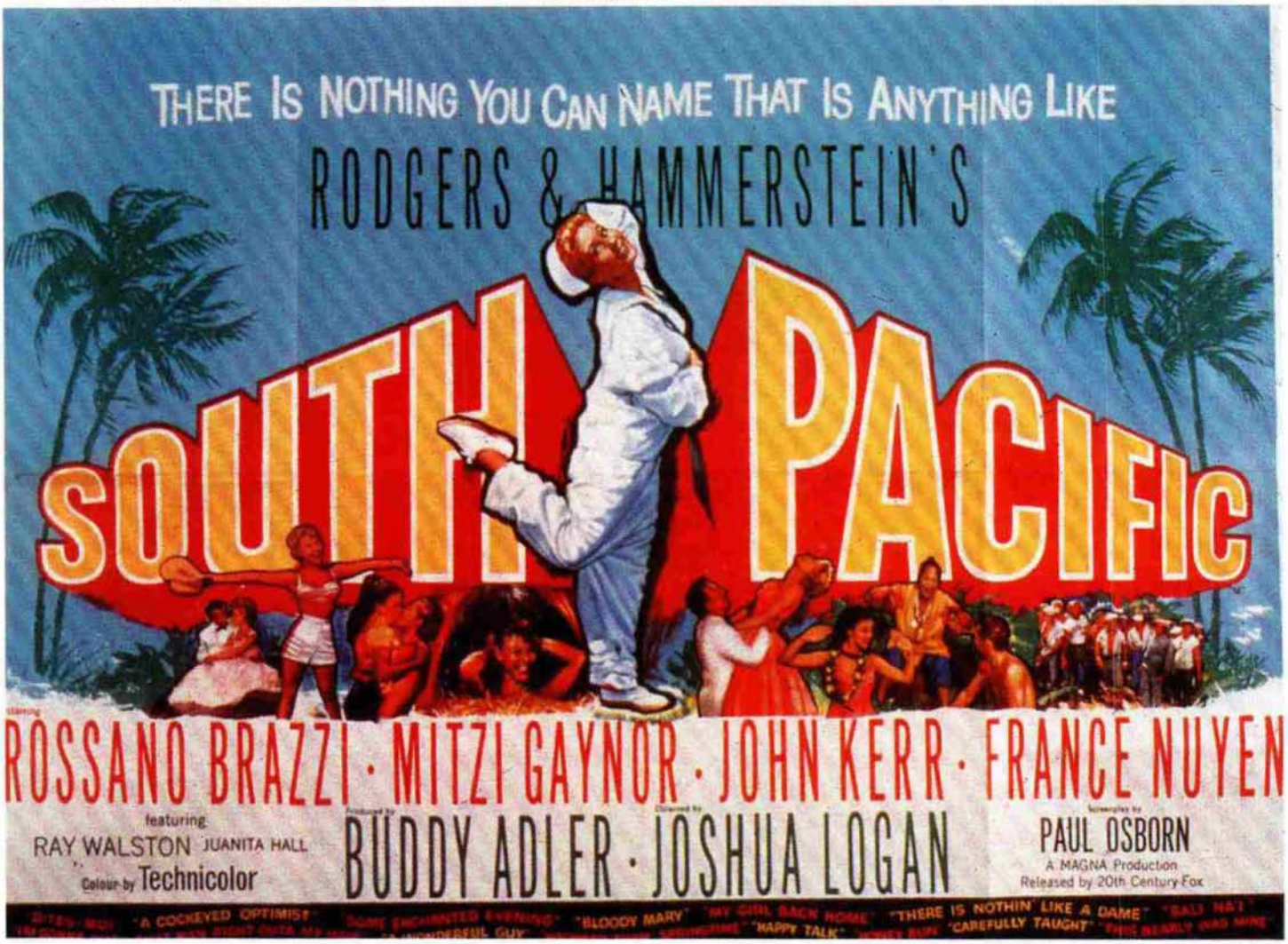
South Pacific given the big screen treatment in its 1958 publicity poster – but its themes had depth the image hardly hints at.



SOUTH PACIFIC

Michael Sturma looks beyond grass skirts and sarongs to discover racial and political subtexts in a 50s American depiction of wartime romance.

