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South Pacific

One Last Enchanted Evening

by Christine Lavin

On Sunday August 22nd the *South Pacific* overture will play for the final time at Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont Theater; three hours later, the longest-running Broadway revival of a Rodgers & Hammerstein musical will end after 37 preview and 1,000 regular performances. The musical



-- based on the Pulitzer Prize winning *Tales Of The South Pacific* by James A. Michener
-- tells a story of love, war, racism, and survival, using some of the best theater songs ever. I was in the audience on March 1, 2008 for that first preview performance, and I'll be in the audience for the last. In between I've seen the show more than three dozen times.

I didn't attend my first Broadway musical until I was in my mid-twenties, and even though I'm more than twice that now, it feels like I'll never catch up. I'm a

folksinger/songwriter, and when Tony-winning actress Sutton Foster started singing my song "Air Conditioner," I found myself being drawn into the theater world.

It was clear from that very first preview of *South Pacific* that it was special. Paulo Szot, the Brazilian opera singer chosen to play Emile de Becque, is a devastatingly handsome baritone heartthrob; Kelli O'Hara a beguiling Nellie Forbush. Danny Burstein is a bolt of energy as the hotheaded "Luther Billis." Loretta Ables Sayre is a searing, in-you-face "Bloody Mary." Two very young actors, Luka Kain as "Jerome" and Laurissa Romain as "Ngana" play Emile de Becque's children with innocent abandon. Matthew Morrison, as "Lt. Joe Cable," a golden boy with a gorgeous tenor voice, sported an impossibly thick head of curls, and a set of chiseled abs. I saw the show three times during previews.

When it officially opened on April 3, 2008 the stellar reviews turned it into one of the hottest theater tickets in recent memory. Originally scheduled as a limited engagement through June 22nd, on April 4th the price of orchestra seats jumped from \$100 to \$125, and it was announced that it would be an "open ended run," with tickets going on sale through January 4, 2009.

Within a few days all those tickets sold out.

A month later when *South Pacific* won seven Tony Awards -- the most for any musical or play that year, highlighted by Paulo Szot's "Best Leading Actor In A Musical" award -- tickets went from "hot" to just about "impossible to get."

How impossible? There was a silent auction to raise money for the Riverside Park Fund that I was asked to find items for. I emailed Sutton Foster who put me in touch with Danny Burstein -- and watched two orchestra seats for *South Pacific* go for \$1,250. *That's* how much people were willing to pay to see this show.

But I still got in, too. How? The cancellation line. Odds are good the final shows will be sold out, too, so I'll tell you what I've learned.

In the hours prior to the performance, if the house seats aren't claimed, they are sold (limit two per customer, cash or credit card) to the patient and hopeful souls who started lining up that afternoon.

I had been lucky enough to score tickets as early as 4:15 PM, but also as late as 7:59 PM. So I knew to bring something to eat in case there's no time for dinner. I met New Yorkers from every borough, Americans from all over the country, and tourists from all over the world. One afternoon in the cancellation line I chatted up a couple that were there because that night William Michals was going to play the part of Emile de Becque. I did not know who William Michals was, and my heart sank. *South Pacific* without Paulo Szot? I contemplated bailing on the line.

But two other people eavesdropping on our conversation told us they drove in from Connecticut when they heard that William Michals was going to sing. This was four

people in the cancellation line who were there specifically to hear him, so I stayed.

That night as I took my seat in row G I overheard people behind me complaining about the "Playing the part of Emile de Becque tonight" addendum slipped into their programs.

I turned around and said gently, "I stood in the cancellation line for three hours today, and met four people who were there *because* William Michals is singing tonight. I debated leaving the line, but they convinced me I'd be missing out on something great if I did. So here I am."

That calmed them down.

William Michals simply dazzled that night. After his first song, "Some Enchanted Evening" -- when the audience erupted with shouts of "Bravo! BRAVO!" -- we lucky people knew we were witnessing one of those mythical nights where the standby doesn't just rise to the occasion, but flies far above and beyond all expectations.

