastation, and unethical nature of battle.

In a recent podcast interview, Kelli O’Hara points out the relevancy and weight of this scene: “Today, somehow, we land in a place, in 2008 that mirrors 1942 (the year the show is set), so well. We’re at war again, and I think it’s very poignant to watch these boys at the end of our show, marching off to war, knowing that we’re sending boys marching off to war in real time”168 (See Figure 16).

To make things worse, Sher’s dramatic staging of Act 2: Scene 10 features Nellie standing abandoned on the deserted, gloomy shore, praying that Emile will survive so she will be granted a second chance at love. Mary appears, informing Nellie that Liat has refused to marry anyone but Cable, who has just died in action. In this heart-wrenching moment, as Nellie and Liat’s worst fears are materializing, it becomes apparent that this tropical paradise has been transformed and lives overturned by the encroaching war, which has left in its wake sorrow and bewilderment.

However, as is characteristic of this production’s nihilistic approach, Sher once again resists committing whole-heartedly to this anti-war sentiment. He makes intelligent use of staging and transitions to temper this deliberate criticism and soften its effect. His inclusion of the lap dissolve technique employed by Rodgers and Hammerstein’s 1949 original production is one way he achieves this. In doing so, he retains the cinematic flow and naturalism of the original and is able to maintain the element of romance he has made way for in this show, free from interruption. This positive, intoxicating energy is carried

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seamlessly from one scene to the next. Combined with Sher’s use of colorful, serene settings and mood lighting, this device renders the production’s embedded criticisms of war more palatable for an audience whose nation was entrenched in one when this show opened. In this way, Sher dances around the subject, glossing it over, and remains essentially neutral on the issue. His nihilistic approach kills two birds with one stone; it not only renders the production more politically correct, but also more commercially viable during a time when a production’s profitability was imperative for its survival.

**Music/Choreography**

There is power in music. As Victor Hugo once said, music “expresses that which cannot be said, and on which it is impossible to be silent.” Indeed, “where words fail, music speaks.” Sher must have understood this when he set out to direct *South Pacific*, as he was able to skillfully and artfully harness its communicative power in order to tell Michener’s stories in his own way and for his own purposes, while managing to pay homage to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s original production. Specifically, Sher made use of Rodger’s sweeping orchestrations and intense underscoring, Christopher Galelli’s choreography, Scott Lehrer’s sound effects, and the addition of a previously deleted song in order to strike a delicate balance between anti and pro-war ideologies that distinguish this 2008 revival from its 1949 original.

The music lends a grand, sweeping quality to the show right from the top, when the thrust stage rolls back to expose an eloquent and unusually large orchestra who, in the words of Brantley, “make the score feel from the beginning like thought made effortlessly

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audible.”¹⁷¹ The orchestrations are predominantly melodic, as opposed to counter melodic, which adds to the romanticism of the piece and distracts its spectators from the ugly reality of war-torn love and loss, embedded in this production. These powerful melodies carry the audience through and smooth out the thorny quality of this telling of the story.

Christopher Gatelli’s unobtrusive choreography on the other hand, lends the production a sense of validity, and grounds it in reality. This is due to the fact that there is, in fact, no choreography in the traditional sense of the word. Both Gatelli and Sher felt that this is what the show demanded. Thus, they used ‘musical staging’ in its place, which most often involves the actors on stage behaving in character, informally, and in time with the music. Even as the marines are singing and “dancing” to “Nothing Like a Dame,” a distinctive underlying tension is maintained throughout. Galelli’s staging is effective in this regard. The soldier’s steps are both driven and fluid, and yet have a distinctly repressed quality which illustrates their frustration at being trapped on the Island, without ‘dames’ to keep them company while they wait for their turn to fight.

The intense underscoring that Sher makes use of throughout the show adds to this sobering effect, and due to music’s unique ability to reach its audience on an emotional level (especially when delivered by a 30 piece orchestra), it is as powerful as any set of words or lyrics. Scott Lehrer’s sound effects grow increasingly more menacing in the show, as they progress from sirens, to the sound of planes flying low overhead, to the blare of a street car horn whizzing past, and the music that accompanies Cable’s personal anxiety during Act 2 adds fire to the flame. All add to the unsettling ambiance that permeates this tropical paradise as the story advances, and war becomes a reality for these U.S. military men.

And despite the light-hearted depiction of the chorus, who “sing and dance, dream of dames, and put on shows for the rest of the navy and marines, this production features several contrasting songs which balance out any light hearted sentiment. Sher reinstates “My Girl Back Home,” for instance, a duet cut from South Pacific 1949, which cleverly ties Nellie and Joe’s stories together. In Joe Dziemianowicz’s estimation, the song is “a simple, sweet number at first glance.” However, upon closer inspection, “the song—shrewdly staged near dozens of road signs—is a clever comment on this marine and navy nurse feeling adrift on the Pacific front, far from home.”

This thoughtful quality is woven through every musical number; none of which are intended to be clap for me showstoppers. Thus, although the orchestrations and intoxicating melodies of South Pacific carry us away with them, the deliberately reflective manner in which they are performed grounds them in reality and reminds us of the

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172 Joe Dziemianowicz, There is Nothing Like South Pacific,, Daily News (April 3, 2008).
sobering truth about what has brought these military men and women to this tropical ‘paradise’ to begin with.

**The Power of Conventions to Communicate Progressive Ideas**

Music is not the only thing Sher harnesses in *South Pacific*. He also makes use of the unique power of musical theatre convention to peddle contemporary political ideas. As a form of entertainment that is profit-driven, commercial and bound by theatrical convention, “musical theatre is at times enigmatic in its unique ability to challenge the widely held ideologies and political beliefs of its audience,” according to Stacey Wolf.\(^\text{175}\) *South Pacific* 2008 relies on these conventions, and on its audience’s recognition of what Wolf terms, “structures of feeling,” to render a progressive political ideology more palatable. It is Sher’s skilled use of this very traditional formula (music seamlessly integrated with story), infused with contemporary political ideas, that is in large part responsible for its financial success, universal appeal, and overwhelmingly positive critical reception. An overture medley of sweeping, romantic songs, a traditional narrative structure and an integrated style was deemed by many theatre critics and connoisseurs to be the mark of a more mature, evolved piece of musical theatre. With these markers, the 2008 revival references other musicals of the golden age in form, but not so much in content. The revival’s depiction of World War II contrasts noticeably with that of the original, directing our attention, perhaps for the first time (in the estimation of *New York Times’* Alex Witchel), to the fact that “*South Pacific* is a ‘thorny property,’ combining the conventions of musical theatre with the hard-core theme of the lost innocence of a nation gone to war.”\(^\text{176}\) Though Sher tackles this issue head on, his

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use of existing ideological structures in the form of recognizable conventions softens its effect.

The audience is both pacified and inspired by Hammerstein’s book, largely because it is integrated with and illuminated by Rodger’s emotionally powerful musical score. This tried and true marriage of song and story has the power to elevate and uplift not only the production, but also its audience, who can’t help but feel at home with the familiarity of the approach. The result is the audience of South Pacific 2008 is much more likely to embrace whatever politically subversive message accompanies it—however much it might contradict their current political or moral code. And consistent with the ever evolving, continuously shifting sands upon which moral nihilism is built, audiences of such politically subversive musicals as South Pacific are more likely to be receptive to the progressive politics they are peddling, but only at the risk of being swept up by any and all of the latest and greatest political currents.

Sher manages to embed both reality and romance into this production, undetected, by employing conventional tricks of the trade. To start, he elicits layered, complex performances from his actors that seep emotional anxiety, and remind us that all bets are off in times of war. Add to this, Sher’s use of intense underscoring, his clever use of musical staging, and his progressively ominous lighting and sound designs, and it is evident that this production glimpses the darker sides—or at least the emotional fallout of war. However, Sher balances and softens this anti-war sentiment by utilizing some familiar conventions: Namely, he utilizes the lap dissolve technique to create seamless transitions in order to preserve the production’s dreamlike quality, he employs a grand, 25 piece orchestra, and he hires opera trained actors whose voices ooze romance from every note. In short, Sher capitalizes on the power of conventions in South Pacific, using them as a vehicle with which
to offer up a friendlier, more palatable version of a conflicting, potentially damaging political message (damaging, with regards to the reception of the conservative US administration, as well as the show’s conservative corporate sponsors, rather than the American people at large, who were increasingly anti-war). 177

**Conclusion**

According to Savran, "Musical theatre’s overt commercial aspirations mean the aesthetic is always and unpredictably over-determined by economic relations and interests.” 178 And as Stacey Wolf points out in her article, “Defying Gravity: Queer Conventions in the Musical, Wicked,” “Successful theatrical commodification depends on products resonating with existing ideological structures.” 179 It is no wonder then that both versions of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s South Pacific went out of their way to echo the presiding political sentiment of the day. And though the depiction of war in South Pacific 1949 was nihilist in that it was a reflection of American society’s polarized views on the subject, its definitive, good vs. bad take on war morality is a manifestation of moral realism—the presiding code of ethics at the time.

In his book, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Richard Schechner argues, “Most people live in the tension between acceptance and rebellion.” 180 The activities of public life are collective performances—the performers intend to change things, maintain the status quo, or most commonly, to find or make some common ground.” 181 The revival of South Pacific is no exception to this rule. In creating this version of the musical, Bartlett Sher set out to bring about change, while simultaneously maintaining the status quo. That is to say,
he allowed his audience to glimpse the reality of war, while managing to retain their sense of moral justification after having emerged victorious from WWII. Sher’s complicated, compromising depiction of war in *South Pacific* 2008 exemplifies current moral nihilist philosophy. As such, it appeases its contemporary audience, right leaning investors and critics alike, thereby retaining its commercial and critical appeal.

Given the fact that both the 1949 and 2008 productions premiered in the midst of a recession, Rodgers, Hammerstein and Sher had ample motivation to create a show that would succeed financially. And like all politically charged, commercially viable works of art, *South Pacific* has always been both reflective and constructive of not only its political message, but also the contrasting moral codes used to justify and perpetuate it.
In Act 1: Scene 6 of *South Pacific*, Nellie receives a letter from her mother, instructing her to break ties with Emile on the basis of his “otherness.” Her resulting inner struggle brings the subject of racial prejudice (an issue of central importance in this landmark musical) to the forefront, in no uncertain terms. Her feelings on the subject are revealed as she confides in Lt. Cable, who will soon face a similar dilemma:

Nellie: My mother is so prejudiced
Cable: Against Frenchmen?
Nellie: Against anyone outside of Little Rock. She makes a big thing out of two people having different backgrounds. ¹⁸²

Immediately thereafter, Cable advises Nellie to “read that letter over two or three times,” implying that there is something she can learn from her mother. ¹⁸³ Nellie responds by crumpling up the letter and throwing it to the ground in an act of defiance, only to pick it up again in a moment of weakness.

There is a lesson here. Like Nellie, few recognize their own prejudice, particularly when it is directed at those whose differences are less apparent. By broadening the definition of intolerance, Rodgers and Hammerstein took their message a step further so that it encompassed all who discriminated—regardless of what they were discriminating against, whether it be age, sex, nationality, religion or color. There is no doubt that the argument embedded in this scene was not only striking for its 1949 audience, but also remarkably progressive in its day.

According to Eagleton, “It is culture and politics which is our primary source of division.”\textsuperscript{184} Similar to the way racial prejudice has been used for centuries as a means to justify and validate imperialism, Eagleton points to cultural sophistication—a phenomenon that leads to the viewing of fellow humans as the “other” and therefore inhuman—as a possible explanation for the justification of not only WWII, but the U.S.’s aggressive expansionist policy in the South Pacific during the late 19\textsuperscript{th}/early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries. Such modes of thinking go a long way towards explaining the sympathetic representation of imperialism in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s \textit{South Pacific} 1949. Eagleton describes this type of moral justification (moral nihilism) as a system, which, for example, would allow for the formation of conveniently reflective moral codes by government bodies in order to validate imperialism or other forms of unwarranted international aggression.\textsuperscript{185}

In contrast to their reactionary (and therefore nihilist) justification of U.S. expansionism, Rodgers and Hammerstein made few concessions in their stand against racial prejudice in \textit{South Pacific} 1949. They fought for what they believed to be an indelible truth, irrespective of the presiding cultural trends. Their willingness to do so was a manifestation of their belief in one of the core tenants of moral realism—the idea that moral value lies in the world, rather than in our minds.

Ironically, while the creators of \textit{South Pacific} 1949 utilized a reflective nihilist moral code in order to justify America’s expansionist foreign policy, they boldly and unapologetically criticized the prejudice that made such a policy viable in the first place.

In contrast to this, the 2008 revival took more of a conciliatory approach. Though Sher took pains to amplify the original’s critique of racial prejudice and present American expansionism in a critical light for the first time in \textit{South Pacific}, his criticisms are hardly

subversive in today’s progressive political climate. Instead, this politically correct, nihilist interpretation hesitates to push ideological boundaries, opting instead to appease its contemporary audience by reflecting and upholding current social and political ideologies.

1. South Pacific 1949: A Topical Story

Karl Marx believed there should be a relation between the state of the world and how we ought to act within it. The state of U.S. society in 1949 called for revolutionary change and Rodgers and Hammerstein rose to the challenge, creating a show as controversial and affecting as South Pacific—a story which bravely confronted early Cold War Era American norms.

The battle Rodgers and Hammerstein fought to retain the controversial song, “You've Got to be Carefully taught” in South Pacific 1949, is indicative of how determined both were to preserve the song’s subversive message within the show. Despite enormous pressure to remove the song from the score, Rodgers and Hammerstein held their ground. In one documented incident, they risked the whole South Pacific enterprise in light of legislative accusations regarding its supposed ‘communist’ agenda. When approached by two legislators from Georgia, who criticized the musical for its use of propaganda and threatened to institute bills which would “outlaw movies, plays and musicals having an underlying philosophy inspired by Moscow,” Hammerstein declared that he “(did) not think the legislators (were) representing the people of Georgia very well.” State representative, David C. Jones went so far as to declare that "a song justifying interracial marriage was implicitly a threat to the American way of life,” to which Hammerstein glibly replied that

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“he was surprised by the idea that anything kind and humane must necessarily originate in Moscow.”

Even when Dr. Jules C. Stein, founder of the widely influential and wildly successful Music Corporation of America, sent a telegram to Hammerstein, demanding that he “eliminate You Have Got to be Taught” (See Figure 19 below), Rodgers and Hammerstein persisted, convinced that their underlying social message was central to the work.

James Michener recalled, “The authors replied stubbornly that this number represented why they had wanted to do this play and that even if it meant the failure of the production, it was going to stay in.” In the end, South Pacific was anything but a failure, in spite of the refusal of numerous cities in the Deep South to book the tour because of that “Moscow inspired” number.

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It seems clear then, that in this racially charged postwar environment, this musical’s indictment of American prejudice was, in the words of Jim Lovensheimer, “somewhat unnerving to the United States’ white cultural and social hegemony.” Increasing realizations of the country’s racial inequality undermined the exuberance of postwar America, and Rodgers and Hammerstein protested this inequality in the form of a groundbreaking musical. Underneath the romance, comedy, and exoticism, their 1949 production of *South Pacific* was undeniably and unapologetically a story that questioned core American values, emphasizing issues of race and power at a time when these topics were intensely relevant.

The depiction of interracial marriage in *South Pacific* reflected the cultural moment of the play’s opening just as much as it did the time period it depicted. In 1949, for instance, interracial marriage was still illegal in many states as it would be in sixteen until 1967. And President Truman was implementing the desegregation of America’s armed forces, while black veterans were suffering at the hands of the *Klu Klux Klan*. The opening of *South Pacific* also recalls the NAACP’s (*National Association for the Advancement of Colored people*) 1947 petition to the U.N. proclaiming that, “It is not Russia that threatens the U.S. as much as Mississippi.” This statement was especially ironic after WWII, given the fact that America had battled on two fronts to defeat regimes built at least partially on beliefs of ethnic supremacy. Also ironic was Roosevelt’s aggressively expansionist response to domestic instabilities in the form of the forcible annexation of Hawai’i, and the violently contested military occupation of the Philippines.

In his 2006 book, *Choices Under Fire*, Michael Bess investigates moral aspects of WWII that he argues were more ambiguous than contemporary conventional wisdom.

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acknowledges or remembers. WWII he suggests, was not a race war, but a conflict in which race played a central role in every theatre of combat at home and abroad.\textsuperscript{194} It is difficult to ignore the pervasive forms of injustice and discrimination that both the Japanese Americans and African Americans faced during WWII, and in his depiction of the war Hammerstein made it his mission not to. Thus, as in the war it depicts, race plays a central role in \textit{South Pacific}.

