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South Pacific is a perfect lesson in how to stage a giddy, romantic, wartime musical

★★★★★ 5/5

At Chichester Festival Theatre, Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1949 escapist show is full of gorgeous music, high spirits and serious smarts

By Dominic Cavendish, THEATRE CRITIC

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My, how I've missed Chichester Festival Theatre – finally flinging open its doors for a proper summer season. And my, how I've missed the gladdening sight and

pulse-quickenning sound of a major American musical done to perfection.

Just to see a large cast dancing, and singing its lungs out, feels like witnessing an act of rebirth. And the Covid-caused delay of Rodgers and Hammerstein's South Pacific has made its facets of warmth and giddy escape more significant.

Where the pair's first collaboration, *Oklahoma!* (1943), hymns the frolicsome nature of America's pioneer communities amid fecund wide-open spaces, *South Pacific* (1949), transports wide-eyed young Americans to the other side of the world. The paradisiacal island setting is tempered by the grim context – the US wartime struggle against the Japanese.

Yet that high-stakes backdrop only serves to sharpen the romantic element. One of many meltingly gorgeous songs, 'Some Enchanted Evening' distils the wonder of love at first sight and the urge to latch on to that newfound love as if life depended on it. It's heard early in the show, anticipating avid kissing and embracing between the middle-aged hero, French plantation owner Emile de Becque (a heart-throbbly Julian Ovenden) and pretty ensign Nellie Forbush (an immediately endearing Gina Beck).

Daniel Evans's production is, fittingly, visually enchanting, the stage-revolve propelling agile, uniformed US sailors about as if a parade-ground had turned into a carousel. That seductiveness reinforces the shock of Act One's dramatic ambush: we get past umpteen numbers that put a spring in our step, only to be hit with the revelation that Nellie is a racist, able to accept that Emile killed a man but not that he once married a Polynesian, producing two children.

She must go on a steep learning curve to regain our sympathy and we're not allowed any easy detachment. When Rob Houchen's dashing Lieutenant Cable (smitten with Sera Maehara's local girl Liat, the daughter of the Tonkinese pedlar Bloody Mary) croons 'You've Got To Be Carefully Taught' – identifying the systemic way that racism is inculcated in the young – the bold-for-its-time song acquires a shaming resonance in the sour aftermath of the Euros finals.

Yet the show's wit is never sacrificed. Choreographer Ann Yee gets the best out of everyone, maximising the comedy value in the writhing male carnival of longing 'There is Nothin' Like a Dame' and its counterpart riot of female disdain 'I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair'. An evening, enchanting and eye-opening, to remember.

Until Sept 5. Tickets: 01243 781312; cft.org.uk

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