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Cover Page Footnote

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Desegregation Through Entertainment: Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* as an Instrument of Military Policy

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Abstract

American musical theatre has served as a composite of historical and cultural memory through its history but has also been an instrument of supporting changing American military policy and culture. The most notable example of this is Rodgers and Hammerstein's critically acclaimed musical *South Pacific*. Set during the Second World War II, the musical was celebrated by the American public for upholding Greatest Generation nostalgia and its progressive views on racial tolerance. Its depiction of the war was acclaimed by veterans and service members alike, prompting the show's heavy usage by the military to assist in the cultural changes that came with military desegregation. The show's wide-sweeping military appeal generated a nuanced relationship between the production company and the Armed Services that extended beyond servicemen attending the show. Utilizing the archival collections of Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, and Joshua Logan, this project highlights how the show became an integral part of Armed Services entertainment through a number of licensed productions to the United Service Organizations, military bases, and veterans' hospitals both domestically and internationally. As the military was desegregating the service, the show's anti-racist sentiment, cloaked in the veil of

wartime nostalgia, was concurrent with the direction of military policy and culture, making it good entertainment for service members. Military usage of *South Pacific* was a way to ease the blow of desegregation on the military by means of entertainment, through peppering the thematic ideas about the importance of racial tolerance into a piece of unsuspecting, morale-building, military-supporting theatre.

Keywords: Musical Theatre, American History, World War II, Theatre History

Introduction

Upon seeing the Broadway musical *South Pacific* at New York's Majestic Theatre in 1949, Pacific War veteran Richard M. Young, felt himself "slip right back to 1944 and '45 and felt every emotion, as if [he] were living it all over" again and captured "those moments of beauty, of horror, of joy, of sadness" he experienced at war (Young). For many people across America, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's musical *South Pacific*, set in the Solomon Islands during the Second World War, was more than an average Broadway show or piece of World War II memory. The musical represented both an escapist fantasy and a reflection of postwar America in mainstream entertainment. Whether it be in popular advertising that played off of the show's songs ("Some Enchanting Eating") or the didactic use of "You've Got to be Carefully Taught" in classrooms and by activist groups, *South Pacific* was a popular culture phenomenon embedded in American hearts and minds (Paris & Peart Advertising; Davis). The show was notably favored by the American military, which sanctioned productions by the United Service Organizations (USO) and Department of Defense, both domestically and internationally. Additionally, war veterans flocked to and connected with the show that "sent [them] back to

those aching wonderful, heartbreaking months” of wartime service, and if they couldn’t go to the theatre, the show was brought to them in veterans’ hospitals (Young).

The collaboration between the American Armed Services and its related organizations and Surrey Enterprises Inc., Rodgers and Hammerstein’s production company, was not a new phenomenon. The two groups had collaborated during World War II by getting service members to see *Oklahoma!* at the St. James Theatre in New York before leaving for duty, but the scale of collaboration on *South Pacific* was unprecedented, both in the show’s development process and the incentivization to get active duty service members and veterans to see the show once it premiered (Carter 147). This begs the question: why did the American military use *South Pacific* in its postwar military entertainment? The mythologization and exoticization of military service in the musical, combined with its thematic promotion of racial tolerance concurrent with the military’s changing culture, made *South Pacific* an appropriate show to present to current and former service members. The show eased the shock of desegregation of the military by means other than physical action such as integrating units. In the case, a piece of morale-building, military-supporting theatrical entertainment was used as a soft power to socialize the military towards tolerance. The show’s anti-racist sentiment, cloaked in the veil of wartime nostalgia and mythologization of service in the Pacific Theater of Operations, fit well into a military culture under racial integration following Executive Order 9981, which desegregated the American military.

This paper highlights how *South Pacific* serves as a composite of postwar American memory and history with a specific focus on the show’s use by the military and related organizations. While most research specific to *South Pacific* focuses on the show’s role in promoting racial tolerance, it forgets that the musical’s backdrop is the incredibly brutal Pacific

Theatre. Instead of grappling with wartime realities and examining the rough interplay of war, myth, and memory, the show fosters the image of World War II as a nostalgic ‘Good War,’ an image that served military and popular opinion. The examples presented below illuminate why and how the musical was pervasive in postwar military entertainment by comparing the lived experience of wartime service to the show’s mythologized history of the war. Additionally, it will examine the show’s complex racial politics, and highlight the musical’s collaboration with and postwar utilization by the military.