Of course, this show had more than topicality going for it. In the face of much controversy, this musical was an unflinching, realist indictment of what Rodgers and Hammerstein saw as a shortcoming, albeit a fixable one of U.S. Society. Hammerstein’s conviction to tell the truth about American prejudice regardless of the costs is not surprising given his political activism as a member of the \textit{Writers War Board (W.W.B.)}, which was dedicated to promoting freedom and tolerance in America and fought for the desegregation of American troops. His fierce dedication to the cause is evident in the following passage written by him, from the third annual report of the W.W.B.:

\begin{quote}
Prejudice is the most virulent enemy that has appeared on the home front... Any citizen belonging to minority groups is warring with the U.S., as truly as are Goebbels, Goering and Hitler... \textsuperscript{195}
\end{quote}

Michael Bess suggests that this issue continues to challenge the U.S., especially when it recalls WWII. He explains that “The racism that marked America during these years (‘41-‘45) was of a different order from that of the Germans and Japanese, yet it was there in all its ugliness—an important part of our history which we must face and acknowledge.”\textsuperscript{196}

Fifty-seven years before Bess made this observation, Rodgers and Hammerstein faced and acknowledged the issue in no uncertain terms. And though they softened the

presentation of their controversial message marginally, they maintained its integrity in the face of much opposition. Thus, *South Pacific* 1949 exemplified moral realism in two respects: First, it questioned core American values, making an overt plea for racial equality and second, its vision of racial mingling was radical for its day, moving way beyond mere tolerance. The message it promoted was bold and subversive—in spite of the controversy that surrounded it—and thus, a textbook example of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s use of moral realism to tell this story.

2. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s use of Realism and Nihilism in *South Pacific*

A Realist Indictment of Racial Prejudice

By following two love stories, both between people of different cultures, this landmark musical took a courageous stand against racial intolerance. After re-reading her mother’s cautionary letter (the same letter described above, advising Nellie to end her relationship with Emile based on his “otherness”), Nellie encounters her girlfriends and reluctantly vows to dispense of her feelings for him in “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Outta My Hair.” Here she displays a similar, but more subtly presented brand of prejudice. Her stance on the issue is made clear as she sings:

> If the man don’t understand you  
> If you fly on separate beams  
> Waste no time,  
> Make a change,  
> Ride that man right off your range.

(20-24)\(^{197}\)

However, almost immediately following this public declaration she discovers more about Emile’s past and embraces her love for him whole heartedly, as she unabashedly proclaims in “I’m in Love with a Wonderful Guy.” This also sends a strong message: She was

wrong to discriminate against Emile based solely on her limited knowledge of him and her unwillingness to understand his “otherness.”

Even less subtle, are evidences of overt racism and discrimination from Brackett and some of the lower profile marines. During his meeting with Brackett, Cable points out, “Emile has kept a few secrets from her, hasn’t he?” to which Brackett responds, “Well you don’t spring a couple of Polynesian kids on a woman right off the bat!” 198 His point almost goes without saying for he and Cable (and for South Pacific’s audience in 1949), which reveals their deep-seeded prejudice. Later in Act 2, we hear two marines walk past Cable and spit out in reference to Liat, “You wouldn’t catch me goin’ for any of that Jungle Julep!” 199 This was a brash, ugly representation of the kind of racial prejudice that was prevalent during the war—one that wouldn't have gone unnoticed even in 1949, despite the fact that many audience members were struggling to overcome their own intolerance.

And then there is the notoriously controversial anthem for racial equality, “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught:”

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!

(1-12) 200

199 Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *South Pacific*, 70.
“Carefully Taught” was subject to widespread criticism, “judged by many,” as Andrea Most points out, “to be too controversial or downright inappropriate for the musical stage.” The unflinching message embedded in these lyrics was the cause of the kind of controversy and resistance Rodgers and Hammerstein fought in order to retain this song’s subversive message in the show. Here, Cable finally takes full responsibility for his feelings and comes to the realization that because his prejudice wasn’t born in him, he has in fact made a choice. He has elected to buy into western society’s narrow-minded, bigoted worldview, and must therefore take whatever steps necessary to overcome his prejudice. The fact that it is he who makes these realizations on his own, without Emile’s encouragement is significant, as it symbolizes the fact that America is capable, and in need of doing the same.

The lesson embedded within the final scene has arguably the most impact. In it, Nellie makes an attempt to get acquainted with Emile’s children as the sun sets in the distance and the American Military embarks for Operation Alligator. She is determined to speak with Emile’s children in their native language, despite her concern that they will laugh at her accent. Emile appears behind her (having miraculously returned from almost certain death), and sings along with them, to Nellie’s astonishment and delight. It seems that only when Nellie can courageously cross over into another culture and overcome her prejudice, can she earn her happy ending (See Figure 20).

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In order to ensure that *South Pacific* would resonate with its audience and remain commercially viable, Rogers and Hammerstein were compelled to employ a distinctly moral nihilist approach in the telling of this story. In order to balance, and sell their politically progressive ideology to an audience with traditional values surrounding interracial marriage, they tempered their condemnation of racial prejudice, ever so slightly.

This softening of their progressive ideologies is evident in their careful handling of the Cable/Liat love affair. Cable’s anthem, “You’ve got to be carefully taught” argues that society, rather than the individuals within it, is responsible for racial prejudice. This recognition, which leads Cable to dismiss the society that taught him to harbor his own racial prejudice, sheds light on his subsequent decisions and outcome (he dies). Cable’s death prevents an interracial love affair from happening on stage. We see here that Rodgers and Hammerstein’s conventional narrative leaves no room for an interracial couple such as Cable and Liat to exist beyond the margins of the story. One could argue that his death implies that a love affair between a white American soldier and a native girl is impossible, or at least implausible. Regardless, the message of *South Pacific* didn’t go so far as to say

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that interracial love is beautiful, only that love can overcome racial prejudices.

Further evidence of this kind of tempering of their otherwise potent message can be seen when one contrasts the sketch with the final version of the angry speech de Becque’s delivers in Act 2. In the original he is critical, not only Nellie, but also of the prejudice ingrained within U.S. Society. He condemns the hypocrisy of intolerance in a culture that prides itself on liberty and equal opportunity. The equating of America’s racism with the enemy’s would have been jarring, or even offensive to an American audience. In the final version, however, the monologue was cut and his objection condensed to a few lines arguing that prejudice is not born in people.

A Nihilist Validation of Imperialism

Just as Bloody Mary pushes her young daughter Liat towards Lt. Cable, 1949 South Pacific’s central message is (in the words of Lawrence Downes), “if you see something good in this ugly world across a crowded room [or in a hut on Bali Ha’i], seize it before it disappears.” This message is fitting in the context of the U.S.’s early 20th Century expansionist policy. Like Bloody Mary, they saw what they wanted and seized it, or more specifically, forcefully annexed it. Here is a central theme that works on more than one level: It’s an important message within the context of the story and a compelling argument for an imperialistic nation, a reflection of its conveniently nihilistic moral code.

Similar to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s promotion of racial equality, their handling of the growing U.S. economic and military powers in the South Pacific is deft and sure-handed and in this sense, an example of moral realism. However, the message itself (which justified and obfuscated an otherwise highly controversial practice), qualifies as a classic case of

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moral nihilism; a school of morality that would gain momentum in the time between the original *South Pacific* and its revival, almost 60 years later.

According to Marx, “Moral consciousness is an ideological illusion, as people are unaware of the social function fulfilled by the moral convictions they hold.”

Indeed, many believe that Nietzsche’s concept of master-slave morality was a factor in the lead up to the American Civil War and that it served the very specific social function of helping justify American imperialism up through the mid 20th century. In *After Theory*, Eagleton points out that “Not long ago, western civilization resorted to various solemn sounding doctrines to legitimate some of its shadier activities: “the will of God,” “the destiny of the west,” “the white man’s burden.” The embarrassment of these ideals was that they clashed somewhat grotesquely with what people were actually up to.”

In light of all this rationalization, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s distinctly relativist justification of American expansionism in *South Pacific* makes sense. As Lovensheimer points out, in the same way that other Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals such as “*The King and I* and *The Flower Drum Song* helped to structure metaphors of containment in our dealings with non-westerners,” *South Pacific* in particular, reinforced post war expansionism and demonstrated an increasing acceptance of US global power.

The creators of *South Pacific* contributed to this “education” in a number of ways, according to Lovensheimer. To begin with, the story of *South Pacific* takes place on a U.S. military base in the New Hebrides Islands during the WWII. The central figures are, of course, the Americans. The indigenous people, who are overrun by the American troops, act as props, exotic supporting characters. The island of Bali Ha’i, contains all that the

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westerner (American, in this case), feels he is in need of in his scientific, rationalistic culture—namely caring, intuition, sensuality, warmth and spirituality. In this way, the colonial lands are positioned as submissive female in the western imagination.\footnote{Jim Lovensheimer, \textit{South Pacific: Paradise Rewritten}, 178.}

Also typical of the Orientalist narrative is the strange, exotic, ‘other’ character, a description that fits Liat perfectly. She represents the colonial male’s vision of the ideal female—a submissive, accessible woman, in need of domination by both her mother and Lt. Cable. Listening to the lyrics of “Younger Than Springtime,” we are reminded of the implicit meaning Rodgers embedded within this deeply romantic song:

\begin{quote}
\textit{My eyes look down at your lovely face/}
\textit{And I hold the world/}
\textit{In my embrace.}
\textit{Heaven and Earth you are to me,}
\textit{And when your youth and joy invade my arms.}''
\end{quote}

\text{(5-7, 13-14. Emphasis added)}\footnote{Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, \textit{South Pacific}, 52.}

Their love is a metaphor for US imperialism—ownership over land. Notice, her youth and joy “invades his arms,” as if to say he didn’t have a choice. She was so beautiful he was forced to take ownership of her. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s simplification and almost complete silencing of Liat (who converses at length with Cable in \textit{Tales of the South Pacific}) is a problematic aspect of the musical. It demonstrates what Christina Klein, English professor at Boston College, dubs “the infantilization of racialized others.”\footnote{Christina Klein, \textit{Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961} (University of California Press, 2003), 21.} Although her character is central to the show’s thematic conflict, she utters only five short lines, each consisting of one to three words. Her “infantilization” and dependence on Cable vindicates America’s emerging role in South East Asia by arguing that in colonizing islands such as Bali Ha’i, America is in fact lending those who live there much needed fostering and support.

Perhaps the most overt message of all is embedded in Bloody Mary’s efforts to entice
Cable to come to the exotic island of Bali Ha’i:

Cable: Bali Ha’i... what does that mean?
Bloody Mary: Bali Ha’i mean... I am your island...mean...here am I, Your special island. Come to me...come to me.
(Emphasis added)²¹⁰

The not so subtle implication here is that Bali Ha’i rightfully belongs to Cable, as a white American man, or more broadly, to white America. Thus, annexing it is simply fulfilling America’s divine destiny, ‘white man's burden’ as bringers of democracy to the world.

The depiction of Bloody Mary, Bali Ha’i’s most savage native adds fire to this distorted version of reality. She is painted as the other, to the point that she seems almost inhuman. This heavy handed, cartoon like characterization is used both for comic effect and to warrant her unworthy of further investigation or understanding. Immediately after she appears on the scene, the marines sing the blatantly belittling, “Bloody Mary is the Girl I love,” which describes her thus:

Her skin is tender as a leather glove,
Now ain’t that too damn bad
Bloody Mary’s chewing betel Nuts
And she don’t use President.
(7-8, 11-12)²¹¹

In addition to her minor lapses in hygiene, she sells dried human heads in order to profit from the war, which further alienates her as an almost inhuman representation of the “other.” When Cable inquires in disgust, “Who is she?” Billis responds, “Oh, she’s Tonkinese. She used to work for a French Planter.”²¹²

Notice the first and most significant description of Mary is, “She’s Tonkinese.” More importantly, she is not one of us. This is what the Marine’s see first when they look at

²¹² Rodgers and Hammerstein, South Pacific, 21.
Bloody Mary—the other. Unlike Emile and Liat, who are also set apart for their differences early on, she does not retain her likeability since the audience is not meant to accept her in the same way. She serves a much different purpose in the story. As a representative of the natives who inhabit the islands colonized by the U.S., she is meant to be alienated as the other. In their eyes (and consequently in the audience’s), Mary and those she represents are nothing more than barbaric natives in need of the sort of civilization that only America could provide.

There is other evidence of this sort of colonization by the Americans in *South Pacific*. During “Thanksgiving Follies” (Act 2: Scene 1), American nurses are disguised as island natives, but they overdo it, reminiscent of the minstrel shows of the 1840’s in which Americans blacked up their faces to resemble Negroes. In contrast, the natives in this show have to wear American uniforms. There is a sort of alienation of the native culture. Luther Billis (who installs a shower and washing machine on the south sea island beach and charges money for its use) makes no attempt to understand the significance behind the

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boar tooth ceremony on Bali Ha’i or the “Thanksgiving Follies” ritual dance. Though he takes part in it, his ignorance and obvious intentions to take advantage of the beautiful island women do not go unnoticed. Described as a character who “knows how to appreciate and understand the culture of the natives” by Michener, this remodeled version of Billis has a significantly different function, according to Hammerstein—namely, to “reform the island, introducing the American way of life.”214

Bloody Mary in particular tries to adopt the American way of thinking and speaking. Making a point to pick up American slang from Billis and his fellow G.I.’s (“Stingy Bastard!”), she makes it clear that before long she’ll be “speaking English better than any crummy marine.”215 Here is an example of a mode of thinking that became all too prevalent in the 20th century. Eagleton terms this phenomenon universality, defining it as “a western conspiracy which projects our local values and beliefs on the entire globe.”216 According to this school of thought, imperialism can easily be justified, at least from the perspective of the encroaching western nations who feel entitled, and as such, demand that in order to survive, weaker, poorer cultures must erase differences and conform—must forget who they are.217

Similarly, this musical provides a fascinating and subtle validation of the shift from French colonialism to U.S. dominance. And who better to represent that moment of shifting political and cultural power than the show’s heroine? This embedded ideology is never clearer than in its final image (See Figure 22 below). Lovensheimer, author of South Pacific: Paradise Rewritten, interpreted it as follows:

217 This has manifested itself recently in the form of the West, attempting to project western values and beliefs, such as democracy on the entire globe. Ex gulf war, war on Iraq, invasion of Afghanistan, democratization of communist countries.
Like Washington’s aid programs in Indochina, this family invigorates an aging and weary France, gives provincial America access to the colonial sources of French wealth and prestige, and maintains the childlike Asians in a condition of security and dependence. It visualizes and narratives America’s emerging role in Southeast Asia. It therefore encourages American audiences to accept American cultural values as bonding and capable of bringing people together in the postwar era, making everyone a happy family,” similar to the one newly formed by Nellie and de Becque.²¹⁸

![Final, iconic image of South Pacific 2008.²¹⁹](image)

This image of white parents to the two non-white children is a means of legitimating the unequal power relations that define imperialism.

Thus, despite the fact that Rodgers and Hammerstein took a realist approach by communicating this message clearly and overtly, the point they were making is nonetheless a reflexive justification for past behavior—a convenient code of ethics that suits their needs and serves their political agenda. These norms of right and justice were constructed by American society and reflected by Rogers and Hammerstein in *South Pacific* to fulfill a social and political need—namely, to provide an excuse for Roosevelt’s controversial imperialist

practices in the first half of the 20th century.220

3. Reflective Nihilism in the South Pacific Revival
Sher’s Contemporary Revitalization

This reflexive approach to storytelling is in keeping with the constant evolution of ethics characteristic of contemporary society. Evidence of this trend can be seen in the 2008 Broadway revival of South Pacific, which provides a mirror image of contemporary society’s stance on both racial prejudice and colonialism. The adjustments Sher has made to the original reflect an evolved and evolving moral stance on these issues, which continue to challenge us despite the perceived progress we have made. As Brantley pointed out in his 2008 review of the South Pacific revival, “Few things in showbiz date more quickly than progressive politics.” When the show first premiered on Broadway in 1949, its bold plea for racial tolerance shook contemporary American audiences. And while its progressivism can be appreciated in retrospect, its jarring impact cannot be replicated now.

According to Brantley, Sher “doesn’t apologize for such potentially dated elements as yesteryear’s progressive political conscience” in this latest version.222 Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that these once subversive political sentiments are not so outdated after all. In an opening night interview, Loretta Ables Sayre (who portrays Bloody Mary in the revival) raved, “It was really bold in 1949 when they staged this. There have been a lot of productions of it that have glossed over the racial issues because it was uncomfortable. Nobody really wants to face those things and look at them. I really have to give it to our

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220 Fewer men were more ardent imperialists than Theodore Roosevelt. Throughout his presidency, he sought colonies and ports all over the world to exert American influence (including the Phillipines, Cuba, Panama, Hawaii, and Alaska).
director Bartlet Sher, who had the courage to bring those situations to light and make people uncomfortable.”

