

South Pacific



“Glorious and timely”

LONG REVIEWS JUL 16, 2021 CHICHESTER FESTIVAL THEATRE



Julian Ovenden and Gina Beck in Chichester Festival Theatre's South Pacific. Photo: Johan Persson



David Benedict

David Benedict has been a daily columnist and theatre editor on the Independent, arts editor of the Observer and chief London critic of V
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Glorious and timely production of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical



The Sound of Music has a lot to answer for. The blockbuster film version led audiences into believing that Rodgers and Hammerstein were synonymous with saccharine.

Mercifully, [Daniel Evans](#)' exhilarating revival of their 1949 hit South Pacific is a timely reminder that, at their peak, the huge emotions they engendered were in service of serious ideas in punchy musical theatre. And given that this musical is famously a powerfully anti-racist statement, it couldn't be timelier.

Evans' production is also a passionate corrective to the idea that has bedevilled British productions for about three decades: that musicals 'need' performers more focused on the acting than the singing. Ever more truthful acting has emphatically enhanced many productions but, ironically, musicals have suffered from insufficient musical power. Evans makes audiences understand and, crucially, feel the way that Rodgers' ravishing music embodies the politics and drama driving Hammerstein's adaptation of James Michener's wartime novel.

Some of this is about sheer scale. David Cullen's new orchestration demands 15 players – a serious rarity these days – and hearing subtle woodwinds and the shimmer of a harp delivers delicious depth and colour. And then there's the eye-widening cast of 31 (plus children). Thanks to them and Ann Yee's zesty, heat-building choreography, the big numbers really deliver, especially a ballsy *There Is Nothing Like a Dame* and an infectiously high-spirited but perfectly homespun *Honey Bun*.

But it's the detailed, passionate solo work that truly motors everything. As fun-loving, naive Nellie Forbush, who has left Little Rock and fallen in love a man out of her league, [Gina Beck](#) never generalises a thought or an emotion. She's so vocally and dramatically secure that she doesn't need to strain for musical or comic effect. When she sings *I'm in Love with a Wonderful Guy* she doesn't just, as required, merely repeat the phrase: she winningly builds feelings right through, taking the audience with her in her exultation.

The casting of Julian Ovenden in the pivotal role of Emile, the older man she loves, is more controversial. The role is written for a paternal-sounding bass-baritone, but Ovenden is a true tenor, arguably British theatre's finest. But what you lose in gravitas you gain in dramatic power. Most singers make his climatic *This Nearly Was Mine* a sentimental display of self-pity. Thrillingly, Ovenden powers the number with rage.

Even the tricky racial politics surrounding the character of Bloody Mary (a full-blooded Joanna Ampil) are lent rare dignity by Evans adding a framing device with her daughter Liat (Sera Maehara). Beneath the rich colour palette of Howard Harrison's lighting charging up Peter McKintosh's restrained, evocative sets and witty costumes, it's the hallmark of the superbly interwoven nature of this seemingly effortless, glorious production.

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Production Details

Production name	South Pacific
Venue	Chichester Festival Theatre
Starts	05/07/2021
Ends	05/09/2021
Press night	13/07/2021
Running time	2hrs 50mins
Composer	Richard Rodgers
Book writer	Joshua Logan, Oscar Hammerstein II
Lyricist	Oscar Hammerstein II
Director	Daniel Evans
Musical director	Cat Beveridge
Choreographer	Ann Yee
Set designer	Peter McKintosh
Costume designer	Peter McKintosh
Lighting designer	Howard Harrison
Sound designer	Paul Groothuis
Video designer	Gillian Tan
Cast	Julian Ovenden, Carl Au, David Birrell, Gina Beck, Joanna Ampil, Keir Charles, Lindsay Atherton, Rob Houchen, Rosanna Bates, Leslie Garcia Bowman, Iroy Abesamis, Sera Maehara
Producer	Chichester Festival Theatre

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