When the musical-comedy *South Pacific* was released by Twentieth Century Fox in March 1958, *Variety* predicted the film would 'mop up'. The movie had, after all, almost a decade of pre-publicity in the form of the highly successful Broadway production which first opened in April 1949. Apart from *South Pacific*'s entertainment value, though, it provides a window on some American preoccupations in the mid-twentieth century. First, it reflected on the American presence in the Pacific during the Second World War. *South Pacific*'s underlying themes of racial and cultural tolerance also came at a crucial juncture in American race relations. It is in these contexts that the film deserves some exploration.

American interests (economic, strategic and cultural) in the Pacific were long standing. By the end of the nineteenth century the United States held territory stretching from the Hawaiian islands to the Philippines. In Hawaii the US acquired exclusive rights to Pearl Harbor as a naval base from 1887, followed by annexation of the islands in 1898. America's imperial involvement, however, tended to be overshadowed in the popular mind by exotic and romantic images of the Pacific islands.

Although tourism did not replace

sugar as Hawaii's main industry until after the Second World War, the islands were marketed as a tourist destination long before this. By the 1890s postcards of Hawaiian *hula* dancers were widely sold. From the 1930s America experienced a Hawaiian music craze with songs such as 'My Little Grass Shack'. The Hawaiians were typically represented as a happy-go-lucky people, despite their loss of sovereignty and integration into the economy as wage labourers.

A succession of Hollywood films in the 1930s in particular represented the South Pacific as a sensual paradise. Perhaps more than anything else, the South Sea setting allowed a level of voyeurism not normally permissible at the time. Actress Dorothy Lamour made famous the scanty and gracefully draped 'sarong' in her roles as an island maiden. A former New Orleans beauty queen, Lamour appeared in a succession of films such as *The Hurricane* (1937) and *Aloma of the South Seas* (1941). A similar formula was adopted in other movies. Maria Montez, for example, portrayed the island girl Melahi, again wearing a sarong, in *South of Tahiti* released in 1941. While genuine Hawaiians often found work as extras in such films, the stars were typically European or Mexican.

Once the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941 popular images of the Pacific islands as a tropical paradise seemed incongruous. American forces suffered subsequent defeats in the Philippines at Bataan and Corregidor, on Guam and at Wake Island. The Pacific islands became the site of a bitter war of attrition. Nevertheless, South Pacific stereotypes were tenacious. *Song of the Islands* starring Betty Grable and released in 1942, for example, continued to portray Hawaii as a romantic paradise. In some ways the perpetuation of the South Seas myth was believed good for morale.

From one perspective *South Pacific* may be viewed as an attempt to reconcile the role of the islands as a war zone with their traditional romantic mystique. The idea for the film came originally from James Michener's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Tales of the South Pacific* published in 1947. Having studied at Swarthmore College and the Colorado State College of Education, Michener worked as an educator and later as an editor with Macmillan publishers. During 1944 and 1945 he served with the US Navy in the South Pacific. It was his wartime experience, especially in the New Hebrides and New Caledonia, which provided material for his book. Michener wrote most of *Tales of the South Pacific* while stationed on the Vanuatu island of Espiritu Santo.

Hollywood executive Kenneth McKenna showed some initial interest in Michener's book, but his studio rejected it as unsuitable for a film. Through McKenna's stage designer

Coconut clichés: Dorothy Lamour with himbo Jon Hall in the 1937 film *The Hurricane*.

brother, however, the book came to the attention of composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein. The pair already had a highly successful Broadway musical collaboration with *Oklahoma!* Together with director Joshua Logan, they adapted Michener's story to the stage. Logan later directed the film version as well.

Those reading Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific* may be surprised at how little of the book was actually translated on to the stage and screen. As a loosely connected collection of vignettes, Michener admitted *Tales of the South Pacific* largely lacked a dramatic story-line. The musical version basically interweaves two of Michener's eighteen chapters into parallel love stories set on a South Seas island during the Second World War. In one story American nurse Nellie Forbush becomes romantically involved with a French planter named Emile De Becque, who lives on the island where she is stationed. In the film's parallel love story, US marine Joe Cable becomes involved with a local 'Tonkinese' girl named Liat.