And though his version may not have produced the same level of discomfort in his audience as did the original, Sher approached this South Pacific with the same spirit Rodgers and Hammerstein did—with the desire to make it an unmistakable, unapologetic criticism of racial intolerance. He understood, however, that in order to achieve this, mere replication of the original’s message would not be enough. No doubt aware of a shift in American political sentiment over the past sixty years, Sher intensified the controversial aspects of the show in order to keep pace with, or mirror contemporary ideology. John Layr of the New Yorker is inclined to agree. He was taken with Sher’s reincarnation of South Pacific, which he called a "frank discussion of cultural diversity: how people get lost and found in translation.”

The resulting updated political message of this story manifests itself throughout the production, which highlights South Pacific’s theatricality to do its ideological work. Sher also restored some of the original dialogue and made clever use of casting, performance, and production elements in order to invigorate the musical for contemporary audiences.

The addition of the word “colored,” is probably the most significant and telling change Sher made to the original script. In the closing scene of Act 1, Nellie is confronted with the fact that de Becque fathered two children through his previous marriage with a Polynesian woman. The original scene is written as follows:

Nellie: Where do you hide their mother?
Emile: She’s dead, Nellie.
Nellie: She’s—(the truth dawns on her,) Emile, they are yours!
Yes, Nellie. I am their father.

Nellie: And—their mother...she was a... was a...
Emile: Polynesian. *(Nellie is stunned. She turns away, trying to collect herself).*

With the addition of one word, the same scene takes on a whole new intensity in the 2008 revival:

Emile: Yes, Nellie. I am their father.
Nellie: And—their mother...she was a...was a...
Emile: Polynesian.
Nellie: *(Vehemently)* Colored!
*(Nellie is stunned. She turns away, trying to collect herself).*
(Emphasis added)  

In an opening night interview, Kelli O’Hara described how it was received by a modern day audience: “I hear people gasping when I use the word ‘colored,’ which I expected” she said, “but in 1949 they didn’t even need to say the word. They didn’t need any of that. The audience knew what the problem was.” In fact, the loaded word was taken out of the original *South Pacific* and reinstated in the revival in order to underscore Nellie’s prejudice. “We actually have to over-explain it,” O’Hara clarified. “And so when we do... you hear people audibly gasping.”  

O’Hara also understood the importance of hitting today’s audience with this message full force, as she went on to explain: “I want to apologize, but I don’t because I think that gets us to the end of the play.” It also helps communicate the severity and weight of Nellie’s prejudice to a modern day audience.

‘Colored’ isn’t the only addition Sher made to this scene, however. He inserted additional dialogue for Nellie that goes further to explain her shock and disappointment at what she has just discovered about Emile. Nellie’s additional clarification: “I’m not jealous, it’s just such a shock for me to think of you with her!” sheds light on the depth of her

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http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5KyI3zDIis

disappointment and intensifies the magnitude of the situation.228 When Emile offers to drive her home and she finally, and explosively protests, “You will do NO such thing!”229 The severity and emotional undertow of her response indicates just how deep her prejudice runs.

Sher deliberately retained outmoded, politically incorrect language from the original for a similar purpose. *South Pacific* 1949 reinforced the racist language commonly used by the media at the time, to demonize the enemy during World War II. Terms like “Jap,” and “Nips” refer to the Japanese people as if they are homogeneous. Whether Hammerstein was aware of it or simply making use of popular wartime vocabulary, usage of these terms was ironic, considering the theme of racial tolerance this show promoted. And although it evoked little response from audiences in 1949, Sher’s decision to retain this language in the revival had an entirely different significance in 2008. Its inclusion served an important purpose—to remind Americans just how serious and mainstream the problem of prejudice was, and is. Laura Osnes (O'Hara’s replacement) addressed this point in my June, 2011 interview with her. She explained,

We retained some dialogue from the original, and put other dialogue back in the script that had been cut because it was too offensive to audiences in 1949. We wanted to make the point that prejudice was a monumental issue of the time, which today’s audiences are not always aware of. Bart (Sher) wanted the audience and his actors to feel uncomfortable about it.

It is also significant that although Hammerstein’s original script designates the children as half-Polynesian, Sher cast the children as half-black in the 2008 revival. This is consistent with *Tales of the South Pacific*, which repeatedly refers to the Malaysian island natives as ‘black.’ The decision to cast these children half Polynesian in the original was

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likely a result of the probability that an American audience, still wrestling with prejudice against blacks at home might be uncomfortable both with Nellie’s decision to mother them, and with the reminder that racial discrimination remained a pressing issue in America. Though prejudice against African Americans is less of an issue today in the U.S., there is still much progress to be made. It makes sense then, that in an attempt to draw attention to the continued severity of the issue, Sher would avoid skirting around it and cast Nagana and Jerome the way Michener had originally intended.

In short, Sher’s restorations and retentions in the *South Pacific* revival helped preserve the power and shock value the show once had, in light of the progress Americans have made in overcoming racial intolerance. He took a harder hitting approach to depicting American prejudice and imperialism, made necessary by the fact that these issues seem further removed today, and there is a conception that we have moved past these problems. As a result, many audience members who hadn’t seen the 1949 Broadway version “were surprised by the social critique of the revival,” according to O’Hara, and “didn’t remember other adaptations of the musical being so political.”

**Sher’s Use of Production Elements to Magnify Meaning**

It is remarkable, the extent to which a text can be transformed by the use of production elements. Sher’s interpretation isn't an avant-garde adaptation of the original, nor even a dramatic departure. By and large it is playing what Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote in the most truthful, unapologetic way possible, illuminated by great performers and an insightful director. And what results is a resolute (and in light of modern day society’s

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230 *Opening Night, South Pacific*, (YouTube Video, 4:28), posted by Broadway.com, February 19, 2011.  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5KyI3zDEIs
similarly progressive ideologies, more politically correct) representation of the problems these cultures in collision once faced, and continue to face today.

Take Sher’s depiction of Lt. Cable and Liat’s love affair. Upon first encountering Liat, Cable circles her slowly, as if preparing to zero in on his prey. When he finally does, we see Bloody Mary peering into the hut through a small opening in the horizontal blinds. The scene’s ominous underscoring mixed with Sher’s staging is striking, more for its menacing undertones than for its romanticism. And given the underlying message implicit to Cable and Liat’s romance, which acts as a metaphor for U.S. imperialism, there can be no mistaking Sher’s take on the controversial issue (See Figure 23).

Later, when Liat informs Cable that her mother is none other than the foul-mouthed, native hustler Bloody Mary, the shocking news is enough to propel Cable to his feet (instead of merely “looking at (Liat) in amazement.” as the original stage directions dictate). Later, when Liat informs Cable that her mother is none other than the foul-mouthed, native hustler Bloody Mary, the shocking news is enough to propel Cable to his feet (instead of merely “looking at (Liat) in amazement.” as the original stage directions dictate).

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obvious revulsion at the thought of sharing such a connection with her speaks volumes about his intolerance for her lesser status in relation to his own.

Sher's version of *South Pacific* is so thoughtfully presented that even the buoyant, amusing songs sung by the Seabees call attention to and amplify the clash of cultures. Bloody Mary's vulgar demonstration of how the marine's "sexy swee-hearts in Chicago make waves," is a textbook example that is hard to miss (she delivers four pelvic thrusts which are met with universal repulsion by the marines, who mimic her offensive movements, recoil from her sexual advances in disgust and then engage in a series of jovial dances and merriments at her expense). With this brash staging of "There is Nothin' Like a Dame," and the Seabeas' use of American curse words and pop culture references like "pepsodent" and "Dimagio," it's as if, as Jeff Lunden of the *National Public Radio* put it, "They're an American assault force of language and style."233

The score brings the production to another level that is similarly searing. Classic standards like "Some Enchanted Evening" and "Younger Than Springtime" have entered the American lexicon. These songs are familiar, but hearing them sung by such powerful, honest actors, and accompanied by the unusually large thirty piece orchestra employed by Sher, intensifies and shines a brighter, more incriminating light on their underlying meaning. Their implicit justification of American expansionism, which might otherwise be missed, due to the audience's familiarity with these standards, is brought into scrutiny for the first time since the original.

In addition, Sher's use of swift, mechanized scene changes and impressive set pieces lowered from the ceiling puts us in the middle of the action and adds a contemporary flare,

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reminding us of this story’s continued relevance and timeliness. Rather than reading as an aged picture postcard no longer applicable in our day, we are treated to something quite up to date in both style and meaning, and thus encouraged to look at it with fresh, perhaps more discerning eyes.

But it is Sher’s artful use of staging and lighting design at the bottom of the show that amplifies this story’s underlying message most effectively. As Nellie stands deserted on the dark, expansive shore, lamenting her previous inability to rise above her own prejudice and praying for the opportunity to ask for Emile’s forgiveness, her anguish and profound regret is palpable. As Nellie takes Liat, who has just learned of Cable’s death, in her arms to comfort her, the damage and heartbreak that both Cable and Nellie’s small-mindedness has caused is abundantly, and painfully clear.

4. Sher’s Revitalized Message: Revolutionary or Reflective?

Despite Sher’s seemingly bold, revitalized approach, the underlying politics he promotes in this South Pacific revival are not so much shocking or controversial, as merely reflective of the general consensus. Once subversive and avant-garde, the moral nihilist, pro-equality message embedded in South Pacific 2008 is downright expected in this day and age—even in its newly augmented form. After all, haven’t we made significant progress in the fight for racial equality over the past sixty years? Considering the revival premiered during the election of the first black president in America, it is likely we have. Given our evolved state of morality and politics, the once enlightening political ideology embedded within Sher’s revival is stripped of much of its shock value, rendering it far less affecting for today’s audiences.
It is also worth considering a valid point raised by Megan Sanborn Jones in her recent work, *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama*. Even as Sher is attempting to shed new, less favorable light on U.S. imperialism in this revival, his “designating one group as marginalized and another as dominant, even to critique the hegemony or explore the process of hybridity, reaffirms the very power positions that the examination hopes to deconstruct.”¹²³⁴ Given the unavoidable watering down of Sher’s anti-imperialist message due to this effect, as well as the aforementioned change of political context, the retelling of this story is rendered significantly less politically potent—particularly in light of Sher’s simultaneous attempts to soften his would-be subversive message.

As Laurence Downes points out in his 2008 review, “*South Pacific* has returned to a nation that is having—or thinks it is having—its most enlightened discussion of race and gender, thanks largely to the presidential campaign.”¹²³⁵ Despite the progress, or as Downes implies, the *perceived* progress we have made since 1949, the fact is we are not there yet. In light of this, Sher was clever in his approach to directing this revival. He stopped just short of alienating an audience who may not be as enlightened when it comes to racial inequality as it thinks it is (just as Rodgers and Hammerstein did). Similar to contemporary nihilism, this version of *South Pacific* re-evaluates and reflects our contemporary and still segregated society. As Lovensheimer points out, the result is that *South Pacific* 2008 “never moves beyond the romanticized notion of interracial affairs in a way that would make middle America cringe.”¹²³⁶

Sher accomplishes this slight tempering of his message primarily by introducing more nuanced, softened characterizations, which allow us to see this story in shades of grey, in

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contrast to the original’s black and white interpretation. Nellie doesn’t fit the harsh, ‘cracker’ stereotype in either production of *South Pacific*, but she’s particularly lovable and complex in the latest installment, especially as portrayed by Kelli O’Hara. She has an innate sophistication and a wholesome openness that goes beyond what Rodgers and Hammerstein indicated for “knucklehead” Nellie Forbush. Her complicity and charm help soften the deep seeded prejudice that is revealed in her startling reaction to the news of de Becque’s previous interracial marriage. This likeability serves two purposes: first, it establishes her as a real, complex person who cannot so easily be dismissed when her prejudice is revealed. Second, once the audience has identified with her on a personal level, they are compelled to re-evaluate how their efforts to overcome their own brand of racial prejudice compare with Nellie’s attempts to do the same.

Sher’s addition of “My Girl Back Home” also contributes to Nellie and Cable’s likeability, and helps the audience understand where their inherited prejudice originates. In a recent interview, Sher expressed his desire to explore “exactly what fighting overseas did to people,” specifically “what happens when somebody from Philadelphia and somebody from Arkansas get dropped into this new world, and they have to question everything about who they are, or who they think they were, and what they believe.”237 “My Girl Back Home” and the scene that follows accomplishes just that. The lyrics express their feelings of being adrift, away from the world they know, and the dialogue that follows sheds light on Nellie’s loss of innocence, disorientation, and disgust at being unable to rise above her own intolerance and narrow-mindedness:

Nellie: How far are they? Little Rock A.R.K.?
Cable: Princeton N.J. how far are they?

Nellie: From cocoanut palms, and Banyon trees and coral sands and Tonkinese? (16-19) 238

Nellie then enacts her inner struggle between heeding her mother’s small-minded advice to move on from Emile and abandoning it, as she throws her letter (and her mother’s words of “wisdom”) away, only to reluctantly retrieve it before she leaves. Despite this momentary setback, we see Nellie embrace a shift in her perspective of the ‘other’ and attempt to make sense of where she fits in a changing world. Most importantly, however we gain a new understanding of where this small town girl really comes from.

Even Bloody Mary is not just flawed but also human in this production. Granted, she was written by Rodgers and Hammerstein as an obtuse stereotype of the exotic other, but Sher fights against this in many ways. Loretta Ables Sayre (a nightclub singer imported from Hawai’i to play Bloody Mary for this production) brings fascinating nuances to the character, often played more reductively for comedy, and embraces her strangeness and corruption without erasing her kindness. According to Andre Bishop (Artistic Director at Lincoln Center) Bloody Mary was “charming, tender and terrifying” in the 1949 production. 239 Sayre’s offered a more complicated, layered presentation of Mary than audiences saw in the first South Pacific. Compare Bishop’s description for instance, with a 1949 NY Times review of the original, which describes Juanita Hall’s performance of the same role thus: “She plays a brassy, greedy, ugly Tonkonese woman with harsh, vigorous, authentic accuracy.” 240

Mathew Morrison complicates and humanizes Princeton educated Lieutenant Joe Cable. His cockiness provides contrast and calls attention to his vulnerability when he falls for Liat. His method of holding back at first, only to reveal an increasing level of warmth,

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sincerity, and vulnerability as the show progresses, adds greater impact to the depth and
sincerity of their uneasy relationship, and softens the imperialistic implications of their
story.

Thus, even in today's politically progressive climate, *South Pacific* shies away from
committing fully to its subversive message. Despite its updated ideology, it remains more
reflective than progressive.\(^{241}\) Perhaps this is symptomatic of the fact that even today's
liberal minded society doesn't yet show a total commitment to change. And consistent with
moral nihilism, neither does this version of *South Pacific*. Instead, it adapts and assumes an
ethically reflexive, rather than prescriptive approach, in order to better resonate with the
audience at large.

**South Pacific 2008 in Context: Politically Progressive Climate?**

Rick Ayers of the *Huffington Post* lends support to this notion, that the tentative, non-
committal message of *South Pacific* 2008 is in fact, a manifestation of modern day society's
hesitancy to embrace reform: “What is most stunning is how this musical is greeted so
uncritically, as if it could tell us something we desperately need to know in this era of
globalization and imperial crisis.”\(^{242}\) Indeed we do need to know. We haven't come far
enough in the fight to stop racism and promote equal rights.

According to a poll taken recently by Opinion Research Corp. for C.N.N., the majority of
Americans, black and white, see racial prejudice as a persistent issue in the U.S. Of the 1,207
Americans interviewed, well over 1/2 of the black respondents (84%) reported that
prejudice is a "very serious, or somewhat serious" issue, while 61% of whites shared those
views. Despite this, only 43 percent of whites and 48 percent of blacks said yes, when asked

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if they know anyone they would consider racially biased. And just 12% of blacks, and 13% of whites admit that they are prejudiced. According to University of Connecticut professor Jack Dovidio (who has spent the last 30 years researching racism), “This may be because an estimated 80 percent of white Americans have racist feelings they may not even recognize.”

The most significant distinction between racial prejudice today and that of a century ago, is today’s brand is restrained, or understated, which reflects the fact that it is no longer widely condoned, as it once was. Although this suggests a change for the better, it is not enough of one.

As other evidence suggests, racism today is not always so subtle. Thirty years after the civil rights era, the U.S. continues to tolerate, or even condone residentially segregated society, in which whites and blacks dwell in economically contrasting neighborhoods. To make matters worse, the U.S. criminal justice system itself is guilty of racial discrimination. Though this is a bold statement to make, the facts are overwhelming. According to an article on drug and race enforcement published by the Human Rights Watch in May of 2008, despite the fact that African Americans consist of 13% of population in America, and 14% of regular drug abusers, they comprise 37% of the people arrested for crimes related to drug abuse. This is but one of many statistics, which illustrate that this is a race-based organization where African Americans are blatantly targeted and punished much more aggressively than are white Americans.

