



Happy Talk: Ethnic Stereotypes in "South Pacific"

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I have a confession to make: I watched a recent television production of "South Pacific" starring Glenn Close. And I meant to do it. I tuned in because a local TV critic had seen a preview and blasted the production's racial stereotypes. Well, Glenn Close warbling "I'm Going to Wash that Man Right Out of My Hair" seemed about as bad as musical comedy can get. But then Close admits that she can't continue her romance with a handsome French planter because he has two children who are "colored." That *really* made me squirm.



Nellie and Emile, sans passion, 2001

Granted the musical takes place during World War II, and the dialogue was probably true to its time and place. But why would anyone revive a production with that dialogue? Did the director clean it up a bit? Was the 1958 movie even worse?

To answer these questions, I rented the film "South Pacific." If you haven't seen it, here's a synopsis. "South Pacific" involves a mission to spy on Japanese troop movements and two love stories:

1. Ensign Nellie Forbush (Mitzi Gaynor), a nurse from Little Rock, Arkansas, and Emile de Becque (Rossano Brazzi), a French planter who has been living on the islands some sixteen years;
2. Lieutenant Joe Cable (John Kerr), a handsome Marine from a proper Philadelphia family, and Liat (France Nuyen), a beautiful Tonkinese/Tonganese islander.

Nuyen plays one of just five Asian characters in the film with more than a walk-on role. This movie about the Pacific seems to employ very few Pacific Islanders (I read the credits closely and saw few Asian or Polynesian names). One of the Asian roles is actually played by an African-American (Juanita Hall as Bloody Mary). These are clues that "South Pacific" isn't going to be smooth sailing.

The movie opens with Technicolor shots of a torchlit beach, a huge waterfall, palm trees, thatched roof huts, rafts hurtling through the waves, and a magnificent sunset while the soundtrack plays the overture: bits of "Some Enchanted Evening," "Younger than Springtime," "I'm in Love with a Wonderful Guy," "Bali Ha'i," and "Happy Talk."



Nellie and Emile in a clinch, 1958.

The beauty of the scenery and the overture is soon replaced by the ugliness of the first musical number, sung by a group of seamen to the first Asian character we see: the Tonkinese trader known as Bloody Mary. While the seamen sing, Juanita Hall laughs merrily. Apparently Bloody Mary doesn't mind her odious nickname or the equally odious lyrics to the song named after her ("Bloody Mary is the girl I love...Her skin is tender as a baseball glove...Bloody Mary's chewing betel nuts/and she don't use Pepsodent.")

The stereotype gets worse as we get a fuller picture of an unscrupulous Asian merchant out to cheat innocent Caucasians. Bloody Mary's vocation is buying low and selling high — specifically grass skirts and other cheap souvenirs — to the enlisted men on the island. You can see dollar signs in her eyes as she whines "You like?" every time she hawks her wares. Before you can say "boar's-tooth bracelet," Lieutenant Cable appears on the scene; Bloody Mary stops wheeling and dealing to gaze at him in amazement. Now John Kerr was a fine-looking young man, but Bloody Mary's reaction to him is puzzling. Is she scheming to sell him a boar's-tooth bracelet? Or does she have a bigger sale in mind?

Bloody Mary introduces herself to Cable and asks if he is a "crummy Captain." Cable assures her that he is just a "crummy Lieutenant." After mispronouncing "Lieutenant" (Asians may be wily in business but can only speak pidgin English), Bloody Mary announces that Cable is a "sexy man" and tries to give him a shrunken head, which she says she found on Bali Ha'i, a nearby island. All the young women have been moved to Bali Ha'i for the duration of the war, and the island is off limits to enlisted men. I guess the Navy felt the women were more dangerous to gullible GIs than to sophisticated officers.

Meanwhile, Nellie and Emile meet and moon over each other, while Emile sings "Some Enchanted Evening." Nellie doesn't seem to notice the two young island children hiding in the bushes, watching. Once Nellie leaves, the children rush to Emile, calling "Papa, Papa." Since Nellie has already been introduced to Henry, Emile's servant, viewers may wonder why the children are being kept hidden. Does Emile suspect that Nellie isn't prepared to be a stepmother to half-Polynesian kids?

In short order, Cable insists that Emile be his guide for the spy mission to the neighboring islands. Why Emile, who has lived on the islands for just sixteen years, when Cable is surrounded by Polynesians who've grown up on these islands? Perhaps Pacific Islanders can be trusted with jobs like doing laundry or hustling souvenirs but not with secret missions. Even the aristocratic French Emile, however, doesn't quite measure up. The commanding officer explains to Cable that Emile was married to a Polynesian woman and had two children with her before she died. So the c.o. cautions Cable that they need to learn more before approving Emile. They ask Nellie what she knows. She says Emile is all alone in the world, without a wife or children. When Nellie leaves, the c.o. says to Cable, "Well, you don't spring a couple of Polynesian kids on a woman right away, do you?" Gee, now we know why those poor kids were hiding in the bushes.