How *South Pacific* Mythologized World War II

“Let’s leap to a conclusion at the outset and establish the fact that neither the play nor the movie version of “South Pacific” was ever meant to be a documentary on what happened in those latitudes during World War II” (Farrell).

South Pacific underwent several revisions, and with every version, its narrative moved further away from the historical truth about soldiers’ experiences in the Pacific Theater. While the creators sought to make *South Pacific* as accurate as possible, the musical is still a piece of Second World War memory and historical fiction several degrees separated from historical fact. The work started off as memories and oral histories that were turned into a fictional short story collection by James A. Michener, which was reshaped by the edits of the Macmillan Publishing company. Next, it was selectively adapted into a musical play, and finally was performed on stage by the show’s company led by a director’s vision. These gaps between each of the multiple degrees of separation are where losses in translation occur, turning actual history and primary source accounts into romanticized, nostalgia-filled fiction.

Historians have shown that the Pacific War for American armed forces was much more brutal and savage than the war in Europe. Also, the Pacific Theater was, in large part, a race war.

As opposed to the European fronts where people were fighting people of similar heritage, languages, and ancestral places of origin, the Americans fighting on the Pacific front saw themselves radically different from the Japanese they were fighting. Due to the differences in language, culture, and race, it became easier for Americans to ‘pseudo-speciate’ the Japanese people as a subhuman menace, which was reinforced through rhetoric, propaganda, and the media (Dower 1-14). Due to the dehumanization of the enemy, savagery in warfare was easier to justify and carry out without hesitation. The combat environment of the Pacific was also characterized by disease, complicated foreign geography, and the harsh climate, making the combat experience both frustrating and exhausting. Compared to the urban and rural environments in Europe, the Pacific Theater was characterized by island hopping and a natural environment that needed to be mastered to defeat the Japanese.¹ In conjunction and motivation with the idea of a race war, American soldiers destroyed the environment with weapons designed to wipe out soldiers, civilians, and nature alike, with a backdrop of modern industrial warfare.

South Pacific is effectively silent on the brutality of World War II as a whole, and even more notably, in the Pacific Theater, where the show takes place. The lack of military action and wartime brutality in the show finds expression in the fact that it takes place in the war’s rear areas and most of the featured ensemble military personnel are either nurses or members of United States Naval Construction Battalions, or Seabees.² In this regard, the play accurately portrays non-combatants, but by focusing mostly on these groups, it distracts the audience from

¹ The Allies utilized the military strategy of island hopping in the Pacific Theater, which entailed the assumption of control and establishment of a base on a key island, and then using that island as a launching point to take over another island, and so on. This allowed the Allies to move defended areas of control closer to the Japanese mainland and work to help blockade Japan by cutting off their supply lines.

² During World War II, United States Naval Construction Battalions, or Seabees were groups of militarized construction workers who built advanced base developments largely in Pacific warzones. Recruited from the Civil Engineer Corps and construction laborers, Seabees received military training and constructed over four hundred bases during the war (“Seabee History”).

the far more brutal history of the war. More akin to a daily job than a traditional military one, when not on duty these men watched movies, drank Cokes, and explored the islands they were stationed on in their downtime, which was not a luxury offered to most combatants (Harman 10-12). Most of the characters in *South Pacific* experienced this side of the war, as opposed to physical combat, but this does not excuse the silence on wartime savagery within the sectors of the play that deal with combatants. Non-combat and military support personnel have largely been sidelined in the World War II narrative because they do not depict tales of heroism and valor like combat memoirs do, so *South Pacific* is important in providing popular culture representation for these wartime experiences.

South Pacific works well as a war musical because it illustrates the idea that war is oftentimes large periods of inaction with bursts of action. However, the musical takes this to an extreme and relegates combat to a very minor role which poorly serves the play's historical accuracy and helps to further mythologize the war. The whole musical builds up to a single military operation, a fictitious Operation Alligator, but one of the most striking elements in *South Pacific* is that for a play that centers around the Second World War the war's physical action happens off-stage. All information given about wartime operations are relayed through radio messages and mission briefings on base, and Lieutenant Cable dies in combat off-stage, which downplays the emotional and plot impact of his passing on audiences (Hammerstein and Logan 87). Instead of seeing him die, audiences only hear about it in passing, which effectively silences the toll of death in a time of war. The play also leaves off with the Navy stationed on the island awaiting transport in battle uniform, indicating there is fighting still to be done, whereas Nellie stays back on the island to raise Emile's children when she presumes he is dead.