In light of where America, and the world at large, stands today in the fight for equality, it is striking how radical Rodgers and Hammerstein’s vision of ethnic equality was in 1949. In bringing Nellie and Emile together in a central love story, they went way beyond mere

tolerance—they embraced what remained illegal in many areas of the U.S. for years after South Pacific first premiered. Though Sher tempered his message slightly to account for our present day shortcomings, his nevertheless bold approach to tackling these issues pays homage to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s intentions in 1949. Perhaps in light of our own prejudices and continued short sightedness, it is not this South Pacific revival that needs to catch up with the times, but the other way around.

Regardless, it is safe to say that just as prejudice persisted after 1949, this 2008 revival has failed to revolutionize modern-day politics. The question remains then, is modern day society receptive to the still progressive ideas proposed by South Pacific? After all, if a Broadway musical could change the world’s views on prejudice and cultural inequality, such forms of injustice would have vanished in April, 1949. Evidence would suggest not. It may just be that Adorno was on to something when he criticized musical theatre for its ability to bring “resolution that doesn’t actually resolve any real world problems.”244

What it can do, and what Sher’s presentation of South Pacific does in particular is invite audiences to consider their own contemporary moment—a time when the issue of equality, race and imperialism continue to haunt the nation. In a recent Masterworks Broadway Podcast, Richard Jay-Alexander articulated the revival’s ability to make us reexamine ourselves and our world.

South Pacific becomes a way by which we measure where we stand on all these issues, each individual member of the audience and American society as a whole, and because it’s so real and unsentimental you respond to it as if its people you know. It’s very powerful and it sends the audience out with something to think about and brood upon as well as to be moved by.245

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244 David Savran, “Toward a Historiography of the Popular,” Theatre Survey, 45, No. 2 (2003), 213.
It is difficult to know what kind of impact a progressive piece of musical theatre such as *South Pacific* can have on the politics and morality of an ever-evolving society. But there is certainly reason to believe Rodgers and Hammerstein’s efforts were not in vein. After all, their heroine moved beyond her prejudice long before Little Rock’s racial explosion in 1957, and “charted a path that much of America, North and South, would haltingly begin to follow in the years following this subversive musical.” However much progress has been made, one thing is clear. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s work is not complete. Their influence will continue to expand and reach new audiences in unforeseen ways, for even now, more than sixty years after its premiere there is still much to be carefully taught.

**Conclusion**

The essential conflicts in *South Pacific* are racial. Hammerstein’s long-held views of racial equality motivated him to write a book for *South Pacific* that was daring at the time it was written. Always aware of the narrow ledge he walked by attempting to create a popular commercial success that contained a progressive, controversial message, Hammerstein, together with Rodgers and Logan created a work that fearlessly criticized racial intolerance and was intensely relevant, considering the war against racism still raging in the U.S. during its opening. Embedded in this story of exoticism and romance was a clear, unmistakable message that promoted racial equality while simultaneously providing justification for the growing U.S. economic, cultural and military powers in the South Pacific. While their attempt to validate American imperialism utilized tenants of moral nihilism, their sure handed, definitive justification of it did not. Their handling of racial prejudice was similarly

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unmistakable, as well as groundbreaking, and therefore, an illustration of moral realism—the fading, but still predominant school of morality in 1949.

Postmodernists such as Derrida, Lyotard and Miller subscribe to the notion of moral relativism (nihilism), in which the existence of an unchanging, objective, universal moral truth is dismissed. And in a sense, they are right. Society’s moral code always has, and will continue to change through time, just as it did during the lapse between the 1949 debut of *South Pacific*, and its reincarnation in 2008.

It should be no surprise then that almost sixty years after the original premiered, the revival not only had something different to say, but also said it quite differently. Sher’s distinct approach can be explained by the unique context in which his version of the story was told. Despite his efforts to vamp up an already bold message of tolerance and racial equality and shed darker light on American imperialism, Sher’s revival merely corroborated and added fire to an existing political flame, stopping just short of alienating an American audience that wasn’t as politically evolved as many would have liked to believe. This renders his recent installment of *South Pacific* more reflective than constructive, and as such, an illustration of moral nihilism.

The “evolved” moral code reflected by *South Pacific* 2008 will inevitably change again as American culture adjusts to whatever economic obstacles and political movements lie ahead—and perhaps it should. After all, America still has a ways to go in the fight for racial equality and the presiding relativist, reflective moral code falls short in many respects. As we seek to define what is right and wrong, black and white, present day morality seems to present more questions than answers. Regardless, as contemporary ethics would have it, the seemingly timeless message embedded in Sher’s revival is not a hard and fast declaration of what is right and just, but a snap shot of a fleeting moment in the modern day
evolution of morality. Despite its limitations however, the power and continued relevance of this time honored classic is a testament to the courage, bold determination and style with which Rodgers and Hammerstein told this story in the first place.
Chapter IV
“My Girl Back Home”:
The Function of American Patriotism in South Pacific

Not long after meeting and falling in love with Emile in Act 1: Scene 1 of South Pacific, a once skeptical Nellie Forbush abandons her pride and publicly proclaims her unabashed love in the emotionally affecting anthem, “I’m in Love with a Wonderful Guy.” The direct comparison she makes between the intensity of her love and her national pride, as denoted by “I’m as corny as Kansas in August, high as a flag on the 4th of July!” is a testament to the strength of both of these convictions.247

The final three stanzas of the song have her fellow nurse comrades repeating, “I’m in love, I’m in love, I’m in love with a wonderful guy!” The visual of these women combining together, gathering momentum as they joyfully and triumphantly sing is an embodiment of the nationalistic fervor and rallying spirit that characterized post-World-War-II America, as well as the popular culture that depicted it (See Figure 24).

![Fig 24: Nellie Forbush and her nurse comrades singing, "I'm in Love with a Wonderful Guy". South Pacific 2008](http://www.ogunquitplayhouse.org/images/Past%20Seasons/2012/2012_South-Pacific-Header-Jennie.jpg)

Such patriotic sentiment was a common theme in early twentieth century musicals, for instance. Even before military themes became common in musicals, a general

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American patriotism pervaded, even saturated many shows on Broadway. By 1943, Broadway had become the country’s center of entertainment for young military men. At the time, Times Square offered nearly four-dozen legitimate theatres, and at every musical the orchestra played “the Star Spangled Banner” at the beginning of the show. These shows reflected a palpable American pride at the time that matched President Roosevelt’s optimism in the face of a positive economic and political climate.

A manifestation of a prosperous and newly victorious post World War II America, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s original production of *South Pacific* was no exception to this rule. *South Pacific* 1949 reflects and constructs this brand of patriotism through its depiction of America’s noble mission as bringers of democracy to the world, WWII nationalism, and most importantly, Nellie’s (and America’s) ability to rise triumphantly above racial discrimination, in order to unite American audiences and smooth the reception of the show’s moral realist indictment of prejudice.

The 2008 revival, on the other hand, is a nihilist reflection of the resiliency of U.S. patriotism that arose post 9/11, despite American society’s more complex, critical political outlook on war, imperialism, and prejudice at the time. Similar to the original, Sher made deliberate use of patriotism to smooth the reception of its criticisms of American prejudice and imperialism. Such criticisms are more nihilist than realist in a contemporary context, as they merely reflect, rather than construct current political and social ideologies.

1. **Patriotism and Realism in South Pacific 1949:**
**A product of its Time**

As a result of the Pearl Harbor attack, the United States was at a staggering disadvantage in December of 1941. Much of its Pacific fleet and nearly all of its air power in
Hawai‘i had been crippled. More determined than ever, the citizens of the United States rallied around their government and focused intently on the challenge of defeating the Axis powers. Circumstances in the Pacific only increased nationalistic fervor in America and in turn, the desire of young men to serve their country.

Emerging victorious from WWII in 1945 reshaped American consciousness, as the country was now a protagonist on the world stage. It permanently altered America’s international position and effectively transformed American life and sensibility. Similarly, nationalistic fervor was a key factor in the success and autonomy of other nations, or would-be nations at the time. Anti-colonial nationalism, (a form of nationalism which arose during the decolonialisation of the post WWII era, particularly in African, Asian and Russian territories), was a reaction by these third world colonies against being subjugated by foreign nations.

A kind of nationalism that took many forms (including Gandhi’s passive resistance movement in the Indian subcontinent), Anti-colonial nationalism was an astonishingly effective force in the fight against Western expansionism. As such, it served an important function: it became a catalyst for many previously subjugated colonies to establish themselves as sovereign nations. Though patriotism serves a different function in South Pacific, it plays no less vital a role in the show’s success, both as a commercial hit and as a vehicle for Rogers and Hammerstein’s subversive, moral realist political message.

A product of a prosperous and newly victorious post World War II America, South Pacific “stood alone in the middle of the 20th century, both as an embodiment of the American spirit, and as an indication of how far the American musical had come as a bona fide art form,” in the estimation of Marc Bauch, author of The American Musical.249 Written

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immediately following actual events, this musical acts like a national memory, an
dexpression of survival and American resilience.

In terms of its depiction of the U.S.’s role on the world stage, the musical was
undeniably patriotic, presenting America as a nation defined by a noble creed and sense of
mission—not only to emerge from the war victorious, but also to win the battle it was
currently fighting against racism at home. Thus, the meaning at the heart of Rodgers and
Hammerstein’s original *South Pacific* is one of uncompromised nationalism. As such, their
message coincides with Eagleton’s conception of moral realism—though, as I will discuss
shortly, its reflection of post WWII patriotism in order to ensure the smooth passage of their
bold, realist message, is evidence of its nihilist tendencies as well.

Rodgers and Hammerstein’s nod to American patriotism takes a variety of forms in
their 1949 version, but never is it more effective and affecting, than when embodied by
some of their most noble and memorable characters. Lieutenant Cable, for instance, acts as
a symbol of American bravery and heroism throughout the show. Despite his inability to
rise above his own prejudice, he nonetheless remains an exemplary American soldier.
Strapping and handsome in his uniform, Cable is the quintessential American hero,
becoming a martyr to the war by courageously volunteering for a life-threatening
reconnaissance mission. In fact, Cable’s bold determination to risk his life for the cause of
freedom renders him unable to comprehend or accept Emile’s hesitation to do so. In Act 2,
Scene 2, he criticizes Emile, suggesting that he has no right to attack the principles of Nellie
or any other American since he is unwilling to fight for what he claims he believes in. In
Cable’s words, Emile is a guy who “lives on an island all by himself and doesn’t worry about
anyone—not the “Japs, Americans, Germans, anybody.”250 The example Cable sets as a

principled man, willing to risk his life for that which he believes, lies at the heart of what being an American hero has come to mean. Notwithstanding America’s much documented and criticized ‘noble calling to bring democracy to the world,’ the U.S. has carved out a place for itself as a world leader in the fight for freedom, as evidenced by their sizeable contribution during both world wars, as well as the Korean, Vietnam and Gulf wars. It is tough to criticize the sacrifices American soldiers and citizens alike, have made to support these efforts, in addition to the long list of foreign peace keeping operations led by the U.S. in the past sixty years. Cable’s heroic, altruistic sacrifice is therefore emblematic of a proud American tradition indeed.

Hammerstein also uses the characters of Commander Harbison and Captain Brackett to reflect and construct American patriotism in South Pacific, and to reaffirm America’s role as an important, even indispensable world power. In response to Emile’s refusal to join Cable on his dangerous reconnaissance mission, Harbison retorts,

Harbison: He’s an honest man, but he’s wrong. Of course we can’t guarantee him a better world if we win. Point is we can be damned sure it’ll be worse if we lose. Can’t we?
Brackett: Of Course.251

This exchange between two high ranking American officers adds fire to an already prevailing idea in post WWII America: America’s participation in the fight against fascism was crucial, due to America’s power and foreordained calling as bringer of peace and democracy to the world. This conception of the U.S. exemplifies Eagleton’s brand of moral realism as well. In it, America is inherently, and incontestably good as a result of its divine calling, and therefore completely justified in carrying out its mission to fight fascism.

Nellie’s passionate declaration of love, in “I’m In Love with a Wonderful Guy” (as per the introductory paragraph of this chapter), also serves as a realist emblem of American

251 Rodgers and Hammerstein, South Pacific, 46.
power and patriotism, but here she takes it one step further: her proclamation has an imperialistic vibe. As previously mentioned, Nellie and Emile’s union in the final tableau of Act 2 acts as a metaphor for U.S. imperialism, and the first signs of this implication are embedded carefully within this number. References to American vernacular and patriotism permeate the song (“corny as Kansas,” “normal as blueberry pie,” “with a conventional star in my eye,” “high as a flag on the 4th of July”), which puts a patriotic slant on the U.S.’s aggressive foreign policies—a marriage of imperialism and national pride. Suggestive phrases such as “not ashamed,” and “world famous,” are a means of rationalizing and glamorizing the U.S.’s expansionist practices, which are, of course completely, and incontestably justifiable, given their divine purpose.

Nellie’s proclamation, “I expect everyone of my crowd to make fun of my proud protestations of faith in romance,” can be interpreted thus: as an imperialistic world power, America can anticipate criticism, but that shouldn’t hamper its efforts to pursue what it wants and deserves—it should do so proudly and fearlessly, as Nellie points out in the next stanza: “fearlessly I’ll face them and argue their doubts away.” Her previous shame in pursuing Emile (as expressed in “Wash That Man”), makes sense in light of the imperialist implication here, and indeed, you might say that Western expansionism is ‘world famous,” (or at least infamous). This line also alludes to Nellie’s patriotism. Additionally, as mentioned above, the final three stanzas of the song in which the nurses proclaim emphatically, “I’m in love, I’m in love, I’m in love with a wonderful guy!” echo and perpetuate the uncompromising (and therefore moral realist) nationalistic fervor and post war patriotism that characterized America at the time.

253 Rodgers and Hammerstein, South Pacific, 57.
It is also worth considering some of the more notable changes Rogers and Hammerstein made to Michener’s original stories in *Tales of the South Pacific*. To start, there is a general change in focus between the two versions. In *Tales*, the life of the natives from the island are given equal, if not primary importance, while in *South Pacific*, life at the American military station is the focus of both the action and the underlying conflict that drives it.

By transporting a piece of America from Arkansas to the Pacific in “Thanksgiving Follies,” for instance, Rogers and Hammerstein direct our focus to all that is American and set the stage for the telling of this story from a U.S. perspective. Intended in part as an entertaining interlude, this song accomplishes much more. It is a way of recreating American culture out of the found objects of the South Pacific (coconut brassieres, ‘grass’ skirts made out comic books, etc.), and in fact it is the most successful attempt at cultural translation we have seen so far in the musical. It is noteworthy, that the translation is from Polynesian to American, rather than visa versa. Note too, that when Bloody Mary attempts the opposite conversion in “Happy Talk,” it fails. Cable refuses to accept Mary’s forcefully persistent invitation to surrender his American upbringing and identity for that of Liat’s.254

Though the addition of this production number was a shrewd way to introduce some musical comedy into a dark, heavy Act 2, it was also an opportunity to remind the audience, watching both on the island of Espiritu Santo in 1943, and on Broadway in 1949, of what they were fighting for—a question raised earlier by de Becque. As an emblem of American nobility and honor, Brackett is well suited to deliver this message, which he does gallantly in his introduction of this play within a play: “Up to now our side has been having the hell beat out of it in two hemispheres and we’re not going to get to go home until that situation

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is reversed. It may take a long time before we can get any big operation under way, so its things like this, like this show tonight that keep us going” 255 (See figure 25).

![Fig 25: A very patriotic “Thanksgiving Follies.” South Pacific 2008.](image)

Also worth mentioning, is an exchange that takes place between Billis and the nurses during this blatantly patriotic Act 2 opener. Part way through the choreography in “Thanksgiving Follies,” the stage directions indicate that Billis should rather abruptly stop, and “look up to see the stars and stripes painted on the backcloth. The music of Anchors Away is heard and he salutes the flag. The nurses salute, and he continues on.” 257 Surely the message of this less than subtle tribute was not lost on its post war audience in 1949.

2. **South Pacific 1949’s Reflection of the Grand Narrative of America**

The history of the United States, as with most national stories, has been depicted as an epic and heroic narrative—a grand story of the triumph of good over evil, right over wrong, and the victory of the human spirit over adversity. It comes as no surprise then, that a post

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World War II, all-American musical like *South Pacific* would endorse this moral realist narrative. In fact, Brooks Atkinson of the NY Times had this to say about Rogers and Hammerstein’s original adaptation: “*South Pacific* naturally does well by the ruffians who saved democracy amid groans of despair in the Eastern Ocean, and ‘There is Nothin’ like a Dame’ ought to go down as their theme song.” This seemingly sarcastic sentiment, a quote from his 1949 review of *South Pacific*, was actually anything but, if Atkinson’s earnest tone throughout the rest of his review is any indication.

Along with many others like it, this article evidences the prevailing notion of the day—that America’s rise to power and accompanying role as “bringer of democracy to the world” was both justified and welcome—a fulfillment of her divine destiny even—despite the necessary “groans of despair” from those who became the casualties of war and US expansionism. Indeed, as Stephen Holden argues in a 1958 *New York Times* review of the movie version of the musical, “the star of this *South Pacific* isn’t any individual, but rather the score itself. It suggests an allegory of America emerging victoriously from the war.”