Since then I have seen William Michals many times, but because he is the standby it has been dumb luck landing me in a seat on a night he was singing. When the show's run was extended -- and then extended again -- it conflicted with opera commitments Paulo had previously made. Word was out that the producers were looking for a new baritone to take over the lead while he was away.

I boldly asked at the box office why they couldn't give William Michals the part? It was explained to me that to be ready to go on with a moment's notice takes a very special actor -- it often being harder to find a rock solid, reliable standby than a leading actor. So William Michals was not promoted, and the search was on to find a new Emile de Becque.

Meanwhile, Matthew Morrison left playing Lt. Cable to take on the role of Will Schuester in the Fox TV show *Glee* -- which proved to be a savvy move as *Glee* became a phenomenon, and Matthew Morrison is now a bona fide TV star. Andrew Samonsky ably stepped in to play Lt. Cable. He might not have Matthew's curls, but he's made the part his own.

Soon the new Emile de Becque was brought in -- David Pittsinger, from the Metropolitan Opera, right next door to the Vivian Beaumont Theater. He had originally auditioned for the part, was beaten out by his friend Paulo Szot, but made such an impression that his name was one of the first to come up.

Though he was taller and a bit older than the other Emiles, Kelli O'Hara gazed into David's eyes with the same intensity she displayed with Paulo and William. As much as I was rooting for William to take over the part, I had to admit that David Pittsinger was a vocal powerhouse and a stunningly wonderful actor (with mesmerizing steely blue eyes). And such a seasoned pro that one Saturday (March 20th of this year) he played

Emile in *South Pacific's* matinee, then later that night at the Metropolitan Opera he sang the part of Hamlet's father (as William Michals played Emile next door). How many singers can say they've performed in a Broadway musical *and* at the Metropolitan Opera on the very same day?

From that point on I came to think of Paulo Szot, William Michals, and David Pittsinger as *South Pacific's* equivalent of the three Billys in *Billy Elliot*. Now I didn't care who was playing Emile because all three were absolutely thrilling.

Soon word got out that Kelli O'Hara and her husband Greg Naughton were expecting a baby, and over the next few months I watched as Kelli's artfully altered costumes hid her growing belly. At 5-1/2 months pregnant she still did double-cartwheels during "I'm In Love With A Wonderful Guy." By then it had been announced that her replacement was chosen, a young actress named Laura Osnes. I was disturbed to learn that she had won a reality TV-show called *You're The One That I Want*, a contest to find the leads for the Broadway revival of *Grease*.

I couldn't believe a reality TV show winner was going to take over for the beloved Kelli O'Hara. With trepidation I bought tickets for her fourth performance, where she'd be opposite David Pittsinger. I could have gotten tickets for her first night, but put it off because I assumed I'd be disappointed and this would be the end of my following this show.

Wrong. That night was a magical variation on that first William Michals night -- Laura was a revelation. Now I found myself loving all three Emiles, plus this new Nellie . . . the show's run was extended again and I knew I was hopelessly hooked. At each performance I attended I watched Laura get deeper and deeper into the role of Nellie. Replacing Kelli O'Hara was a daunting task, but watching Laura work her own special magic was a delight.

Despite the cast changes, demand for tickets remained strong, though now it was only weekend shows that sold out way in advance. On weekdays whenever I was free and could justify the expense (and truthfully, I could justify the expense for any reason I could muster), I'd hop on the Columbus Avenue bus, knowing my chances of getting in were good (only once did I fail to snag a ticket). Like Kelli O'Hara, Laura Osnes' perfectly calibrated performances opposite all three Emiles were a wonder to behold, as were Billis' (Danny Burstein) and Bloody Mary's (Loretta Ables Sayre).

I became friendly with the box office attendants who at first thought I was a little nuts. But during one of my visits I gave them each an album of mine so they could see I was -- tangentially at least -- in the same business, and I told them attending this show is part of my education. I also became friends with Charles, the security guard. Once I brought him cookies, but it wasn't a bribe (bribes don't work on the cancellation line . . . OK, the cookies *were* an attempted bribe). I sure hope he'll be there that final Sunday so I can say hello. And goodbye, I guess.