The play also glorifies World War II by showing a romanticized role for women in their roles as nurses. During World War II, while most women served in munitions jobs and helped support the war effort on the home front, one of the most significant ways women became actively involved was through the Army Nurse Corps (ANC). The popular and prevailing dichotomy was that women were meant to be the caretakers while men were meant to be soldiers, which the Second World War reinforced. Due to this, nursing also remained a very gendered profession and thus the ANC sought to keep men out of the picture as nurses, who were largely young, unmarried, female, white recruits (Tomblin 10; Threat 2-6, 24). The ANC served in both the European and Pacific Theatres and worked almost non-stop, serving as major factors in raising the morale of soldiers and sailors alike (Tomblin 10; Threat 2-6, 24). *South Pacific's* nurse characters are cookie-cutter versions of the young, unmarried, female, white image that the ANC perpetuated.

The ANC's model nurse is fully realized in the main female lead Nellie Forbush, a self-proclaimed cockeyed optimist who works tirelessly towards the morale of the Armed Forces. When Nellie is first introduced, in the song "A Cockeyed Optimist," she proclaims that while people believe with the war that "[they]'re done and [they] might as well be dead," she "can't get it into [her] head" because she is full of hope and optimism (Hammerstein and Logan 6). As opposed to seeing the realities presented to her, Nellie believes that everyone can and will persevere through the hardships of war and that nothing can hold her back. Her can-do attitude is also paired with a devotion to military morale, as the Master of Ceremonies and one of the organizers for the island's 'Thanksgiving Follies' revue for the troops. One Pacific Theater veteran who later attended the show, Richard M. Young, wrote to Mary Martin that her performance as Nellie "the kind of girl that [they] all dreamed of and thought about down there"

during the war and how she “[was] America, [she was] home” (Young). In ways, Nellie also represents the woman the veterans got to return home to because like a woman of the period who started the war as employed members of the public sphere and returned to the private, domestic sphere post-war. Nellie similarly takes this journey, starting as a model nurse and by the end of the show forgoes joining her fellow nurses for Operation Alligator and transitions to the model mother of Emile’s children and woman of the plantation house. Even though Nellie is only an Ensign, she is a model nurse that represents exactly what an ANC nurse was meant to be and a snapshot of the idealized woman of the period.

The play idealizes the relationship between the American Armed Forces and the populations on the islands where the military was stationed. During the war, island populations helped the armed forces on both sides of the war. Some sought to free themselves from colonial rule and saw Japanese victories as inspiration that other Asian populations could stand up to the white colonizers. Some sympathized with the Japanese despite their harsh occupation regime, while others such as Filipinos helped the Allied causes through combat, shipbuilding, agriculture (Okihito 356-357). In the Solomon Islands where *South Pacific* is set, the Allies recruited islanders to serve in a labor corps and had contact with people they otherwise would have been segregated from during colonial rule.

In the play, more focus is placed on the enlistment of the colonial forces on the island, as opposed to the colonized who are relegated to a minor role. Colonel Brackett enlists Emile in the dangerous operation to go on a scouting mission with Lieutenant Cable and help “turn...the tide of the war in their area” (Hammerstein and Logan 46). Brackett’s proposal is an example of the United States Armed Forces working with the local if non-native population during the war and recruiting them for help. While Emile is a Frenchman, and not a Polynesian, his involvement is

still an example of how the war fostered globalization and often became integrated into local societies. The indigenous populations in the show, however, are largely dissociated from the war effort and are presented as people that are of service to or cause trouble in colonial society. The show has a “French colonialist presence...apparent” throughout, which is emphasized by the use of the French language by all of the local peoples, except for Bloody Mary, who is one of the show’s anticolonial models (Lovensheimer 176). Henry, Emile’s French-speaking native servant, has no agency within the play and is only there to serve the de Becque family of the plantation house, making him an example of a ‘civilized’ Pacific Islander who has acclimated to colonial society. He serves as a contrast to Bloody Mary, who constantly comments on how the “French planters [are] stingy bastards” and stirs up trouble to get the islanders to work for her by making island paraphernalia instead of their farm work (Hammerstein and Logan 21, 25). Throughout there is a clear expectation that the plantation owners and their tenants will be helping support the US military presence on the island, and those who disrupt this process are trespassing on Navy property.

