

'South Pacific' enjoyable

South Valley Civic Theatre opened "South Pacific" last weekend to an enthusiastic audience. I shared their enthusiasm, though not without some reservations.

I love the play, but it's always a mixed bag for me when I watch any version of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical based on James Michener's "Tales of the South Pacific." The film that I loved in '57 is now sooooo sloooooow. And the plot is motivated by emotions that don't make sense to most of us, unless you're really familiar with the historical period (World War II) during which the story takes place. Though the show's theme of racism is timeless, the particulars are not. It's simply a dated show.

In the play, two of the principles, Nellie and Lt. Joe Cable hesitate to commit to Emile and Liat, with whom they have fallen in love, because Emile has children by a previous "mixed marriage," and because Liat is Polynesian. Today it would be no big deal.

And then for some in the audience, there is the whole musical theater thing.... I know exactly what the three young men sitting in front of me were thinking as they began to squirm when David White as Emile, with his classic baritone voice, started singing "Some Enchanted Evening." Men just don't start singing to women at such moments, especially in an operatic style. Right?

Well, I'm sorry, but in musical theater they do, and one has to learn to kick back and accept, or one will miss out on a major part of this sublime art form.

And such music! I love that music, particularly when sung by the fine soloists and chorus members in this Penny Lockhart-Hermie Medley production. In addition in White, I was impressed with Jane-David McIntosh as Nellie, and Maureen Imagawa, who played Bloody Mary.

White's deBecque is charming, though a bit stiff on opening night. His rich renditions of the classic melodies filled the warm, large Gavilan Theatre. (Penny says that fans will be imported for the remaining performances.)

I understand that Miss Imagawa has wanted to play Bloody Mary for a long time. That's understandable. Her voice, energy, timing and acting provided some of the show's brightest moments.

Gary Caswell created a fine Luther Billis, the lovable Sea-Bee con-artist. He handled his vocals with a new confidence.

Helen Huang was beautiful as Liat. Though her role is small, her interaction with Cable made their instant love affair, always a problem with "South Pacific," more believable.

Mike Perry has the difficult task of playing a young, heroic, tragic, romantic community theater lead. He handled the role just fine, though his voice is not one of those that carries well.

The male and female choruses were most impressive.

Russ Hendrickson's direction moved the show at a rapid pace. His use of the beautiful, professional quality set and his placement of characters on stage all worked very well.

I hate phrases like, "a star is born," but it came to mind as I watched Miss McIntosh take command of her role. She captured the essence of Nellie, the bright, wholesome young nurse in conflict with her family's old values. Her strong young voice has matured to almost a professional level. She was a constant delight, betrayed only slightly by her youthful appearance.

Faye Pettner's orchestra, despite having some difficult moments in the overture, worked well with the vocalists, never overpowering them.

On the down side.... Though "South Pacific" is not a dancer's show, the choreography was lacking. And the lighting distracted from the quality of the production. The lighting lacked crispness at scene endings, failed to illuminate faces or enhance moods, like during Emile and Nellie's lovely "This Is How It Feels." The lighting failed even during the curtain call.

Will you enjoy the show? If you demand uniformly professional quality throughout, probably not. But if you love good, well paced community theater, excellent renditions of the classic songs of "South Pacific," performed on a professional set, all performed by local citizen-actors, your friends and neighbors, then you will enjoy this production.

"South Pacific" runs for two more weekends. Call 842-SHOW for reservations.