Before embarking on his mission, Cable decides to visit Bali Ha'i. Hundreds of singing and dancing Polynesians welcome him. Suddenly, it's as if we're watching two different movies. The men wear grass skirts, have bones in their noses, and sport Afros, like refugees from a Tarzan movie. The women wear what appear to be gaily colored prom dresses. And what is Bloody Mary doing here? Certainly losing money since she can't sell souvenirs to the Polynesians. She leads Cable through a lush landscape of greenery, waterfalls, and swinging bridges to a small house where she introduces him to her half-Polynesian daughter Liat by saying, "You like? We are a pretty people, no? She is nice daughter and she will make a nice wife." Bloody Mary giggles and leaves; Liat embraces Cable as if her mother's offering her to a G.I. like a cheap trinket is perfectly normal. I

guess those island women just don't have the morals of us continental hussies.

Back at the plantation, Emile finally introduces Nellie to his children. He explains that his wife was Polynesian and says, "I have no apologies. I came here as a young man and I lived as I could." Apparently Emile married a Polynesian because there were no Caucasians available. So much for true love. His explanation certainly doesn't convince Nellie, who runs off sobbing.

Cable makes another visit to Bali Ha'i. Bloody Mary joins him and Liat at a waterfall and sings "Happy Talk":

Talk about a boy saying to the girl,
Golly, baby, I'm a lucky cuss.
Talk about the girl saying to the boy,
You an' me is lucky to be us.
Happy talk, keep talking happy talk,
Talk about things you like to do.
You got to have a dream, if you don't have a dream,
How you gonna have a dream come true?"

Liat merely mimes the words. While Bloody Mary speaks Pidgin English, Liat apparently doesn't speak at all. Is she mute, or is it her character's purpose to show that young Asian-Pacific women are beautiful but dumb in a very literal sense? How Cable and Liat can engage in any talk--let alone happy talk--is a puzzle since Cable speaks English and Liat doesn't speak at all. Bloody Mary urges Cable to marry Liat and offers to support the couple with profits from her souvenir sales, but Bloody Mary just doesn't know when to shut up. She leers at Cable and says, "First time I saw you, I knew you were right man for Liat. You have special good babies." Cable recoils and declares he can't marry Liat. Bloody Mary storms off, dragging Liat behind her, yelling that she'll marry Liat to a French planter instead.

When Cable tells Nellie about Liat, Nellie sympathizes by saying "We have to go where we belong." I guess that means where everyone is white. Soon Emile appears and questions Nellie about her sudden request for a transfer to another base. "Is it because of my children? Because of my Polynesian wife?" asks Emile. Nellie says she can't give him a reason. "It's something born in me. I can't help it." She asks Cable to explain to Emile and then rushes off as Cable sings "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught":

"You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a different shade,
You've got to be carefully taught."

This song purports to explain that the prejudice Cable and Nellie have is not innate but learned. Suddenly Cable vows to stay on the islands with Liat. There isn't any explanation for this sudden flip-flop in attitude. Surely a man who only the day before has recoiled at the thought of having children with Liat would need more than the lyrics of a song to help him change his attitude toward Pacific Islanders.

In the next scene, Cable convinces Emile to join him on the mission. They manage to send back several reports on Japanese movements before they are discovered and Cable is killed. When Nellie learns of Cable's death, she rushes to the beach and gazes intently toward the chain of islands where Emile is hiding.

"I know what counts now," she says. "Not the woman you had before or her color. What a pinhead I was. Don't die before I can tell you: all that matters is us."

But why does Nellie refer to Emile's dead wife as "the woman"? Then again, why does she rush to Emile's plantation to care for his children? Another sudden change of heart — and Nellie didn't even hear Cable sing

"You've Got to be Taught."

What does "South Pacific" say about the Pacific? Well, Asian women are ugly and unscrupulous while Polynesian women are beautiful and dumb; the Polynesian men, for their part, are happy-go-lucky guys who care only about hanging out on Bali Ha'i. Did the TV production clean up any of the movie's racist language or stereotypes? No. In fact, in the movie version, Nellie doesn't ever refer to Emile's children as "colored." So why revive "South Pacific" for TV and make it worse by adding racist dialogue? For that matter, why rent the movie other than for its music? Hey, if you want to hear the score, and I don't blame you, get the soundtrack.

DRAWN ON FOR THIS ESSAY

"South Pacific," Josh Logan, director. Starring Mitzi Gaynor, Rossano Brazzi, John Kerr. Run time: 150 minutes. CBS/Fox Video, 1984 (theatrical release 1958).

"South Pacific," Richard Pearce, director. Starring Glenn Close, Rade Sherbedgia, Harry Connick, Jr., Robert Pastorelli, Lori Tan Chinn, and Natalie Mendoza. ABC production, March 26, 2001.

AUDIO RELEASES

"South Pacific," Original Broadway Cast. Starring Mary Martin and Ezio Pinza. Columbia Records, 1998 (original release 1949).

"South Pacific," Original Soundtrack. Starring Mitzi Gaynor and Giorgio Tozzi. RCA Records, 2000 (original release 1958).

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