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# South Pacific at Chichester Festival Theatre review — an enchanted evening

The musical marks the return of theatre in glorious style. Also reviewed — [Tell Me on a Sunday](#)

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Thursday July 15 2021, 5.00pm, The Sunday Times



Alive and kicking: South Pacific at Chichester  
JOHAN PERSSON

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**South Pacific**  
*Chichester Festival Theatre*



## Tell Me on a Sunday

*Touring (next week at Canterbury's Marlowe Theatre)*



Frightful self-flagellation at Chichester, where, pre-Covid, they had the idea of reviving Rodgers and Hammerstein's **South Pacific** — great songs, laughter and loss, Polynesian sunsets — only to realise with a gulp that this 1949 musical could now [get them cancelled](#) quicker than the 7.37 to London Victoria.

Its central female character drops her beau (a plantation owner, tut tut) in disgust that his late wife was Tonkinese. An Asian teenager falls for a white American naval officer, has about three lines and then just has to gawp at him with longing. Then there's the banter between western boys and gals, with numbers including *There Is Nothin' Like a Dame* and *I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair*, the latter sung, for goodness' sake, by neocolonial nurses in skimpy bathing suits. How binary can you get? A social media show trial surely awaited its director, Daniel Evans.

To head off any woke whingers, Evans and his senior creatives have done an agonised Q&A in the programme. It reads like something from Pyongyang. They should simply have trusted in the theatrical power of this zesty tale. Yes, Ensign Nellie Forbush initially shows the racist reactions of a mid-20th-century Arkansas white woman, but she is jolted out of it. Yes, lithe Liat has few lines to learn, but her affair with the dashing Lieutenant Joseph Cable has a telling purity. Stop this grovelling, Evans. Let love stories work their magic.

Chichester's wide stage is good for musicals. Evans and his choreographer, Ann Yee, use it well with exuberant set-piece dances and sets including a silhouetted mountainscape, a beachside washhouse and a fighter plane. The evening opens with Liat (a balletic Sera Maehara) balanced on one set of toes while arm-swinging US sailors march a circle round the perimeter of the stage. Later we have parachutists and a military radio ops room.

Gina Beck's blonde-curved Nellie has Doris Day wholesomeness. Julian Ovenden, as Nellie's leathery monsieur, raises things musically the moment he starts singing. It is an operatic voice, superbly controlled. His closing number, *This Nearly Was Mine*, is a real moment. Meanwhile, the handsome Lieutenant Cable (Rob Houchen) finds release from the tensions of battle on the paradise isle of Bali Ha'i. And why not? He is young. He is clearly doomed. What is wrong with "make love, not war"? Today's left are as miserable as the reactionaries who taunted the hippies in the 1960s.

The show is not perfect. Keir Charles has his comic moments as impish Seabee Luther Billis but swallows some of his words. Glamour levels are not uniformly high and I could have done with a stronger flavour of sunshine and surf. But *South Pacific* isn't far from an ankle-swinging paradise and no one should be remotely ashamed of enjoying it. And it ends with a liberated Liat doing a balletic leap, the lights snapping off while she is still mid-air.

In **Tell Me on a Sunday** Jodie Prenger shows she is more than just a TV talent show winner. It takes proper singing chops to carry off Andrew Lloyd Webber's one-woman song cycle about a lovelorn English lass in late 1970s Manhattan. This is the show for which Lloyd Webber teamed with Don Black, whose *Capped Teeth and Caesar Salad* pricks the falseness of the Beverly Hills set. Prenger resists any urge to go the full-volume diva, although

after one quick change she does glide back on stage in floating robes that Demis Roussos would have envied. The title song catches the essence of New York Sunday brunch melancholy. After performing Lloyd Webber's piece in the first half, Prenger reappears to take questions from the audience and give them a few more easy tunes. Smoochy as homemade fudge.

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18 HOURS AGO



South Pacific at Chichester was superb. I felt quite emotional to be there and once again hear great singing and an amazing show. Wish I could go again. I could sing along happily behind my mask!!

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