In part Michener's stories reflect the disillusionment of many US servicemen whose expectations of the South Pacific were shaped largely by Hollywood films. In fact such disappointment was popularly referred to as the 'Dorothy Lamour Syndrome' by American service personnel. In one scene in Michener's book a group of marines discuss the discrepancy between film versions of the Pacific and their own experience. A character named Eddie quotes a letter from his girlfriend back in Minnea-

Theme park tourism: Americans on an outdoor 'luau' or Hawaiin dinner in the 1950s – continuing an image-marketing that had gone on since the turn of the century.

polis: 'I certainly hope you are not dating one of those luscious South Sea beauties we see so much in the movies'. The marine plans to send a very unflattering photo of a Melanesian woman back to Minneapolis, and questions 'how Hollywood dares to cook up the tripe it does'.

Also, in the film *South Pacific*, the gap between the expectations of American servicemen and reality is satirised. American sailors and seabees bide their time on the island while waiting to go into combat against the Japanese. The Dorothy Lamour type 'native' is conspicuous by her absence on the island where the Americans are based. All the young women have been sent to the neighbouring island of Bali Ha'i for fear that they might fall prey to the lust of US troops. The only local woman is the shrewd but sexually unappealing Bloody Mary, who is more interested in making money than love. As were many islanders in real life, Mary is happy to supply the Americans with souvenir grass skirts which became an icon of the South Seas, mainly through Hollywood images.

At the same time, the film *South Pacific* manages to juggle the conflicting images of the Pacific as both theatre of war and sensual paradise. It does this largely by juxtaposing the neighbouring islands of Bali Ha'i and Maria-Louise. The lush and mystical island of Bali Ha'i promises all the sensual delights of the mythical South Seas. The island is brimming with young women, and it is here that Joe Cable has his romantic rendezvous with Liat. The island of Maria-Louise, on the other hand, offers danger and the prospect of death. It is infested with Japanese, and the reality of war is forcefully brought home when Cable is killed during a reconnaissance mission on the island.

The historical significance of the musical, however, arguably relates not so much to war as civil rights. Embedded in the plot are themes of bigotry and racial intolerance, themes developed still more explicitly in Michener's original book. Indeed, the need to overcome racial prejudice might be identified as the common theme in all of James Michener's writings.

Among the dramatic changes the war years brought to the American homefront were changes in race relations. During the war there was a mass migration of African-Americans from the South to northern and western cities. Along with generally improved working conditions and pay came rising expectations of

This US Second World War propaganda poster underlines the psychological shock that the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor had dealt to the American consciousness.

The tension between idyllic settings and preparation for life-and-death struggle that *South Pacific* presents is parallelled in this real-life 1944 photo from the Ellice Islands of a naval lieutenant dancing with a native girl.

equality and greater political power. The war also highlighted racial inequalities in other ways. While American rhetoric vigorously attacked the racial policies of Nazism, African-Americans were openly discriminated against in the US armed forces. In 1942 the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) was founded to fight against segregation, and civil rights leaders called on the government to promote at home the democracy it advocated overseas. At least indirectly, *South Pacific* puts forward a similar challenge.

The central character of *South Pacific* is Navy nurse Nellie Forbush. (Mary Martin played the role on Broadway, while in the film the role went to Mitzi Gaynor. Ironically, Gaynor began her show business career performing in USO shows for the armed forces.) Coming from Little Rock, Arkansas, Nellie is a woman of limited worldly experience. Although attracted to the French planter De Becque, she is troubled by their different cultural backgrounds. What most complicates her feelings, however, is the fact that De Becque has two children by a Polynesian woman. Although the woman has since died, Nellie finds it hard to accept De Becque's past liaison with a woman of colour. In fact in Michener's original story De Becque had eight daughters by four different women of varied ethnicity. The musical abbreviates his sexual history, as well as Nellie's, who in Michener's tale was previously involved with a married man.

A similar racial dilemma is depicted in the film's other love story. Bloody Mary on her first meeting with US marine lieutenant Joe Cable decides he is the perfect mate for her daughter Liat. Cable seems to agree, falling instantly in love with Liat after meeting her on Bali Ha'i. In a later scene he offers Liat his grandfather's watch as a token of his affection. But he quickly turns sullen when Mary tells him, 'You have special good babies'. Cable leaves protesting that he cannot marry Liat. Although he comes from the northern city of Philadelphia and is an Ivy League graduate, Cable shares some of the same prejudices as small-town Nellie.

