

EDGAS presents a spectacular South Pacific!



The lady sitting next to me leans over; 'This is my Mum; she saw the original with **Mary Martin**'. *South Pacific* is a bit like *The Archers*; everyone knows it and everyone who likes it loves it – when it opened on Broadway in 1949 one critic called it '*South Terrific*'. All credit, then, to **Edinburgh Gilbert & Sullivan Society** for tackling this iconic **Rodgers and Hammerstein** musical – get it wrong and you'd better be on the next flight to Tahiti yourself. In an exuberant first night at the **Church Hill Theatre** on Wednesday, EDGAS not only got it right – they made it their own.



The curtain opens on a fabulous garden under a tropical orange sky; it is no longer a stormy night in Morningside and instead a beautiful day on a Polynesian island, temporary home to a unit of the US Navy in World War II. The garden belongs to French plantation owner **Emile de Becque**, a sophisticated man of the world impressively played by **David Mutch**, who brings just the right combination of formality and passion to the role. Emile is someone who has seen life and knows what he wants from it, a man of honour – but also of kindness; the scenes with his children **Ngana** and **Jerome** (**Elise Edwards** and **Nathan Faulds**, both excellent) are full of tenderness and fun.



The star of the show is of course **Nellie Forbush**, a navy nurse straight out of Little Rock, amazed by everything she sees and already envisioning herself as the wife of the mysterious Emile. The outstanding **Fiona Main** immediately wins us over – her Nellie is light-hearted, jolly and never uses one word

when twenty will do – despite declaring herself ‘just speechless’. Fiona’s full, mellow tones, first heard here in *A Cockeyed Optimist*, are one of this show’s many strengths and perfectly complement David Mutch’s strong baritone in duets such as the glorious *Some Enchanted Evening*. David also gives a superlative and moving interpretation of *This Nearly Was Mine*. Both leads have perfected appropriate accents, Nellie’s Southern drawl reminding one just a little of **Meryl Streep’s** Julia Child (and for me that is an accolade), with Mutch’s restrained French accent avoiding any descent into cliché.



There are serious themes in *South Pacific* – we’ll come to those in a moment – but there’s also a generous helping of light relief in the form of the ‘**Seabees**’, members of a construction corps of the navy, all of them out for fun, preferably in female form. **Luther Billis** (the inimitable **Simon Boothroyd**, whose facial expressions and sense of comic timing are second to none) is their wheeler-dealer leader with a

heart of gold; his banter with **Bloody Mary** (**Caroline Kerr**, in a totally convincing performance as the local version of Luther) is very funny, and leads us into an hilarious version of *There is Nothing Like a Dame*, complete with graphic gesturing from the sex-starved men. Caroline's rendition of *Bali Ha'i* was perhaps just a little fast – but as one of the few people present who hasn't seen **Juanita Hall's** original (I'm basing my judgement on **Sarah Vaughan's** version), what do I know?



The second act of *South Pacific* is full of contrasts. The Thanksgiving Entertainment organised by the nurses is a riot (the chorus in this production is very good, with every member fully engaged and enthusiastic), but we are also reminded of the real purpose of the navy's presence on the island; it needs to outwit Japanese warships hiding in the area, and a mission to spy on the enemy has tragic consequences. The damaging effects of ingrained racial prejudice are highlighted in two key relationships and encapsulated in **Lt Joseph Cable's** (**Chris Cotter**, whose singing is another highlight of the show) groundbreaking *You've Got To Be Carefully Taught*, which Oscar Hammerstein was originally asked to remove from the show (he replied 'That's what the show's all about!'). Critic **Kenneth Tynan** called *South Pacific* 'the first musical romance which was seriously involved in an adult subject', and EDGAS manages the changes of tone well, although the number of short scenes needed to move the plot along as it nears its end would be a challenge to any company and does become a little confusing – but this is a fault of the writing rather than the performers.



Choreographer **Janice Bruce** has done a magnificent job with this production. Highlights include *Bali Ha'i* itself, in which all the Seabees turn towards the backdrop of the mystical island, a wonderfully joyous *I'm Gonna Wash That Man...* in which Fiona excels and towels are used to great effect, and the enchanting dance performed by **Liat** (**Emma MacFarlane**) in *Happy Talk*. Billis's spoof of *Bali Ha'i* and his uproarious duet with Nellie in *Honey Bun* also deserve five stars. Similarly the orchestra, expertly conducted by Musical Director **David Lyle**, is to be congratulated on its spirited delivery of the show's many hits; the musical crescendo coinciding with Nellie and Emile's long-awaited first kiss is but one of a number of effective touches. The set designs created by **John Urquhart** and his team are of a standard way beyond many amateur productions – Emile's beautiful garden really looks like a plantation owner's property, while the island of Bali Ha'i has a convincing steamy-tropical feel.

This is the first time that **Edinburgh Gilbert and Sullivan Society** has performed an American musical, and it certainly shouldn't be the last. *South Pacific* is a triumph for director **Alan Borthwick** and every member of the company.



South Pacific is on at the **Church Hill Theatre, Morningside**

Road, at 7.30pm on Thursday 29th, Friday 30th and Saturday 31st October 2015, with an additional matinee performance at 2.30pm on Saturday. Tickets may be purchased from the **Usher Hall Box Office**, Lothian Road, in person, by calling 0131 228 1155 or online [here](#). All cast photos (c) **Darren Coutts**.