Of course, it is hard to miss the underlying message of Nellie’s (and America’s) triumph over racism in *South Pacific*. In Act 2: Scene 10, after discovering the precariousness of Emile’s mission and the possibility of his death, she proclaims her devotion and loyalty to him with increased vigor and resolve:

> I know what counts now. You. All those other things, the woman you had before, her color, what Piffle! What a pinhead I was. Come back so I can tell you. Don’t die until I can tell!

This agonizingly remorseful declaration, along with Nellie’s subsequent commitment to mother Emile’s children redeems her—and that which she embodies: America itself—from her previous small mindedness.

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And although Cable is unable to conquer his own prejudice completely before he dies, he too makes significant strides. The implication in Cable’s declaration that “[Prejudice] is not born in you, it happens after you are born,” is that there is no excuse.²⁶¹ He has come to understand that it is not part of one’s DNA. It is immoral and one can, and must change and take responsibility for one’s actions. The fact that it is Cable, also a stand-in for America, who admits this is important. The message here is that just as Cable does in “Carefully Taught,” America is capable of recognizing and renouncing the evils of racial prejudice, and thus fulfilling her destiny by heroically rising above and conquering that which is inherently evil. Again, Cable’s, or rather Rodger and Hammerstein’s definitive indictment of prejudice qualifies as an example of their moral realist approach in the telling of this story.

It is also significant that a Southerner like Nellie is able to overcome her personal prejudices, whereas Cable, a Princeton educated Philadelphia native cannot fully surmount his; he refuses Bloody Mary’s attempts to coerce him to marry Liat. The suggestion here is that if Nellie, who was carefully taught by her southern culture can renounce it, so can anyone—so can all Americans, no matter how deeply ingrained their prejudice runs.

Audiences are still moved by the final scene of *South Pacific*, which features the original production’s final pose, an image that has become rather iconic. This finale, featured in both Broadway productions of the show, is among the most powerful in musical theatre and has a similarly ennobling message of both Nellie’s, and America’s triumph over racism. It exemplifies the ‘distinctly American’ ability to rise above racial intolerance. In true moral realist form, it thus champions America in no uncertain terms and elicits powerful feelings of patriotism among the audience.

This final tableau of *South Pacific 1949* confounds musical theatre convention. Rather

²⁶¹ Rodgers and Hammerstein, *South Pacific*, 77.
than joining together to reprise their emotional anthem, “Some Enchanted Evening,” Emile and Nellie merely exchange knowing looks while clasping hands underneath the table. Their silence is fraught with meaning, however. In his book, South Pacific: Paradise Rewritten, Lovensheimer makes a case that this image implies that “compromise and collaboration can begin only when both sides stop forcing their language on the other.” He points out that the idea of breaking down barriers and building new relationships is a very American one, given the US’s dream of a common, united identity which emerged after WWII.262

This idea was also a topical one when South Pacific was written, and thus, of paramount concern for the creators of the musical. It was not a time to celebrate or emphasize differences. Just ten months before the opening of South Pacific, President Truman had put an end to segregation in the U.S. armed forces, and the city of Berlin had recently been separated into four sectors, each speaking a different language. Through the use of words and music, Rogers and Hammerstein hoped to unite their predominantly American audiences, just as Emile and Nellie are united in a common language of speechlessness in the culminating scene of this musical.

**Nellie: An American Heroine**

No amount of social contextualizing and flag waving counts for much if the audience is not invested in a heroine, capable of rising above her inherited racial prejudice in time for a triumphant finale. This is accomplished through the character of Nellie whose self-proclaimed cockeyed optimism became an emblem for post war American hope and resilience in this show. In a 2008 interview with Charlie Rose, Sher commented on Nellie’s

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function in his revival of *South Pacific*: “Her story teaches us that we not only can acknowledge who we are and how we might be flawed but that we can change and we can be better.”\(^{263}\) Given that Nellie’s story arch is virtually the same in the 1949 original, one can assume Rodgers and Hammerstein would corroborate Sher’s statement.

And according to Cathleen McGuigan, “Part of the genius of Hammerstein and his co-writer Joshua Logan, was they made sure the audience didn’t lose sympathy for the sunny, down-to-earth Nellie, despite her bigotry” (or perhaps narrow-mindedness, in the eyes of a less progressive-minded audience in 1949).\(^{264}\) As discussed earlier, Nellie is “a cockeyed optimist,” “corny as Kansas in August,” “normal as blueberry pie,” and finally, “high as a flag on the 4\(^{th}\) of July.”\(^{265}\) She is the embodiment of the patriotic zeal that characterized post WWII America, and indeed, of America itself. The audience roots for her and trusts in her (and America’s) potential and willingness to change for the better. And she does.

A character with extraordinary depth, Nellie understands that she must be bigger than where she came from. Her earnest rendition of “Cockeyed Optimist” is a direct expression of this sentiment:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{I hear that the human race is falling on its face} \\
\text{And hasn’t very far to go,} \\
\text{But every whippoorwill} \\
\text{Is selling me a bill} \\
\text{And telling me it just ain’t so!}
\end{align*}\]

\[\begin{align*}
\text{I could say life is just a bowl of jello} \\
\text{And appear more intelligent and smart,} \\
\text{But I’m stuck (like a dope)} \\
\text{With a thing called hope,} \\
\text{And I can’t get it out of my heart!}
\end{align*}\]

(9-18. Emphasis added)\(^{266}\)

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\(^{263}\) Bartlett Sher: Lincoln Center, (YouTube video, 7:20), posted by Lincoln Centre Theatre, April 16, 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vd6zDa8tnhQ


\(^{265}\) Rodgers and Hammerstein, *South Pacific*, 7
The implicit meaning here is apparent: Nellie embodies the buoyancy and resilient spirit that characterizes post WWII America. When she finishes the song with “Not this heart,” It is clear that just as she refuses to allow herself to give up hope in the face of war and tragedy, neither had the American people at large.267

There is other evidence as well, that points to what, or who Nellie represents in South Pacific 1949. Particularly significant, is Billis’ choice of words as he attempts to comfort a downtrodden Nellie in Act 2: Scene 4: “What’s the matter, Nellie the nurse? Having diplomatic difficulties with France?”268 The use of the word diplomatic, and the fact that Billis reduces Emile to his country is telling here—pointing to the fact that like Emile, Nellie is in fact a stand-in for her country in this wartime story. As a metaphor for the U.S., a country that makes it part of its mandate to reach out and support its allies through peacekeeping missions, it is fitting that Nellie just happens to be a nurse (See Figures 26, 27).

Fig 26: Nellie the nurse (O’Hara) in South Pacific 2008.269

Fig 27: A triumphant Nellie at the end of “I'm in Love with a Wonderful Guy!”270

268 Rodgers and Hammerstein, South Pacific, 75.
270 http://d3rm69wky8vagu.cloudfront.net/photos/large/137461.jpg (Nellie the nurse)
It makes sense then, that as a symbolic ambassador of the U.S., Nellie would be treated with a disproportionate amount of respect and esteem. Her entrance in Act 1: Scene 3, for instance, elicits an impressive display of admiration from the marines, and contrasts sharply with their treatment of Bloody Mary and the other nurses. When Nellie asks Luther how much she owes him for the shorts he has sewn for her, he gushes, “Oh no, not from you.” And when she casually rests her left hand on Billis’ shoulder, the stage directions indicate that “all men lean in to her in a slow movement” as if to benefit from the residual effects of her affection for Billis.271

In a similar way, Hammerstein’s stage directions help clarify her status in relation to the Marines in Act 1: Scene 5 when she reports to the Island Commander’s office: “Nellie crosses down to sit in a chair. Simultaneously all three men [Brackett, Harbison and Cable] rush to help her sit.”272 This show of obvious and unnecessary admiration and respect goes further to cement Nellie (who is an officer herself), as a fixture of authority and high regard, not unlike the country she represents. It should be noted, however, that there is an additional implication inherent in this gentlemanly gesture. Despite Nellie’s very capable, intelligent nature, the officers’ ‘kind’ gesture, in fact suggests that they view her as their less capable counterpart. Whether this slight was intended, or merely a symptom of the less than progressive gendered expectations of the time period, it is difficult to say.

Despite this, Billis’ uncharacteristically heartfelt pronouncement of his feelings for Nellie in the second act erase any doubts as to the esteem he and his fellow officers have for her character: “Miss Forbush, I would like to have you know that I consider you the most

271 Rodgers and Hammerstein, South Pacific, 19
272 See Footnote 270 above.
wonderful woman in the entire world—even including the fact that you’re an officer. His sentiments here are in fact a tribute to the nobility and physical beauty of not only Nellie, but that which she represents: America itself.

Also significant beyond the limits of the story is Nellie’s unwavering loyalty to her country. She puts blind faith in the U.S. military when asked to spy on the man she loves—even at the cost of risking his integrity and safety. Hammerstein and Logan’s underlying meaning is clear: Nellie has her priorities straight. She values her country and its noble, inherited mission above all, and therefore is in possession of the kind of loyalty, integrity and heroism that characterizes the country she represents.

3. Indictment of Racism Unnerving to American Patriotism

Given the generous dose of patriotic sentiment embedded within *South Pacific* 1949, it is no surprise that Hammerstein was one of Broadway’s most engaged citizens and patriots. However, his involvement with the W.W.B. (*Writer’s War Board*) had a lingering effect on his post war work and in turn, on his determination to present a bold, uncompromising (and therefore morally realist) criticism of U.S. racial prejudice in *South Pacific*. As Eagleton contends, according to the moral realist, “if a statement is true, then the opposite of it can’t be true at the same time, or from another point of view.” And in Hammerstein’s estimation, racial prejudice should be treated accordingly. He believed unequivocally that racism of any kind was not only morally wrong, but also deeply un-American.

One needn’t look further than the many W.W.B. articles co-written by Hammerstein, which state definitely that “U.S. citizens harboring racial prejudice against other Americans

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are enemies of the United states,” for verification of his stance on the issue. Many of the same themes, and even some of the same phrasing is present in much of what Hammerstein wrote in South Pacific. Act 2: Scene 4, for instance, in which the characters climactically confront their racial intolerance, is reminiscent of the way Hammerstein equates American bigotry with the attitudes of the enemy. Emile’s response to Cable’s rendition of “Carefully Taught,” brings this to light: Emile: “This is just the kind of ugliness I was running away from. It has followed me all this way, all these years. Now it has found me.” Emile’s native country of France—the country he escaped was a member of the Axis alliance during the war, and therefore an enemy of the United States. Thus, his observation that the racism he had left behind in France had resurfaced, courtesy of two supposedly exemplary Americans, carries extra weight and harkens back to Hammerstein’s earlier writings with the W.W.B.

From the standpoint of statements found in Hammerstein’s writings, such as, “We believe that our military success must not be jeopardized by bigoted notions about our Allies and fellow citizens,” harboring feelings of racial prejudice is un-American, and thus challenges both Cable and Nellie’s integrity as American patriots. Ironically, it is the prejudice that other Americans (their friends and family back home) have instilled in them, that threatens what Nellie and Cable hold most dear—their sense of national pride and American identity.

We see here, that Hammerstein’s unbending determination to uphold South Pacific’s controversial, moral realist central message and his resolve to present a fundamentally patriotic story were deeply at odds with each other in South Pacific. America’s realist confrontation with its own racial prejudice, while simultaneously fighting an overtly racist

278 Lovensheimer, South Pacific: Paradise Rewritten, 32.
enemy on the Pacific front provides the underlying conflict in *South Pacific*. Hence, this musical’s criticism of American racism was somewhat unnerving to its sense of national identity and pride.

In addition, the subtext of the memorable final tableau, featuring Nellie and de Becque grasping hands under the table as his—now their—Eurasian children look on, suggests that Nellie is prepared to embrace a colonialist lifestyle, not completely foreign to the racial insensitivity she has worked so hard to overcome, and one that seems out of step with American values.

And earlier in the show, when Nellie inquires as to Emile’s political philosophy, the following exchange ensues:

- Emile: Well to begin with, I believe in the free life...in freedom for everyone.
- Nellie: Like the Declaration of Independence?
- Emile: C’est ca. All men are created equal, isn’t it?
- Nellie: Emile, you really believe that?
- Emile: Yes.
- Nellie: Well thank goodness!

The irony of Nellie’s ‘American’ ideals, which conflict with her later actions comes into focus here: She believes that she stands for these principles, but her actions tell a different story. This is a call out to Americans like Nellie, to reexamine themselves—an uncompromising criticism of the prejudice that many Americans had not yet overcome, cloaked in patriotic sentiment. Here, Hammerstein makes use of moral realist ideology—which holds that since the qualities of good and bad, right and wrong are inherent to their objects or actions, and independent of social or political context, they are beyond justification or rationalization. From this realist perspective, since Nellie’s un-American, ingrained prejudice was unquestionably wrong, it needed to be exposed and indicted,

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rather than rationalized, if *South Pacific* had any hope of affecting change among its Audience.

This contradiction between Nellie’s actions and ideals mirrors the disconnect that many Americans felt during this era. In his book, *South Pacific: Paradise Rewritten*, Lovensheimer agrees: “The overall exuberance of postwar U.S. society was tempered by increasing realizations of the country’s institutionalized racial inequality.”

Wendell Willkie, the Republican nominee for president in 1940 brought the issue to the forefront during a public address in 1946: “Our very proclamations of what we are fighting for have rendered our inequalities self-evident.”

The growing realization of this contradiction between American ideology and action threatened the narrative of America—the land of freedom, equality, and opportunity. This somewhat disturbing paradox was not lost on Rogers and Hammerstein, nor was the potential for the kind of criticism they had embedded to disrupt or detract from the otherwise affirming, patriotic message of hope and resilience in *South Pacific*. Thus, it was apparent to both writers that they would need to tread carefully.

**Softening the Indictment of U.S. Prejudice: A Means to an End**

As we explored in the previous chapter, despite (or perhaps in order to make possible) Rogers and Hammerstein’s fight for racial tolerance, their goal was to create a commercial and critical hit, and that goal necessitated a softening, or at least careful handling of the rhetoric in *South Pacific*. Their creation of an enormous commercial success that still packed a subversive thematic punch indicates that they knew exactly what they were doing.

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The result was a work less explicit in its assault on American racism than originally intended, but one which kept its uncompromising, realist underlying criticism in tact, via the use of American patriotism to render the message more palatable. As Lovensheimer, puts it, “Placed in a distant paradise, the racial conflict in *South Pacific* is always cushioned by romance, beautiful music, and the conviction that cockeyed optimists, and by extension—Americans, can overcome their more ominous instincts.” And as he points out,

Early versions of the original *South Pacific* script suggest an occasionally abrasive polemic that is modified in the final version. Changes made in characters’ expressions of intolerance, for instance, or in their criticism of racial prejudice indicate that Rogers and Hammerstein tempered the show’s tone significantly from their first, to their final draft of this story. Many sketches bear a striking similarity to Hammerstein’s aggressive writings as a member of the Writers’ War Board, while final versions of the same scenes are more restrained.

Interracial problems in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific* are minor in comparison to the original *Tales*, by Michener. In Michener’s “‘Fo’ Dolla,” for instance, which served as inspiration for the secondary storyline in *South Pacific*, the American soldiers discuss whether a decent American could have sexual intercourse with a Melanesian, Polynesian, or Tonk girl. This discussion is omitted in the musical. In another omitted scene, the marines teach Bloody Mary to swear in English, despite the fact that they are unwilling to learn her language.

After the out of town opening in Boston, some discrete cuts were made to the show with the help of Emlyn Williams, a British playwright and friend of Logan’s. According to Williams, “Some of Nellie’s prejudicial reaction to Emile’s children was toned down.”

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the previously mentioned diffusion of de Becque’s original indictment of American hypocrisy and prejudice in Act 2: Scene 4 was similarly motivated by the need to salvage the patriotic sentiment within this musical.

In addition, the creators of *South Pacific* deliberately sidestepped America’s primary racial conflict in 1949: the institutionalized inequality of black Americans and white Americans. In fact, the musical is notably silent about the issue with the exception of Cable’s fleeting reference to “people whose skin is a different shade”286 Rodgers and Hammerstein’s focus on a racial binary other than black-white enabled them to make general points about racial intolerance without referencing the most inflammatory intolerance, that between white and black Americans. The conflicts in the show seemed removed from the principal racial conflicts in the U.S. at the time, and were thus more acceptable to a mainstream audience who would have just as soon avoided confronting America’s dark underbelly. In this way, Rodgers and Hammerstein were able to keep the patriotic sentiment woven throughout *South Pacific* 1949 intact, thereby sparing their audience of having to confront questions that were overly unpleasant and therefore counter-productive.