One of the most significant ways *South Pacific* serves to generate nostalgia is in the scenes at the top of Act II for the island’s ‘Thanksgiving Follies’ performance for the troops, evocative of the Soldier Shows and amateur theatrical performances put on by service personnel for service personnel. These shows had “inestimable therapeutic effect value” for both the audiences and participants and were different than the professional Camp Shows organized by the United Service Organizations (USO) (Matson 5-7). Extremely amateur, the revue in *South Pacific* is costumed in rope, newspapers and comic books, the GIs in attendance are sitting on ammunition boxes and are struggling with problems like people forgetting to put gas in the generator to power the show (Hammerstein and Logan 62-65, 70). However, as Colonel Brackett

claims “It’s things...like this show tonight that keep [them] going” especially as the Allies are “having the hell beat out of [them] in two hemispheres” (Hammerstein and Logan 70). The revue serves as a way to uphold morale until things take a turn for the better and foster a sense of hope and community among the service members, nurses, and locals on the island as they try to make themselves a temporary home before they can return to the United States. The scene serves to remember the entertainment experiences of the war while also celebrating the perseverance of the spirit and sense of fraternity that came with American military service during the Second World War.

No matter what the context, be it drama or comedy, at points where the *South Pacific* could have nuanced discussions about the Second World War, it all comes back to the same notions of island escapism presented by the play. The musical, while an important piece of war memory that came in within five years post-war, is a piece of heavily mythologized historical fiction.

***South Pacific* and Pushing the Discourse of Race in America**

While *South Pacific* is set against the background of the Second World War, more than anything Rogers and Hammerstein saw an opportunity to make a statement about racial politics in contemporary America. The show was meant as a critique of the fact that Americans fought a war against enemies they perceived as racist when “their own racism remain[ed] unresolved” and continued even past the war’s conclusion (Lovensheimer 1). In the late 1940s, America had complicated racial politics as tensions remained high, especially in the American South that still faced segregation under Jim Crow laws. Additionally, there was a deep fear of race riots erupting especially in cities and white America struggled to face their racism and present America as a place of democracy and integrity (Kellogg 18, 40-41). In the heat of the Cold War, both America

and the Soviet Union tried to emphasize equal worth and dignity of their respective peoples, and the United States was not practicing what it preached. The Soviet Union wanted to “prove to the world that America violated the human right rules” in its treatment of civil rights for people of color, and some Americans also noticed this embarrassing discrepancy and were displeased (Skrentny 42, 45).

Due to its presentation of traditional gender norms and American values the musical, *South Pacific* would be considered an uncontroversial show would it not be for the cynical song “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught,” an open condemnation of racial prejudice. It reveals the ugly side of American racism and presents it as a nature versus nurture issue, which is, in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s opinion, a nurture problem. The song highlights that people are conditioned to have racist beliefs by their families and surroundings when they are children and will proceed to carry this sentiment through the rest of their lives. This refers to the racism harbored by white America against people of color, most likely in direct reference to Asians, implied through the stereotypical reference to ‘oddly made’ eyes. In addition, this is inclusive of other people of color like African Americans, implied through the reference to a “different shade” of non-white skin. This song both chastises Nellie within the play and the audience members who may believe their racist beliefs are inherent, and thus are unable to be changed or altered. The notion that racism is taught also means it can be unlearned so that people can be socialized towards tolerance, an important step toward empathy on the personal level and civil rights on the societal level. The song also is the most overtly political statement in the show, because whereas the rest of the show is more subtle and nuanced in terms of racial discourse, its’ bluntness cannot be missed.