The tensions involved in crossing racial and cultural barriers are in a sense reflected in the musical's show within a show. Nellie is responsible for organising the 'Thanksgiving Follies' in order to raise troop morale on the island. The American holiday of Thanksgiving itself conjures up intercultural images, given that the original celebration involved both Europeans and American Indians. In the 'Follies' boundaries are further challenged. Nellie appears on stage wearing an over-sized male sailor's uniform, while another character, Luther Billis, appears in drag with mop-like hair and coconut husk breasts. As Marjorie Garber persuasively argues in her book *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (Routledge, 1992), gender cross-dressing frequently serves to displace anxieties about transgressing racial boundaries. The exchange of sexual identity in the 'Thanksgiving Follies' both mimics and distracts from the more profound challenge to categories posed by the film.

The film's theme of racial intolerance crystallises in the musical number 'You've Got to be Carefully Taught'. The song is performed by the Joe Cable character (played by John Kerr in the film while the vocals were by Bill Lee). In the preceding scene, Nellie tells Emile De Becque she cannot marry him because of his children's Polynesian mother. She tells him her decision is not so much based on reason, as something born in her. Emile, though, rejects the idea that such prejudice is inborn. Having witnessed this interchange, Joe Cable sings the song which begins 'You've got to be taught to hate and fear'. The song directly challenges the notion that racism is something innate, but

Light relief: inequality and cultural transgression all feature in this selection of black-and-white publicity stills from the film: (clockwise) 'Bloody Mary' (Juanita Hall) telling tall island tales to a captive audience of US sailors, and playing carousing matchmaker by the waterfall to her daughter Liat and the clean-cut WASP lieutenant Joe Cable; gender-bending for Thanksgiving with Nellie and Luther; Nellie and Emile, the posed South Sea romance shot only hinting at some of the complexity of the sexual and racial dilemmas their relationship explores.

Author James Michener: his *Tales of the South Pacific* were given heightened drama by Rodgers and Hammerstein's adaptation with Joshua Logan.

argues that it is learned from an early age.

When the stage version of *South Pacific* was originally produced, some experienced theatrical people pressured Rodgers and Hammerstein to leave out the song. Some felt its sensitive content might prevent the musical from achieving the success it deserved. Nevertheless, Rodgers and Hammerstein remained adamant that the song stay in the play. A number of early reviewers did in fact criticise its inclusion, but as time went on the song received more praise than criticism.

With the film version of *South Pacific* the song, 'You've Got to be Carefully Taught', continued to elicit comment. *Variety* believed the number would 'raise discussion', describing it as 'a punchy Hammerstein lyric that frankly propagandizes against racial bigotry'. Another critic, writing for *Films in Review* in April 1958, praised the number as a 'commendable plea for racial tolerance'. Recent events in America in fact gave the theme of racial intolerance, and the song in particular, a special poignancy.

It was with some prescience that James Michener had his Nellie Forbush character coming from Little Rock, Arkansas. The city was to explode on to the American consciousness only a short time before the screen version of *South Pacific* was released. From the late 1940s lawyers, including Thurgood Marshall (destined to become the first African-American justice of the Supreme Court), increasingly challenged segregation through the courts. Following a Supreme Court decision in 1954 that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, federal attempts to desegregate schools were actively resisted in many localities. It was at Little Rock, though, where the issue reached flash-point. When nine African-American students tried to enroll at Little Rock Central High School in September 1957, the Arkansas governor, Orval Faubus, ordered the state's national guard to bar their entry.

In a dramatic move, President Dwight Eisenhower responded by sending regular army paratroopers to Little Rock, and placing the Arkansas national guard under federal control. The black students were escorted into the school under army protection. The media gave wide coverage of the whole episode, including the ugly taunting of the black children by some local residents. Little Rock became a potent symbol of racial bigotry.