It is not surprising that Rogers and Hammerstein felt it necessary to avoid committing entirely to the morally realist approach of blatantly indicting American racism. The nihilistic alternative of side stepping the depiction of America’s primary form of racism in order to preserve patriotic sentiment that would resonate with audiences of that era was a means to an end. Specifically, it allowed them to ensure positive reception of their clear and uncompromising message, which is an absolute, unchanging realist moral truth: racial intolerance is unacceptable in any time or circumstance.

Moral Nihilist Delivery of a Moral Realist Message

Thus, the desire to create a patriotic, and therefore commercial hit necessitated a slight, but significant softening of Rogers and Hammerstein’s rhetoric. This resulted in a work less aggressive in its assault on racism than originally intended, through means of sidestepping America’s primary racial conflict in 1949, and by modifying earlier versions of the script. Add to this the fact that Rodgers and Hammerstein’s daring criticisms were cleverly embedded within a story (led by the emblematic Nellie Forbush), which mirrored the resilience of American patriotism and triumph over racism, and it is clear that Rogers and Hammerstein made use of a nihilistic approach in order to effectively and strategically convey a morally realist message.

As a challenging and subversive, yet enchanting reflection of/vehicle for the resounding American patriotism of the day, it cannot be a total surprise that South Pacific was met with what are known in show-business parlance as “solid raves” and overwhelming commercial success. As Michel Mok, author of the 1949 article entitled, “Anecdotes: South Pacific” noted, “The critics raided their dictionaries for the biggest superlatives in the language.”287 South Pacific led the way in terms of endorsement deals as well. The elegant scarves pictured below (see Figure 28) were joined by South Pacific lipsticks, ties, perfumes—even fake ticket stubs that people could leave on their coffee tables as status symbols. It was so popular, in fact, that according to the March, 1949 edition of Show of the Month News, additional workers were hired to fill the overwhelming requests for tickets to the show, and an electric cutting machine was employed to speed up the process of envelope opening. The heavy mail was a “formidable tribute to the manner in

which this team [had] won its way into the hearts and minds of millions of play-goers.”\textsuperscript{288}

Such overwhelming commercial and critical success is indicative not only of \textit{South Pacific’s} topicality, charm and artistic brilliance, but also of the appeal of its resilient patriotic sentiment.

This can be no coincidence, considering its vital function within the broader framework of the show.

According to Richard Schechner, there are seven functions of performance: “To entertain, to make something that is beautiful, to mark or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach, persuade or convince, to deal with the sacred and/or demonic.”\textsuperscript{291} The overall function of the original Broadway performance of \textit{South Pacific}

\textsuperscript{288} Herald Brown, “So. Pacific April Show” \textit{Show of the Month News}, 11, no. 5 (1949), 38.
\textsuperscript{290} Mark Bauch. Image courtesy of \textit{The American Musical}. “Opening Night of South Pacific.” Photograph. 1949.
coincides with all of the above, except that it sidesteps any sacred or demonic subject matter. The function of patriotism in this show, however is much more specific. Not only does it render the indictment of racism more palatable, helping the show retain its appeal and commercial success, it reminds us that despite America’s continued challenges surrounding racial inequality, there is much to celebrate, namely its culture, values, and potential to courageously triumph over adversity, as it has proven so many times throughout history.

As former U.S. military men themselves, Rogers and Logan were patriots, and despite their courageous, moral realist confrontation with American prejudice in *South Pacific*, there is no doubt it was also important to them that the show uphold and celebrate what it meant, and means to be American.

4. *Patriotism and Nihilism in South Pacific 2008*

The destructiveness of World War II (whose devastation has gone unmatched by anything seen before in modern warfare) laid the groundwork for contemporary American anti-war sentiment. The dream of America as a standard for moral integrity and stability collapsed during the 70s with race riots, assassinations and Vietnam. The sound and style of musical theatre during the 70s (shows such as *Hair* for example), made *South Pacific* seem hopelessly dated, as did its patriotic “good war” sensibility, which was no longer in vogue as a result of the growing dissatisfaction over U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war.

This ideological shift had implications during the recent war in Iraq, when there was a dwindling of American patriotism due to the suspicions many Americans faced that they were a country at war for reasons that were questionable at best. Because of the contested nature of the Iraq War, America seemed more inclined to admire the selflessness of
Americans fighting in Iraq, than to glorify their heroism. Frank Rich of the *NY Times* sums up this sentiment in his recent article:

> Unlike their counterparts in WWII, [American Soldiers] do their duty despite answering to a commander in chief who has been both reckless and narcissistic. You can’t watch *South Pacific* without meditating on their sacrifices for this blunderer, whose wife last year claimed that ‘no one suffers more’ over Iraq than she and her husband do.\(^{292}\)

In light of this troubled history, Sher understood the importance of acknowledging the catastrophic and paradigm shifting events of the Vietnam War, 9/11, and the War on Iraq in the retelling of this classic story. As Eagleton explains in *After Theory*, “Cultural ideas change with the world they reflect upon. Even the most rarified ideologies have a root in historical reality.”\(^{293}\) As discussed in previous chapters, Sher’s depiction of war and American expansionism is noticeably thornier and more complicated in *South Pacific 2008*, because it is a nihilist reflection of contemporary political sentiment surrounding such issues. Sher’s decision to tell this story from this changed and changing perspective had a ripple effect. Specifically it put a damper on an otherwise remarkably patriotic story.

Sher shed further light on his approach in a 2008 interview with Susan Haskins:

> Looking back down the corridor of time towards the revival, in between there has been Korea, Vietnam and Iraq. All these other experiences of imperial engagements abroad affect how you look at a show like *South Pacific* now. You see Cable differently through the lens of post-traumatic stress. You look at the characters and the desperation of where they are, and at how different we were as a society. All these things were resonating as I read it, and I thought, well it may be good, especially as we’re in sort of a chaotic time as a country, to renew how we feel about who we were and to examine who we are now.\(^{294}\)

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\(^{294}\) *Theatre Talk: South Pacific Then and Now*, (YouTube video, 25:12), from weekly Theatre Talk television show May 8th, 2011, posted by the Kuny TV foundation, May 12, 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55b0sJQdalQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55b0sJQdalQ)
Sher’s thoughts shed new light on Eagleton’s assertion that according to the presiding nihilist philosophy, “our (or in this case society’s) actions create the appropriate states of mind.”

Sher’s decision to take into account this changed perspective in his examination of “who we were and who we are now,” rather than simply rely on or trust in a fixed moral compass was a nihilistic one. His revival is a production that critiques these contemporary issues, rather than glossing over or justifying them, thereby avoiding much of the sentimentality of the original. This is a noteworthy achievement, considering the nostalgia many feel for this classic. However, he was also aware of the multifaceted nature of these memories. In Sher’s own words, “The play summons a sort of memory of being under threat, which is always just beneath the surface of this production.”

Such is the case during the reprise of “Honey Bun,” which, as mentioned previously, Sher utilizes to create a rather chilling effect. The soldiers are familiar with the American tune. At the end of the scene (which depicts members of all forces, ready to embark for a battle they anticipate winning), the martial underscoring crescendos and segues to a chorus of “Honey Bun,” which the soldiers sing while dispersing to their assigned areas. This moment is further intensified in the revival—the underscoring drops out and at the order to “Move out!” the men and women march in formation, facing the audience while singing without accompaniment. They turn in precision and exit as the song fades along with the lights. As Lovensheimer points out, “The Americans, having brought their popular culture to the island, are now taking it to battle.” The juxtaposition of “Honey Bun” with this harsh

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295 Eagleton, After Theory, 135.
reality creates a stunning effect, reminding us that war isn't all roses and patriotic sentiment—there is a sobering and bleak cruelty to it that must be faced.

The Function of Patriotism in Sher’s Revival

It is a marvel then, that this wartime musical manages to emerge again in 2008 with its patriotic sentiment well intact. It is set just three years before Hiroshima and Nagasaki and amidst unmistakable racial prejudice, diametrically opposed to what modern day America claims to prize most: equality and freedom for all. In his recent review, Walter Hixson argues that the resilient patriotism of this revival “could only have come, really, of what must to date remain the most American of all great American wars.”

Similar to the war it depicts, Sher calls South Pacific a great American play. When asked recently why the revival struck such a chord with its contemporary audience, he responded,

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When we did it we were still in the latter part of the Bush administration, and very much embroiled in the War in Iraq. The country was, and continues to be deeply polarized, and I have found that it’s a little bit like a Greek Myth. The Greek myths were told in the theatres in order to remind the Greeks of their history and what held them together and what their values were.\textsuperscript{300}

What’s beautiful about \textit{South Pacific} is that the American musical is so close to our psyche over the last fifty to sixty years. This story is about things that we’d suffered and how we’d overcome things like racism and learned things about ourselves. It’s the kind of story that allows us to celebrate who we are as Americans.\textsuperscript{301}

Sher added fire to this patriotic flame in his 2008 Tony Award acceptance speech:

I think really there are 4 extraordinary artists who I have to thank for this... and they are: Rodgers and Hammerstein, James Michener, and particularly Josh Logan. They were kind of incredible men, because they seemed to teach me particularly, that I am not only an artist, but I am also a citizen, and that the work we do in these musicals is not only important in terms of entertaining people, but in that our country was really a pretty great place, and that perhaps it could be a little better, and perhaps in fact, we could change.\textsuperscript{302}

Here are merely a few of many such examples of patriotic sentiment expressed by Sher in the promotional interviews surrounding the opening of \textit{South Pacific}. And though his sentiments were likely also motivated by a desire to position the revival politically, Sher makes it abundantly clear that he understands the importance and potential theatre has as an institution of national memory and identity.

He lends further support to this argument in a recent interview with Charlie Rose:

The nature of theatre for any community going back to Ancient Greece, or Shakespeare, or Moliere or now, is that it intersects with the national mythology and who we are, so that the story can help you judge where you are as a parent, a friend, a lover, and as a citizen. It’s important that these stories have a national character.\textsuperscript{303}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{300} Bartlett Sher: Lincoln Center,” YouTube video, 7:20, posted by Lincoln Centre Theatre, April 16, 2010. \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vd6zDa8tnhQ}
\item \textsuperscript{301} “Bartlett Sher: Lincoln Center,” Interview, 2010.
\item \textsuperscript{302} \textit{South Pacific: Bartlet Sher Tony Speech}, (YouTube video, 3:30), posted by Lincoln Centre Theatre, September 1, 2008. \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPgd-qaEmVI}
\item \textsuperscript{303} \textit{Theatre Talk: South Pacific Then and Now}, (YouTube video, 25:12), from weekly Theatre Talk television show May 8th, 2011, posted by the Kuny TV foundation, May 12, 2011. \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSb0sJQdalQ}
\end{itemize}
It is clear that Sher understands the reason the creators of *South Pacific* included this patriotic sentiment in the first place, and is aware of its continued importance in light of its function both within the show (to smooth the reception of its moral realist criticisms of American prejudice and imperialism), and within contemporary American society. It makes sense then, that he took measures to prevent its extinction.

**Preserving Patriotism in *South Pacific* 2008**

Consistent with his directing style, Sher took a multi-dimensional approach to accomplishing this. To begin with, he made effective use of staging to establish an air of respect and nobility surrounding the U.S. military officers, the efforts of the American military at large, and by extension, America itself. In Act 1: Scene 3, when Captain Brackett enters amidst a flurry of commotion, Sher’s direction calls for tall soldiers to scramble into position to salute him. Cable’s arrogance diminishes and he is at once subservient and respectful. In a more light hearted moment during “Thanksgiving Follies,” when a dancing nurse adorned with an American flag costume takes the stage, all dancers in view immediately salute her and we hear the music transition to an American military march. The only exception is one bad mannered Seabee, who then shows blatant disrespect to the head nurse and is publically reprimanded by her in the middle of the scene.\(^{304}\)

During Act 2: Scene 7, Sher uses a combination of underscoring, sound effects, staging and acting direction to imbue the moment with patriotic sentiment that is hard to miss. During the pilot’s briefing, Officer Steeves stands in front of a stunningly large, illuminated contour map suspended from the ceiling, and relays the all-important, top-secret information Lt. Cable has just transmitted back to them from his reconnaissance mission.

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The underscoring builds throughout his speech, culminating in a dramatic military march, which is further intensified by sounds of radio static, beeping, and the beating of drums. Steeves then instructs them to “Give those two characters [the now heroic Emile and Cable] a present—a beautiful view of no ships coming back!”305 As the soldiers march out bravely and resolutely to fulfill their assignment, the importance of Cable and Emile’s contribution to the American cause is abundantly clear. The scene explodes with nationalistic fervor and we catch a glimpse of what it meant to risk everything for a noble cause, as a great number of American soldiers did during this hard fought battle on the Pacific front.

Juxtaposed against the following scene, during which Nellie and the officers learn of Cable and Emile’s whereabouts, the former carries even more emotional punch. After listening to Emile report Cable’s death amidst the sound of fighter planes overhead, Nellie begs to know if Emile is likely to survive and then runs off in a panic. Brackett can only respond with, “Don’t you blame Emile de Becque! He’s okay!”306 After witnessing the effect this news has on Nellie, we understand much more clearly the kind of noble sacrifices made by a man of French nationality in this case, that enabled the U.S. to emerge victorious in their fight against Japan, Germany, and against racial prejudice—both at home and abroad.

The final image of the soldiers marching soberly and uniformly off to war and towards a precarious future in Act 2: Scene 11, acts as a powerful visual reminder of the bravery of those who fought for our freedom in WWII—those who risked everything for the cause of liberty and equality. Nellie’s subsequent pronouncement to Emile’s children that “There’s been a big change,” refers not so much to their plans to move off the island, but to the path these military men paved to freedom, equality and victory, and to the fundamental change Nellie has made in her own heart by rising above her deeply ingrained prejudice. As an

305 Rodgers and Hammerstein, *South Pacific*, 87.
emblem for American optimism and hope, her progress paves the way for all of America to do the same.

*Sher’s Use of Nostalgia to “Argue for America’s Greatness”*

Perhaps Sher’s most effective method of preserving patriotic sentiment in *South Pacific* is his intelligent use of nostalgia. By borrowing material and stylistic features from the original, he creates a sense of longing in the audience for America’s past. In this way, Sher relies on the memory of post war patriotism “to argue for America’s Greatness.”

As an interpretive American artist, Sher explained recently that “(He) sees (his) job (as a theatre director), as staying in touch with the national memory that is in these stories.”

Because of the multifaceted nature of these memories, the results are not as simple as they seem. Likewise, the equally multifaceted 2008 revival is celebrated both for its truthful confrontation with these memories, and its nostalgic re-creation of the experience of the original 1949 production.

For instance, during “I’m Gonna Wash That Man,” Sher revives the ceremonial, patriotic feel of *South Pacific* 1949 by heeding the original stage directions almost entirely. As Nellie makes her way back to the shower to literally and symbolically wash that man,—that foreigner, who, as the song says, “rides on separate beams,” and “can’t understand (her)” based on his otherness—out of her hair, the stage directions dictate that the nurses should stand at attention in straight lines on either side of Nellie. She then joins them in a raucous salute before turning around and cleansing herself of her near brush with a foreigner. As the song ends, the girls form two lines behind Nellie (again, consistent with

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the original stage directions), and she “finishes the number with the towel held up like a flag.”309 This picture of American solidarity is no accident, as is evident from Hammerstein’s specific request in the original that the towel be “held up as a symbol of the American flag.”310 The fact that Sher mimics this staging so precisely in the revival is evidence of his deliberate attempt to pay homage to the 1949 production, so as to generate this sense of nostalgia.

The aforementioned iconic final image of the show provides further evidence of this effect. Emile’s return at the end of South Pacific 2008 is identical to the original version. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s original rendition ends with Nellie seated in a chair opposite Emile, the children nestled between them at the head of the table. Emile and Nellie hold hands across the table, gazing at each other in romantic wonder that they have been

310 Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, South Pacific, 37.
united once more. While the look of the surrounding room differs, the poses are precisely the same ones used by Paulo Szot and Mary Martin. This might be because such poses and costumes have a similar visual impact that is consistent across time, but Sher’s deliberate attempt to recreate this scene has another dramatic function—it creates nostalgia in the audience for America’s past (See Figure 32).

The musical staging of “I’m In Love with a Wonderful Guy,” in which Nellie and her comrades enact their patriotism, tells a similar story. Though Nellie’s friends are initially hesitant, even judgmental upon discovering that she has failed to “ride Emile right off [her] range,” they are gradually won over by Nellie’s uninhibited fervor as she unashamedly proclaims her love for him. As the original stage directions dictate, “They wonder about the stage in a mock trance, and one by one, give themselves over with wild abandonment to Nellie, allowing themselves to be swept up in the emotion of the moment.” As they join together, their momentum and emotional fervor builds, mirroring the patriotic sentiment of

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314 Rodgers and Hammerstein, *South Pacific*, 44.
both the characters on stage, and the American audience in both 1949 and 2008. Again, Sher pays homage to Hammerstein’s stage directions, which dictate that the nurses “hold the picture for the finish,” with “Nellie’s arms raised, and the girls in two ragged lines, L and R.”315 This final tableau cements an image of solidarity, mutual respect and support among these American military nurses, and suggests that other Americans endeavor to adopt a similar mind-set.

