

'South Pacific' breezes

LOOK presents classic musical with outstanding cast

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When it comes to great American musicals, Light Opera Oklahoma likes to play things straight.

The company is known for taking a few artful liberties with some of the shows it presents, such as its traditional Gilbert & Sullivan offering. Such fiddling is understandable, even welcome in operettas like "The Sorcerer" or "Iolanthe," where the humor and plot hinge on events and attitudes long forgotten.

But when LOOK stages something like Rodgers and Hammerstein's "South Pacific," which opened Friday at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center, there is nary a hint of revising or updating or re-imagining or "making relevant" or any of those terms some directors like to use to justify bending someone else's creation to their will.

A show such as "South Pacific" doesn't need to be re-thought — it simply needs to be presented with all skill and talent and passion and understanding that its cast and crew can muster.

As it was Friday in the PAC's Williams Theatre, the first of some 13 performances the company will give of this prize-winning classic tale of love beset by the violence of World War II and the poison of bigotry.

Two love stories, actually. One involves a middle-aged Frenchman Emile de Becque (Ron Loyd) falling for an American nurse Nellie Forbush (Michelle Jennings) who is stationed on the island where de Becque has established a successful plantation.

The other concerns another newcomer to the island, Lt. Joe Cable (Alexander Ross), a Marine assigned to discover a weakness in the Japanese defenses on nearby islands. He becomes smitten with Liat (Ayumi Manabe), the daughter of the local madam/entrepreneur Bloody Mary (April Golliver).

In spite of the depth of their feelings, Nellie and Cable can't bring themselves to put aside the prejudices that have become ingrained in them. De Becque's previous relationship with a Polynesian woman is something Nellie can't deal with, while Cable's sense of Yankee propriety won't allow him to marry the woman he loves.

Around these seemingly doomed romances swirls the rest of life on this Navy outpost — supposedly overseen by Capt. Brackett (Bob Ball) and Cmdr. Harbison (Joseph Hager), but in reality run by the enterprising and conniving SeaBee Luther Billis (Patrick Jacobs).

"South Pacific" is a show where voice is character — how the performer sounds is just as revealing as the words spoken or sung. One needs literally to hear the clash of cultures that fuel the musical's story. It's not a matter of accents, which



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Light Opera Oklahoma plays it straight with its staging of "South Pacific" at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center. Shows continue through July 15.

have a tendency to slip a bit here and there. It's the contrast of a European sound with an American sound, of opera set against Broadway.

And in Ron Loyd, this "South Pacific" has an Emile de Becque who delivers above and beyond the call. His voice is warm, resonant and powerful, and it gives the songs de Becque sings ("Some Enchanted Evening," "This Nearly was Mine" even the spoof of "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair") an even greater emotional weight and gravitas.

You believe he is a man who has seen too much, who has gone through terrible things and yet still holds out hope for a new chance at love and happiness. And Loyd accomplishes all this with the greatest economy — it's a remarkable performance.

Jennings as Nellie is an excellent contrast. She moves about the stage with a kind of gawky grace, as if literally feeling her way through the

world. Jennings also reins in her voice, downplaying the operatic chops she has demonstrated in previous LOOK shows. Her singing here is more conversational in songs such as "Cockeyed Optimist" and "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair." (Andrea Leap will take on this role at some performances.)

As Lt. Cable, Ross is a little stiff, a little bland, but it works in this context. His Marine is no hero — like so many soldiers and sailors, he's a kid doing his best in extraordinary circumstances. So when he discovers something other than war with Liat, his whole being seems to soften. And it allows Ross to sing "Younger Than Springtime" in a suitable, rapturous way. One just wishes he brought a little more bitterness to the show's anti-bigotry song, "Carefully Taught."

Bloody Mary is an unfortunate collection of Asian stereotypes, but Gol-

liver doesn't overplay them, whether wheeling and dealing with the troops or urging them to "Bali Ha'i" or to keep on talking "Happy Talk."

Jacobs tears happily into the role of Billis — an actor willing to do just about anything for a laugh playing a character willing to do just about anything for a buck. Manabe's Liat is a graceful, if silent, presence, while Ball is all desk-bound bluster as Braddock, and Steven Fontenot as Stewpot and Kyle A. Dougan as Professor were very good as Billis' even more comic foils.

LOOK artistic director Eric Gibson has staged the action in a natural, unobtrusively cinematic way, aided by Thom Weaver's evocative lighting design and Ryan Palmer's simple but functional sets. Chorus master Ernest Neal did a superb job with the ensemble, especially with the men on "There is Nothing Like a Dame," which was show-stoppingly good.

James Bagwell conducted the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra, which is almost a character in itself in this show, given the way Rodgers underscored so many scenes. The orchestra's playing was at once rich and full, and intimate and subtle — and just one more proof that this ensemble needs to find an identity (and a series of performances) outside of the orchestra pit. It's too good a group to be kept — literally or figuratively — out of sight.

"South Pacific" continues with performances through July 15, including two run-out shows in Miami, Okla., (July 6) and Lawton (July 12). For tickets, visit www.MyTicketOffice.com, or call the PAC ticket office, 596-7111.

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