The song is the show's most overt attempt at conveying the creative team's message of racial tolerance clear to the audiences and was so progressive that it made some audiences anxious. The song was problematic for certain audience members, who saw the number as an "abrupt...halt...for a double-barrel three-minute commercial" (McWhorter). Several more conservative theatergoers were unable to enjoy that part of the show, feeling that a lecture on racial tolerance was being shoved in their faces. However, both on the individual and organizational level, other Americans found comfort in the progressive nature of *South Pacific*. On the individual level, the show's creators received numerous letters about how much it impacted them and hopes that "the moral of love casting out prejudice" that the play perpetuates "touch[es] a warm spot in the American heart!" which proved its resonance (Parker). One schoolteacher, Helen I. Davis, also wrote to Oscar Hammerstein for a copy of the "You've Got to be Taught" lyrics because she felt the song's "'social significance' [would be] useful for [her] classroom presentations during Brotherhood Week" (Davis). This highlights the fact that she not only clearly understood the song's message but also was taking up a call to action to promote racial tolerance among youths in her workplace. On a larger organizational level, groups like the Los Angeles Interracial Chorus requested to perform the song and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) requested to have the show's cast perform a benefit concert for the organization's 40th anniversary (White; Mazer). While some sectors of America weren't ready to come to terms with changing racial politics, there were also many people on the same page as Rodgers and Hammerstein who were also striving towards a goal of tolerance and harmony among the races.

Although the show pushed boundaries by critiquing the American record on civil rights and advocating racial tolerance in general, it also reinforced and perpetuated racist caricatures

and stereotypes of Asians.³ *South Pacific* is not entirely a glowing picture of representation for non-European characters because while the songs and libretto may preach racial tolerance, several moments retrospectively are racist. The most significant victims of racist caricatures and stereotypes are the show's Southeast Asian characters, Liat and Bloody Mary, who are poorly treated by the libretto since their heritage and culture become the show's punch line and serve as dangerous caricatures.

Some racist elements towards Asian peoples, in general, reflect wartime attitudes, such as the libretto's utilization of the racial slur 'Jap' eleven times throughout the course of the play by American military-aligned characters (Hammerstein and Logan). This slur was commonplace in wartime propaganda because "monosyllabic enemies are easier to despise than others" and could be used in catchy slogans like "Rap the Jap" or for quick reference (Fussell 117). The usage of the term, while offensive, is period accurate to the widespread wartime anti-Japanese sentiment, especially in the Pacific Theatre, which was more racially charged than in the European Theater. During the war, both in military lingo and propaganda the Japanese enemy was also dehumanized into "dwarfish but vicious species" of sup-human but powerful animals that made "desirable trophies" when tortured and killed (Fussell 120). This anti-Japanese sentiment was subdued after the war and during the American occupation of Japan, where people realized the "subtle... and delica[te]" nature of Japanese people who were now democratized and committed to peace (Fussell 120). However, the fact that Americans rediscovered the humanity that they lost sight of during the war does not undo the xenophobic damage that had been done. As to the

³ In the *South Pacific* libretto, the people of color characters are referred to as either natives, who are presumably Pacific Islanders, and others who are referred to as Tonkinese, who are presumably from the Tonkin region of Vietnam in Southeast Asia. For purposes of this paper, these are the two Western-imposed classifications that will be used. From the libretto, it is unclear if Rodgers, Hammerstein, and Logan were aware of or understood the nationalities or ethnicities of the people they were representing or the associated historical anthropology.

usage of the ‘Jap’ slur in *South Pacific*, it is likely that this normalized slur would not have been seen as a problem, especially because the fact that the Japanese were America’s enemies during the war was uncontroversial across all political leanings. The dehumanization of Japanese people was already embedded into the war experience, so this language locates the musical temporally and reflects American attitudes for their former wartime enemy.

South Pacific is a racially charged play that aims to grapple with the tolerance of other races and this theme overshadows the brutality and dehumanization of the war as well as the race tensions in the American postwar climate. While the show should be acknowledged for its progressive nature at the time of its creation, it is also important to retrospectively reflect on some of its racist elements that contradict the very theme the show upholds. Despite this, the show’s overall message made it an unprecedented hit with both the American public and American military, making the show a good candidate for its later usage in American Armed Services entertainment, especially in the face of a changing military culture.