The 2008 Lincoln Center revival of *South Pacific* mimics the costuming and staging of the original production as well. The most compelling evidence of this can be seen by examining O’Hara’s costume for “Honey Bun,” which appears virtually identical to the attire Martin wore in the original production, with added decoration on the sleeve (see Figures 33, 34). In his recent review, theatre critic Clive Barnes compares O’Hara’s performance of this song with the original, noting that it “offers an uncannily, precise re-creation of [Martin’s] original ‘Honey Bun.’”316

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Particularly powerful in its ability to transport its audience to the patriotic post war era is music, and that of *South Pacific* delivers in this regard. Scott Lehrer deserves credit for a sound mix that allows every note of Richard Rodgers’ lush, romantic score (which introduced standards of the American songbook like “Some Enchanted Evening,” “Younger than Springtime” and “Wonderful Guy”), to fill the theatre with brilliant clarity and resonate powerfully with its audience. The forty member cast of this show is matched by a now, almost unheard of thirty piece orchestra, which indicates just how determined and dedicated the Lincoln Center Theater was to do right by this classic American story of heroism, self-discovery and triumph over evil.

Bartlett Sher describes the orchestral music in this production, as “literally, physically and emotionally overwhelming. The audience opens up and connects to being an American, and they are refreshed by the experience.”\(^{319}\) And according to Jesse Hamlin of the San Francisco Chronicle, “Rodgers and Hammerstein were such great writers, they captured not only the joyful sound of who we were, but also the sound of the struggles of who we were.”\(^{320}\)

In addition, Sher creates nostalgia with his strategic use of a convention Josh Logan established in *South Pacific 1949*. He cleverly projects the following passage (taken directly from Michener’s *Tales*), on a scrim to open and close the show:

> They will live a long time, these men of the South Pacific. They had an American quality. They, like their victories, will be remembered as long as our generation lives. After that, like the men of the Confederacy, they will become strangers. Longer and longer shadows will obscure them, until their Guadalcanal sounds distant on the ear like Shiloh and Valley Forge.\(^{321}\)

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\(^{319}\) Bartlett Sher: Lincoln Center, (YouTube video, 7:20), posted by Lincoln Centre Theatre, April 16, 2010. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vd6zDa8nhQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vd6zDa8nhQ)


This passage seems to create a context in which to read the rest of the production: Namely (as Scott Garbacz articulates in his recent review), it “works to position South Pacific as a part of American history, making it a cultural document through which we can find and remind ourselves of our American values.”

In the words of Schechner, “One of the differences between life and art is that in art, we do not experience the event itself but its representation.” The creators of South Pacific chose to inject a healthy measure of patriotism in their carefully measured representation of America’s participation in both WWII and racial prejudice, for a specific end.

Sher utilized patriotic sentiment and American theatrical convention in South Pacific in an attempt to soften the much less palatable criticism of a homegrown variety of prejudice and imperialism, to ensure its positive reception by both audiences and critics alike. His reflection and justification of these complicated issues, as well as his consideration of our modern day perspective on them evidences his use of a nihilistic approach to carry off a challenging, progressive ideology.

By mirroring both the decline, and yet the remarkable resilience of American patriotism in response to such catastrophic events as the Vietnam War, the War on Iraq and 9/11, Sher reminds us of those courageous and remarkable American patriots who came before. He tells of their tenacity, nobility and determination to triumph in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. He reminds us what it is to be American.

Since its inception in the late nineteenth century, musical theatre has been a critical tool for the distribution of ideas and the creation of a national sense of unity and purpose in America. “Most of us don’t know people who are in Iraq,” Sher recently remarked. “Most of us don’t have a direct engagement of the experience of it. Doing South Pacific is a way of

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saying, this is a mirror of who we are as Americans. Do we have a shared experience we can refer to?"\textsuperscript{324}

**Conclusion**

Both productions of *South Pacific* helped to articulate a similar national agenda, although they responded to and were shaped by notably different socio-political conditions. The original took a nihilist approach in order to reach a realist conclusion. It was reflective of its cultural moment (a time of unrivaled post war optimism and nationalism), and it used a distinctly patriotic narrative—America’s triumph over the forces of evil—as a vehicle with which to soften the delivery of its uncompromising message: A daring, moral realist indictment of the ironically un-American practice of racial discrimination.

Sher’s revival on the other hand, is primarily nihilist in both form and content. It contains a more complex, sober presentation of war, prejudice and American expansionism—one which merely corroborates America’s contemporary stance on these issues, rather than confronting a very sunny, nationalistic society’s dark underbelly, as did the original. And yet, it still manages to retain a good measure of patriotism. Sher accomplishes this masterfully, by offering up an intelligent, archival tribute to a past moment in American cultural history, which can be read with appreciative nostalgia.

But that is not all Sher accomplishes in the 2008 revival. He invigorates *South Pacific* for contemporary purposes, utilizing the production’s theatricality to call attention to the musical’s modern day political resonance. Racial tension and an uneasy U.S. presence in

Southeast Asia are both explored unapologetically in this revival, however less courageous it is to do so in a modern-day political context.

And just as Sher’s nihilist confrontation with these issues reflects an evolved, more complex political outlook, along with the dwindling American patriotism that has accompanied it, this revival mirrors the resiliency and resurgence of the same patriotism that arose post 9/11. Here is a case of art imitating life. Just as Sher found a way to preserve a measure of patriotic sentiment in *South Pacific*, despite his confrontation with some very un-American U.S. history, the American people have shown a similar resiliency by acknowledging and rising above their own prejudices. In so doing, they have discovered what it is about being American that is worth celebrating.
Chapter V

Conclusion: The Evolution of Realism to Nihilism in *South Pacific*

In his 1793 autobiography, or ‘memoirs,’ as he referred to it, Benjamin Franklin mused about the convenience of the philosophy we’ve since come to classify as moral nihilism, after having found justification for his decision to abandon his vegetarian diet: “So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do.”

Convenient indeed. Unfortunately however, this prevailing school of ethics is not always as effectual as it is practical. According to Eagleton, moral nihilism has “served western civilization tolerably well in these post metaphysical times,” but this may not always be the case. The problem with examining moral ideas such as, say freedom and justice from a cultural and historical standpoint (rather than a universal human rights standpoint), is that we are faced with the issues surrounding moral relativism. What if your culture finds nothing wrong with slavery? Does this make it acceptable? Should Americans, or any first world citizens for that matter, turn a blind eye to the foreign underclass of construction workers who have almost singlehandedly built the city of Dubai (the glittering monument to the Arab enterprise), while being treated no better than modern day slaves—without the freedom to leave, or even their most basic needs met? Should we attempt to understand cannibals rather than try to change them? If so, how about drug traffickers? Or serial killers for that matter?

As Eagleton maintains, postmodern theory has been hugely evasive on matters such as these, when it has dealt with them at all. He believes, however, that the period when this

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was more or less acceptable may be coming to an end. “It becomes harder to justify your form of life in such laid-back, off the cuff terms when it has launched upon a new extremist, globally aggressive phase. The more predatory and corrupt capitalism grows, the less easily it can mount convincing defenses of its way of life; yet in the face of the rising political hostility caused by its expanding ambitions, the more urgently it needs to do so!”

I too, have considerable reservations about this most recent trend in moral philosophy. And yet despite its limitations, I must concede that there are elements of this postmodern code of ethics that are worthwhile and even vital in today’s society. If moral means exploring the texture and quality of human behavior as thoroughly and sensitively as one can, we certainly cannot accomplish it by abstracting men and women from their cultural or political surroundings. Aristotle had the right idea when he insisted that morality and politics must necessarily be related. Perspective, as well as cultural and political context must be considered. We must contemplate the socio-political circumstances that factor into a specific decision, action, or way of life. Indeed, if, as Eagleton contends, theory means “a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions,” it remains as essential as ever.

And yet, I believe that as parents, grandparents, teachers, employers, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters—as members of the human race, we must think carefully about the function that our reflective, ever-shifting code of ethics plays in our lives and in society at large, and take a hard look at what the consequences of employing such a conveniently reflective moral philosophy might be. Having attempted to do so myself, it is my firm belief that all of us—as individuals and as a society—would benefit from at least a partial

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resuscitation of the now outmoded code of ethics, moral realism, which dictates that if a statement is true, than the opposite of it cannot be true at the same time or from another point of view. When victims of racism denounce it as evil, for example, they are not, as Eagleton writes, “simply expressing how they feel, but rather making a statement about the way things are.” In short, moral realism claims that that which is true, is “made true by objective features of the world,” regardless of subjective opinion.\textsuperscript{331}

In contrast to this, today’s brand of “morality,” which ought to be a solid anchor—a guiding force in our lives—can no longer be depended upon. Our belief systems are in a constant state of flux, “changing and warping with the tides of fashion and modern day cultural theory,” Eagleton points out. There must be hard and fast moral laws to anchor us amidst these relentless tides of change. In the absence of this stabilizing force, we are merely products of our environment—of our cultural and political upbringing. Regardless of whether these laws were given by God or are simply facts of the natural world, I believe that without a mutually agreed upon, unwavering moral code we are but leaves tossed in the wind—in which case—how can we trust that we will not lose our footing, our vision of who we want to be as members of society attempting to navigate a course in a complicated, ever changing world? If the definition of what qualifies as good and right is ever changing, or indeed doesn’t truly exist (according to the postmodern nihilist), how can we hope to achieve it? What path must we take and how can we ensure we don’t stray from that path, when our morality merely reflects, rather than prescribes our actions?

Furthermore, why should we concern ourselves with this theoretical discussion of morality and metaphysics in the first place, when we as individuals are so powerless to affect, or even slow the winds of moral change? Because, as moderately rational, dignified

\textsuperscript{331} Terry Eagleton, \textit{After Theory}, (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 2
members of society, we owe it to ourselves to know and seek after the truth. And that includes, as Eagleton contends, “knowing the truth about truth.” But also, he argues, because “if the relativist is right, then truth is emptied of much of its value.”

“Truth” be told, moral relativism is really a way of explaining away conflict. “If what’s good and true is merely relative, then political radicals can no longer argue that it is irrefutably true that women are oppressed or that the planet earth is being poisoned by corporate greed.” The champions of enlightenment are right: truth indeed exists.

1. Moral Realism in South Pacific 1949

My analysis of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s South Pacific 1949 has brought me to the conclusion that for better or worse, this innovative writing team made use of moral realist philosophy in two principle ways: first, in their use of an “us vs. them,” right vs. wrong ideology surrounding America’s role in WWII and second, in their presentation of a simplistic, glorified, romanticized view of a very complicated event in order to justify and smooth over the controversial decisions made by the U.S. government at the end of the war.

Consistent with moral realism, South Pacific 1949 instructed people on the rules of behavior “in a world where America knew best and good triumphed over evil,” free of complications or cynicism. And although thorny issues were not entirely skirted in the original production, bright colors, romance, loveable characterizations and American patriotism made them far more palatable (thus encouraging the audience to interpret these controversial events “properly”). Essentially, this realist approach was used as a method of

333 Terry Eagleton, After Theory, 109.
334 Terry Eagleton, After Theory, 131.
ducking hard political questions surrounding American conduct in the war, by reducing them to the personal, or emotional.

This romantic, glorified depiction of war was feasible because Americans were able to maintain a certain physical, and therefore emotional distance from WWII due to the advent of military technology and the fact that the war was not being fought on home turf. In addition, *South Pacific* was written and produced during a recession, and Rodgers and Hammerstein felt pressure that it be a commercial success. In order to ensure it would resonate with a post WWII America, it needed to be consistent with moral realism, society’s most accepted school of moral philosophy at the time.

Rodgers and Hammerstein also utilized a moral realist approach in their courageous handling of racial prejudice, as well as their less than courageous justification of American imperialism, although an argument can be made that their decision to scale back (slightly) the very controversial anti-prejudice message in *South Pacific* is reminiscent of nihilist philosophy as well.

The central message of *South Pacific*, “If you see something good in this ugly world across a crowded room (or in a hut on Bali Ha’i), seize it before it disappears,” works on two levels.\(^{335}\) First, it is an important message within the context of the central love story, and second, and perhaps less justifiably, it acts as a compelling argument for an imperialistic nation. Similar to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s promotion of racial tolerance, their justification of American imperialism was precise and sure handed, and in this way, a reflection of moral realist philosophy. As mentioned previously, this justification was needed as a result of Roosevelt’s expansionist policies at the time (the American Annexation of Hawai’i, the Philippines, etc). However it should be noted that because the

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central message did indeed validate, and was a reflection of the U.S.’s imperialist policy, it also qualifies as an example of moral nihilism.

With regards to racial prejudice, however, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific* put moral realism to work in no uncertain terms. Its two cross cultural love stories made an overt plea for racial tolerance, questioning American values boldly and unmistakably—a radical, controversial message for its day. By refusing to merely reflect or justify society’s stance on the issue, this groundbreaking story took a courageous stand against racism, if not imperialism, despite the anticipated controversy. Analyzing the function of U.S. patriotism in *South Pacific* 1949 becomes a little more complicated. Essentially, Rodgers and Hammerstein used a moral nihilist approach in order to deliver a fundamentally moral realist message of American patriotism: one that focused on America’s triumph of good over evil (in this case prejudice, and Japan) without irony or skepticism.

Their approach was nihilist in that as previously mentioned, it softened the indictment of American prejudice ever so slightly (the removal of de Becque’s speech as well as the black/white binary accomplished this) yet retained the crux of it, so that they could acknowledge and celebrate Nellie’s (and America’s) triumph over it by the time the curtain fell. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s unapologetic indictment of racial discrimination made it all the more important for them to keep a healthy measure of patriotism in tact in the production, since it rendered the controversial message more palatable and helped retain the show’s commercial and critical appeal. One could also argue that this production was nihilist, in as much as it was a reflection of American patriotism and the grand narrative of America, which was just hitting its stride by opening night.

Despite this arguably nihilist approach, the underlying message itself was unmistakably moral realist. Complex characters like Nellie (the cock-eyed optimist) and
Cable (the war hero) personified the simple, unmistakable hope, courage and resilience that exemplified post WWII America. And the show all but preached the grand narrative that we have become so familiar with: America, as a nation with a noble creed—to overcome all forces of evil (racial prejudice and the Axis powers). This presupposes of course—in true realist fashion—that America must, by extension be altogether good.

Thus, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s South Pacific helped define and perpetuate the notion of a national culture—one that was consistent with the kind of simplicity, clarity, and consistency that sets moral realism apart from today’s counterpart.

2. Moral Nihilism in the South Pacific Revival

In The Stage Life of Props, Andrew Sofer explains that props aren’t merely accessories; they are time machines—concrete devices used by playwrights to animate stage action and revitalize dramatic form. Therefore, in a sense the function of the stage property duplicates that of theatre itself: “To bring dead images back to life, but with a twist.” Likewise, South Pacific 1949 was resurrected in 2008 with a very deliberate, carefully devised twist. At first glance it can be read with appreciative nostalgia and fondness for a sunnier, simpler era. But Sher’s reincarnation ventures much further than that. Racial tension, an uneasy U.S. presence in Southeast Asia, and uncertainty about who and what is American in the face of an ugly, unrelenting war are all present in this deceptively nostalgic revival. Sher’s version is deceptive, in the sense that its’ carefully measured dose of war-time reality is offset by an equal helping of nostalgia, which acts as a sort of balm ensuring a smooth reception by today’s audiences, who have become disillusioned after having lived through the sobering Vietnam, Korea, and Iraq wars.

South Pacific 2008 reintroduces into the script dialogue that was far more problematic in 1949 than it is today, and while Sher’s restoration does not change the work’s central message, it puts it in terms appropriate for early twenty-first century Americans. Specifically, it frames its message in terms of moral nihilist philosophy, which, as I’ve established, is reflective rather than prescriptive of behavior, and contingent on one’s cultural and political perspective.

When applied to South Pacific 2008, this nihilist approach meant allowing the audience to glimpse the harsh reality of war, while leaving room for a sense of moral justification and therefore national pride, given the U.S.’s untidy involvement in the war with Iraq—an obvious elephant in the room at the time. Sher was well aware of the fact that if he could appease his audience and retain a spirit of national pride in the piece, the production stood a fighting chance of achieving commercial, as well as critical success. It is important to note, that both versions of South Pacific, in fact subscribe to moral nihilism in the sense that both were reflective of their audience’s current political/moral ideologies. The revival takes it much further, however, using the production elements as a means to express a conflicted, non-committal message consistent with current political philosophy, and therefore moral nihilism.