In the years between the first production of *South Pacific* on Broadway and the subsequent film version, other changes also made for a more receptive atmosphere. There were no longer the Congressional investiga-

Little Rock, Arkansas, 1957: black student Elizabeth Eckford turned away from high school by National Guardsmen – the changing context in which *South Pacific* came to cinema audiences in America.

tions of Hollywood which discouraged explicit critiques of social issues as in the early 1950s. In 1956 the Motion Picture Production Code underwent its first major modification since the 1930s, so that topics such as 'miscegenation' were no longer considered taboo. By the late 1950s the civil rights movement was also having an impact. With the emergence of leaders including Martin Luther King Jr and campaigns against racial segregation, Congress passed its first civil rights legislation in over eighty years in 1957.

Despite all these changes, *South Pacific* still handles the subject of inter-racial romance gingerly. After his number 'You've Got to be Carefully Taught', Joe Cable tells Emile De Becque that he will stay in the islands with Liat if he survives the war. But he does not survive. He is killed while he and Emile carry out an intelligence mission on the neighbouring island of Maria-Louise. The dilemma of inter-racial marriage and children is thus resolved, as indeed it was in other films of the period such as Westerns which depicted romantic relations between white men and American-Indian or Chinese women.

It may be that at the time James Michener penned his stories in the 1940s he doubted inter-racial marriages were tenable, given society's attitudes. In a 1993 interview Michener is quoted saying that during the Second World War he would have found the prospect of falling in love with an island woman 'unthinkable'. As with *Tales of the South Pacific*, Michener's novel *Sayonara* published in 1954 also deals with the theme of inter-racial romance and again ends with the death of the lovers. It was not long after *Sayonara*'s publication that Michener first met the Japanese-American woman Mari Yoriko Sabusawa who told him she did not like the book's conclusion. She maintained inter-racial liaisons did not necessarily have to end tragically. Michener married Sabusawa in 1955 in what proved to be an enduring union.

In *South Pacific* the relationship of Emile De Becque and Nellie Forbush fares better than that of Cable and Liat. In their case, though, the barriers crossed are more cultural than racial. Once Nellie learns of the Frenchman's dangerous mission with Cable, she decides she can overcome her prejudices and marry Emile if he lives. When Emile returns, he is reunited not only with his children but also with Nellie, forming a new blended family unit as the film ends.

Some critics were sceptical of Nellie's conversion to a more liberal viewpoint. Her motivation appeared underdeveloped. Nevertheless, she emerges as a more sympathetic character than in Michener's original story. In *Tales of the South Pacific* Nellie's decision to marry De Becque comes after he rescues her from a group of American soldiers intent on raping her. Nellie's racial bias does not appear so much changed as she declares in the book, 'I don't care who he lived with, I got me a man!'

In the film, Nellie's behaviour is full of unselfconscious irony. Although she tells Emile she left Little Rock partly to meet different kinds of people, she frets about his foreign background. She is reassured when he tells her he believes, with the American Declaration of Independence, that 'all men are created equal'. Yet while she can accept with relative equanimity his having left France because he killed a man, she is unable to cope with his having fathered children with a woman of different race.

Although often sensitive to racial matters, it is probably not surprising that the film does not touch on more profound issues such as De Becque's right to carve out his plantation on islanders' land. To do so might have reflected on the role of American planters in Hawaii and US claims to other territory in the Pacific. As it happens, most of the location shots for *South Pacific* were filmed on Kauai, site of the first successful sugar plantation in the Hawaiian islands.

In many ways, too, the film *South Pacific* perpetuates racial stereotypes. When the character Bloody Mary is introduced, for example, she is standing next to a human skull. The first time she meets Joe Cable she tries to give him a shrunken head. When Cable later visits the island of Bali Ha'i, the locals perform a dance sequence which one reviewer described as 'Hollywood-primitive of the most obvious kind'. Meanwhile, the character of Liat, apart from some brief exchanges in French when she first meets Cable, remains effectively mute through the rest of the picture. She epitomises the exotic woman as passive and pliant.

In spite of this, *South Pacific* did represent something of a bold step forward. Especially when we consider that a film like Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) could still inspire intense controversy a decade later. Although ostensibly about Americans in a far-away place, *South Pacific* served as commentary on domestic politics which were difficult to approach directly. It rearranged American anxieties in a less threatening form. In the context of the late 1950s, the film assumed a relevance which was (in some ways) distanced from its audience, yet was nevertheless still recognisable to them.

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