One night I was there during Fleet Week, when Manhattan is visited by aircraft carriers and the sailors and Marines stationed on them. Before the lights went down I looked around and counted more than 30 sailors in their dress whites. I quickly sent an email to Danny Burstein asking if he and the cast would like to greet the sailors after the show. But then the show started and I had to turn my phone off.

At intermission I read an email from Danny -- *bring 'em back* -- so I darted around the lobby looking for men and women in uniform. There were Marines there, too, but not as easy to spot as the sailors in the whites. I told every one I could find to meet me by the box office after the show if they wanted to meet the cast.

An older woman overheard me, took me aside and told me she was there with her 90-year-old father who was a veteran of WW2 -- could he go backstage, too? Of course.

It's hard to know who was more excited to meet who -- the sailors and Marines meeting the actors who portrayed them, or the actors meeting the real servicemen and women. Laura Osnes ran back to her dressing room for her camera. I became the unofficial photographer -- sailors and actors handing me their cameras -- as I snapped pictures for them.

At each performance I studied all aspects of the show. The Vivian Beaumont is a thrust stage, with the audience on three sides. Sitting on the left you'd watch a scene where actors face you, but sitting on the right their backs are to you -- two very different views, and yet from every angle director Bartlett Sher made sure the scenes worked. I marveled at the lighting design that also had to work from all these different angles.

Paulo Szot had more opera commitments and David Pittsinger stepped in. Then David left to play Emile in the national tour, and William Michals got to play Emile De Becque for weeks at a time. The last time I saw the show at Lincoln Center (Tuesday, July 13th) William was singing, it was sold out . . . and there was a cancellation line. Alas, not everyone on the line got in that night, but smartly I had bought tickets in advance.

At that performance I noticed just how much taller the young "Jerome" and "Ngana" had grown since the beginning of the run -- almost 12 inches. And my admiration for the actors playing the non-lead roles has increased every performance, notably Skipp Sudduth as Capt. George Brackett, and Sean Cullen as Cmdr. William Harbison.

For a number of months a terrific actor named Murphy Guyer played Capt. Brackett, and in one tense scene he always made the sign of the cross (my Catholic upbringing noticed), while Skipp never did, but Skipp added a humorous hip-swivel in one scene that Murphy never did. Sean Cullen played Harbison with a New England accent and a world-weariness that reminded me of the WW2 veterans who worked at the military school where I grew up. Not being from the theater world, it never ceases to amaze me how actors maintain such pitch-perfect performances over a long run, and how they find subtle things to bring their characters to life.

This is your last chance to see *South Pacific* in New York -- if it's sold out, now at least you know you can try your luck in the cancellation line -- but if you can't get in, it is going to be broadcast live on Wednesday August 18th at 8:00 PM on PBS stations' "Live From Lincoln Center" around the country (check your local listings). If you don't have a high def flat screen TV with surround sound, make some calls 'til you find a friend or neighbor who does, and then invite yourself over.

New mom Kelli O'Hara has rejoined Paulo Szot and the rest of the cast for this final run -- but remember, there's nothing to worry about should Kelli or Paulo get kidnapped or stuck on the subway (not that I am hoping for that). The show is in good hands no matter who plays the starring roles.

And here are two helpful tips: the intermission comes one hour and 40 minutes into the show. So don't drink too much water before curtain. And this production has a wide dynamic range: some singing is boisterous, but some of the dialogue is very quiet. Anyone with hearing issues should get the amplification devices available just to the left of the bar in the main lobby (where, conveniently, you can pre-order a "Bloody Mary" to be served to you during intermission).

Oh -- and one last thing. Don't sing along. Yes, we know you know all the songs. So do we. You can buy the soundtrack in the lobby and sing at the top of your lungs all the way home. But for now, sit back, relax, and enjoy being part of theater history as this spectacular Broadway revival ends its remarkable run.

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Christine Lavin is a singer/songwriter/concert performer who has released 20 solo albums of original songs, and has just written her first book, *Cold Pizza For Breakfast: A Mem-Wha??* (TellMePress.com)

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