South Pacific 2008’s presentation of prejudice and American imperialism is similarly reflective (rather than prescriptive) in nature, and as such, also a function of nihilism. The revival offers up the same anti-prejudice message, however in today’s progressive political climate it fails to qualify as the bold statement it once was. It is now merely reflective of society, thus its function has changed; it has become a theme that resonates with, rather than ruffles, a modern day, liberal minded audience. No longer does it risk alienating its

viewers in the name of taking a courageous stand for what is inherently right, regardless of its audience’s political or cultural perspective, as the realist original did.

And although the revival sheds darker, more complicated light on this story, it is careful to match today’s evolved, anti-imperialist stance on the issue, stride by stride, stopping just short of alienating its audience, who are perhaps not as enlightened when it comes to racial segregation and imperialism as they think they are. American imperialism is hardly extinct today, and many large cities in the Southern U.S. remain remarkably segregated. Thus, even in today’s liberal political climate, Sher shies away from committing fully to *South Pacific’s* potentially progressive message, in true nihilist form. His careful stance reflects the fact that today’s society hasn’t yet embraced a total commitment to change when it comes to these, still controversial topics.

Considering this production’s acknowledgement of the hard realities of war and continued issues with U.S. imperialism and prejudice, it is a marvel that Sher manages to retain a healthy measure of American patriotism in the production. He does, however, largely with the help of his clever use of nostalgia to argue for America’s Greatness. His ability to retain this patriotic sentiment mirrors the resilience of present day U.S. patriotism—despite complications such as the controversy surrounding the U.S.’s questionable role in the Iraq war—and as such is again, a function of moral nihilism. The sixty-year lapse from 1949 to 2008 means that audiences related to each production of *South Pacific* in decidedly different ways. The revival accounts for this, walking a carefully calculated line—one that flirts with anti-war ideology, while simultaneously expressing hope that America will rise triumphantly above whatever enemies or moral challenges she may face.

Given the fact that we live in a society that is by and large anti-war and anti-prejudice,
it is surprising and telling that this revival is as compromising as it is. Consciously or unconsciously, Sher employed tenants of moral nihilist philosophy in his unique and thoughtful retelling of *South Pacific*. Rather than boldly siding with his popular audience, he felt it necessary to tow the line—to strike a balance between the interests of his right leaning investors, and the political leanings of his much more liberal minded audience. Rather than following in the footsteps of the productive team of *South Pacific* 1949 and taking an undaunted, virtually unwavering, moral realist stand, consequences be damned, he carefully considered the socio-political context of his post war production and constructed a unique version of the show that would benefit everyone involved, investors, creative producers and spectators alike. Questions about the morality of war, mixed race relationships, the loss of lives and the way America engages with the world continue to resonate today, only in a much different, “evolved,” way, and true to moral nihilist philosophy, this production is a careful “reflection” of that.

Not that what Sher did was reprehensible or weak. On the contrary, his revival masterfully cites the original without succumbing to it—inviting audiences to consider their own contemporary moment. Its just that the gingerly way he approached it, the perfect balance he struck between anti and pro-war philosophies, between boldly rejecting and exposing U.S. expansionism and the residual racial prejudice that continues to haunt the nation, and merely frowning upon it, is a sign of the times. It is typical of the often compromising, politically correct, nihilistic code of ethics that has become so prevalent in this post modernist era.

It is hardly surprising then, in light of this ever so cautious mounting of the revival, that it was as well received as it was. So much so in fact, that in Lovensheimer’s estimation and that of many others, this reconceived, carefully “updated version of *South Pacific*
remains, at least in musical theatre terms, paradise.”

3. Musical Theatre as an Instrument to Mold Public Perceptions

What impact then, has this increasingly nihilistic, commercial and critical powerhouse of a musical had on America’s perception of war, prejudice, imperialism, and more broadly, on the state of modern day morality? Is theatre, as Aristotle tells us, “the most perfect artistic form of coercion?” Or was it, particularly in its musical form, born merely to divert and entertain? There is nothing wrong with simply enjoying musical productions such as *South Pacific* for what they are, and aren’t. However the politics and philosophies—moral or otherwise that they promote—indeed, their ability to promote them at all, deserves some critical attention.

It is difficult to dispute that since its beginning, theatre has been not only a reflection of cultural norms and traditions, but a vital instrument for the molding of shared perceptions. But in this modern age of commercialism, corporate greed and moral nihilist philosophy, can we still claim this to be the case? The unfortunate truth is that theatre, and specifically musical theatre is a medium that has become increasingly less effective as an instrument of social and political change as time has gone by and the mass media has become the dominant form of entertainment. Contemporary theatre most often functions to imitate, rather than construct political sentiment and culture, and as such, operates similarly to moral nihilism, which serves a similar function—to reflect, rather than prescribe action and morality in modern day society. Like moral nihilism, theatre of today—including of course, my topic of study here, *South Pacific*—tends to change with the world it reflects upon, and the reflection does not often precede the action or dictate it to the extent

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that it used to. Also reminiscent of modern day morality, contemporary theatre often equates morality with repression and antiquated notions of dogmatic, authoritarian, often irrelevant restrictions. Consistent with nihilism, theatre tends to celebrate the perceived complexity and multidimensionality of ethics, as well. Things can be immoral only from certain perspectives. Truth is only truth for us, and it doesn’t often hold up across time or circumstance (consider David Hare’s *Stuff Happens*, for instance). Since, as Eagleton contends, there are no absolute force to values, there can be no knock down arguments against them.\(^\text{340}\)

In a sense, we are at the mercy of whatever constantly changing, conveniently reflective moral code deems to be in fashion. And, given the likelihood that such delineations of right and wrong will inevitably morph and change according to what is convenient or profitable, they lose legitimacy, and much of their meaning. As Eagleton explains, current moral philosophy holds that “Moral values which state what you ought to do are impressively idealistic, but too blatantly at odds with your behavior. Moral values which *reflect* what you actually do are far more plausible, but only at the cost of no longer serving to legitimate your activity.”\(^\text{341}\)

Musical theatre has become an expression of our current state of morality and as such, it often perpetuates or recycles the same notions. In doing so, it strips itself of much of its validity in terms of its ability to bring about legitimate, meaningful change and uphold uncompromising values of right and wrong. Thus, unlike *South Pacific* 1949, which took a brave, subversive moral stand, the distinctly relativist revival is more in line with the somewhat less noble function Aristotle attached to the theatre. He saw theatre as a coercive system whose basic task is the purgation of all antisocial elements—that which is not in line

\(^{341}\) Eagleton, *After Theory*, 152.
with what is presently politically correct, or en-vogue from a moral or political standpoint. Aristotle maintained that his system was limited; it could not be used by revolutionary groups during revolutionary periods, because the social ethos is not clearly defined. “The character’s ethos will not find a clear social ethos it can confront.”

In this modern era marked by postmodernism and moral nihilism, when absolute truth is all but dismissed, morality has become relative, and there are few clear, consistent delineations of right and wrong. Thus, although we are not in the midst of a revolution, theatre nevertheless loses much of its power to challenge or sustain a hegemony that in many ways, doesn’t exist. Where there is no clearly defined, stable belief system, there can be no means of subverting or sustaining it.

4. Musical Theatre: Limited—but Enlightening Entertainment

However restricted the political influence of theatre, and specifically musical theatre might be, it remains a valuable, uniquely American form of artistic expression with much to offer beyond mere entertainment. While it is impossible to provide indisputable proof of this assertion, there are many who substantiate my claim. The following is a particularly insightful response to a recent Huffington Post review of South Pacific 2008.

The brilliance of our early musicals lies in their subversiveness. An American culture weaned on glossy and mindless Gershwin and Porter fantasies gave way to a stunning transitional art form complete with strong libretti, exquisite music/lyrics, glorious sets/costumes, and meaningful direction and choreography. The sly and subtle social commentaries embedded in these musicals: spousal abuse and class struggle in Carousel; questions of racism, assimilation, imperialism in Flower Drum Song, South Pacific and The King and I; and the rise of fascism in Austria in The Sound of Music. These legitimate works of art brilliantly caught the imagination of an America still reeling from World War II and not especially receptive to some of the darker narratives that needed to be told. In many ways it fell to our musical theatre to further the dialogue. With “a spoonful of sugar” they gave voice to profoundly important issues,

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identifying the socio-economic and political challenges facing a multicultural nation still finding its collective voice in a modern context. You may focus on the diminishment of these works through the lens of time. I choose to remain astonished at their insight, power and continued relevance.\textsuperscript{343}

The reprise of \textit{Honey Bun}, a minor but revealing musical number at the top of the second act of \textit{South Pacific}, serves as an additional reminder of the potential impact musical theatre can have on an audience. While contemporary musicals, even those as critically acclaimed as \textit{South Pacific}, might not provide the most in-depth, ground breaking commentary on our history, their effect on an audience can be immeasurable and long-lasting. As Nellie proclaimed when introducing her holiday musical revue to her captive community, “Shows like this keep us going”\textsuperscript{344} (See Figure 35).

Nellie’s audiences, then and now, can’t help but be affected and transported by the theatrical experience in ways that are often difficult to explain. Michener’s description of the South Pacific (displayed on the scrim at the top of the show) concedes that it was “lovely beyond description,” which seems fitting when applied to a genre that has the unique ability to communicate in a powerful way, that which cannot be expressed, or captured with words alone.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{NellieForbushSouthPacificFilm.png}
\caption{Nellie Forbush (Mitzi Gaynor) in the \textit{South Pacific} Film c. 1958: “Shows like this help keep us going...”\textsuperscript{345}}
\end{figure}

What then, of the American musical’s limited scope of influence when compared to the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{343} Rick Ayers, “South Pacific: Musical Orientalism,” \textit{Huffington Post}, May 1, 2008
\item \textsuperscript{344} Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, \textit{South Pacific}, (New York: Williamson Music Inc, 1949), 70.
\item \textsuperscript{345} Mitzi Gaynor. \textit{South Pacific} Film, (Sentinel archive photo) Photograph. 1958.
\end{itemize}
increasingly dominant mass media of today? Let us refer back to Martin Esslin’s argument, that it is on the living stage that the actors and playwrights of the mass media are trained and gain their experience, and where the material of the mass media is tested. He explains,

The avant-garde of the theatre today is, more likely than not, the main influence on the mass media of tomorrow—which shapes a great deal of the thought and feeling of people throughout the western world. The theatre, an art more broadly based than poetry or abstract painting, without being, like the mass media, the collective product of corporations, is the point of intersection where the deeper trends of changing thought first reach a larger public.

It should be noted also, that despite the fact that the trend on Broadway in recent years has tended to spring largely from commercial motives (and indeed, contrary to Esslin’s argument, would often not be possible without the backing of corporations), there is much more to the story. As David Savran points out in his article, “The Do-Re-Mi of Musical Theatre Historiography,” unlike opera, which has occupied a clearly defined, highbrow niche among forms of cultural practice, musical theatre has always been a “bastard art—the illegitimate offspring of art and commerce, Carnegie Hall and Tin Pan Alley... and as such, enjoys the privileged status as a barometer of cultural politics, as well as social and class politics.”

This results from the fact that it reaches an international audience with its often progressive, and almost always current political message. As such, the American musical has evolved into a genre characterized by its exploration of timely and demanding themes and techniques, as well as engaging production values, which not only co-exist, but also interact and compliment each other. Each is integral to the other’s success. It is entertainment for the people and of the people—a reflection of our time, as well as our

history. By way of example, musicals cover a wide range of themes and topics, including political scandals, war, strikes, gang warfare, and racial tensions, to name a few. Such themes are influenced by commerce, fashion, audience taste, and determined by contemporary politics.

Thankfully, there still exists among the ranks of Disney mega-musicals and big-ticket revivals, a handful of original or artfully re-imagined musicals that seem to spring from a desire to educate, enlighten, or fight a cause that needs to be fought, rather than solely from a desire to create a large profit margin. Consider the 2009 Tony Award-winning musical, Next To Normal. An original book and score, it was described by Rolling Stone as “A groundbreaking musical that pushes Broadway in new directions.”

Next to Normal tells the story of a seemingly typical American mother coping with severe bipolar disorder, and the ways her illness affects her family. Addressing a range of gritty issues including drug abuse, suicide, and ethics in modern psychiatry, this show was described by Brantley of the New York Times as, “A brave, breathtaking piece of theatre...much more than a feel-good musical, it is a feel-everything musical.”

And the Color Purple, nominated for ten Tony Awards in 2006, is a provocative and inspiring account of the feminist evolution of an African American woman who turns to God and her estranged missionary sister for refuge from physical and emotional abuse. These are but two of many evocative pieces of contemporary theatre, whose purpose and contribution seem to transcend mere commerce and amusement. Other such examples include: Once, (2012), Memphis (2009), In the Heights (2008), Billy Elliott (2007), Spring Awakening (2006), and The Light in the Piazza (2005) to name just a few.

349 Peter Traverse, “Next to Normal Proves that Rock is Thriving on Broadway,” Rolling Stone Movies and TV, April 16, 2008.
To be sure, the power for political influence found within musical theatre is often underestimated. Aristotle insists that tragedy, poetry and theatre are not political. But his own politics tell us otherwise. Augusto Boal agrees with this assertion: “Aristotle was wrong. We have to be better friends of reality. All of man’s activities including, of course, all the arts—especially theatre, are political and theatre is the most perfect artistic form of coercion.”351 In contrast to William Shakespeare’s Hamlet, who claims that “Theatre is like a mirror that reflects our virtues and defects equally,”352 Boal saw theatre as a “mirror in which one can reach in to change reality and to transform it.”353

Part of musical theatre’s power for influence, notes Margaret Werry, lies in the fact that “[it] has the unique capacity to create a relation among strangers (a social imaginary) in the act of addressing a public which is constituted as a public in the act of acknowledging that address. It is, then, a form of ‘poetic world-making’ that works across the terrain of fantasy and materiality.”354 Is it possible that musical theatre could be more than simply an instrument of representational stabilization? Could it, in fact, act as a ‘machine of circulation’ that as Werry argues, “produces the social imaginaries that characterize global modernity”?355 I can’t help but agree with Werry’s assertion that this form of commercial theatre is not confined to politically salient signification, although I believe that is a crucial part of its function. There are many who would endorse Werry’s argument, that “Together, theatre and tourism form a distinctive modality of symbolic experience that, as opposed to merely representing, is materially constitutive of the worlds it imagines, precisely through

351 Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed (London: Pluto Press, 1979), 38
353 Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed (London: Pluto Press, 1979), 27
355 Werry, Theatre Journal, 381.
its capacity to generate circulatory momentum.”

Despite its limitations, I remain convinced of musical theatre’s power for influence and for good—even if it does not accomplish everything it once did, or all it sets out to do now. The value of musical theatre does not necessarily lie in its capacity to dictate morality and behavior, subvert and challenge contemporary politics and cultural norms, or underscore what unifies human beings, but rather, as Andrea Most argues in her recent article, in its potential to “emphasize their differences and to create bridges between them.”

South Pacific reaches its audience in a powerful way, but by different means than expected. It exemplifies what Stacy Wolf terms, “the ideological project of musical theatre in the United States in the mid-twentieth century: ”to use the heterosexual couple’s journey from enemies to lovers as a representation of the bridging of cultural and political differences in American culture.”

Nowhere is this more applicable than in South Pacific’s central love story.

It’s rare, Sher observed in a 2009 interview, ”When all Americans, whether Democrat or Republican, from here or from there, can hear a story that kind of pulls together the noble and good things we did together, where we showed that we could change, we could be different, and we could be united in our differences. And I think that’s what this story does. Stories in the theater can help remind us of who we are and what our potential is as a society.”

Sher argues that South Pacific functions as far more than a cultural artifact. “The potential inherent in any classic,” he affirms, “Is it can return to us from our own past, to

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359 Jesse Hamlin, “South Pacific Coasts on Contemporary Currents,” San Francisco Gate, Sept 20, 2009
give us lessons about the future.”

If that is what contemporary musical theatre is capable of, perhaps it is enough. Despite its limitations, *South Pacific* exemplifies the kind of theatre that is capable of impacting those who experience it in a meaningful and lasting way. This Rogers and Hammerstein classic is merely one of countless, remarkable works of art that reaffirm to all theatre goers alike, that despite its limitations amidst the persistent tides of economic, political and moral change, one thing remains irrefutably true: there will always be an important place carved out for America’s unique art form, musical theatre, with its extraordinary potential to intermingle entertainment and enlightenment in a seamless, profound and memorable way.

Indeed, we would do well to take heed of Henry James’ counsel, “If one held the belief that there is any very intimate relation between the stage as it stands in this country, and the general cause of American civilization, it would be more than our privilege, it would be our duty as vigilant observers, to keep an attentive eye upon the theatres.”

I for one am inclined to believe.

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Fig. 18. “My Girl Back Home, South Pacific.” 2009. Image courtesy of Lincoln Centre Theatre. http://i1.ytimg.com/vi/hjpbLmZg7xU/hqdefault.jpg

Fig. 19. “Western Union Telegram.” 1949. Image available from: The Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.


Fig. 32. Masterworks Broadway Image. Kelli O’Hara and Paul Szot. Photograph. 2008.

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