***South Pacific* as an Instrument of Military Policy**

“The generous spirit which has prompted your offer of the wonderful production that is to be highly commended. The Department of the Army wishes to express its gratitude for your interest in the welfare and morale of the Armed Forces” (Bergin).

On July 26, 1948, President Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which desegregated the Armed Forces and established “equal treatment and opportunity in the Armed Services.” This led to a period of integration that continued throughout the Korean War conflict (Executive Order 9981). During these years there was considerable resistance from all sectors of the military. However, with many minority populations enlisted in the Armed Services and an emerging movement campaigning for civil rights, there was no choice but to cooperate with the

executive order. This was exceedingly important during the early Cold War years as American leaders had to prove they were not secondary to the Soviets in terms of civil liberties. In the face of armed forces that had yet to have mixed-race units, there also needed to be a change in military thought and culture, and *South Pacific* was a way to ease this change through popular entertainment.

One of the most notable things about *South Pacific* was its deep connection with entertaining the American Armed Forces and usage by military-aligned organizations. The American military readily used *South Pacific*, whether through sanctioned productions of the show or encouraging service members to attend productions of it. In many cases, it was not just low-level members of the military engagement with the show's content; Rodgers and Hammerstein's company, Surrey Enterprises Inc., had been requested to organize benefit concerts "for the personnel of the Pentagon and their families" or arranged for the "highest-ranking Generals of the Marine Corps" to see the show in New York (Reinheimer, Memo to Hammerstein II). This relationship is recorded in correspondence to President Truman regarding a "tour of Armed Forces Installations in the Pacific" during the Korean War and collaboration with Far East Command to make sure the show got to the men on the ground (Bergin). This collaboration with and acceptance by military elites demonstrate that the relationship between *South Pacific* and the Armed Forces was pervasive through the entire chain of command, and the show's usage was not just accidental. When placed in historical context, the military's wish to utilize a show that emulated the changing military culture following the desegregation of the Armed Forces makes the musical arguably an instrument of military policy and cultural change through entertainment.

More than just mere entertainment, *South Pacific* served a social function in the military and helped socialize the military towards racial tolerance within the ‘safe space’ of a theatrical performance cushioned in luxurious, if wartime, island escapism. The musical’s uniquely moderate position, which could be attributed to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s fears of being labeled as communists, worked well with a military that was not ready for radical change. If the show had not placed the military in as high esteem or worked to showcase some of the less heroic and more horrific elements of the Second World War, it would not have been as revered in sanctioned Armed Services entertainment. Alternatively, if the show was any more radical it would have likely been dismissed as being too discursive or progressive by the conservative-leaning military. *South Pacific*’s position on the military and race was shaped by the larger sociopolitical context of the 1940s, but in the end, it was perfectly suited to entertain service members.

As early as the show’s conception, there was a connection with the American military and veterans that helped inform and bring the show to fruition. For example, Oscar Hammerstein II was in contact with the Director of the Training and Information Division of the Navy’s Bureau of Yards and Docks to borrow materials like copies of the Seabees News Service to help inform the creation and development of *South Pacific* (Stowe). Additionally, veterans like Harold M Esty Jr. were involved in helping finance the show, indicating that former servicemen expected the show to succeed and were willing to invest to help the piece of war media reach the stage (Esty Jr.). These examples highlight how even from before the show’s premiere, the show was establishing a relationship and resonate with military associated personnel, which would continue throughout the show’s lifetime.

While some motives of Surrey Enterprises were business and public relations oriented, it did not mean they let the military get away with any performances it wanted. The company had a deeply vested interest “in the welfare and morale of the Armed Forces,” and that meant both enlisted men and officers (Bergin). At times, a number of the show’s benefit performances had been attended largely by officers, their wives, and families at the expense of enlisted men attending, which disturbed attendees and the show’s creators alike (Masemetz; Hayward; Reinheimer, Memo to Burnham). When the military tried to get shows sanctioned largely for the benefit of military higher-ups as opposed to the “unfortunate [veterans] who are confined to hospitals” the company also exhibited large degrees of push back to ensure the military did not abuse their kindness (Reinheimer, Memo to Burnham). While Surrey Enterprises Inc. readily supported the military, the company was not subservient to military wishes and shared a mutually constitutive relationship.

One of Surrey Enterprises’ biggest goals was to ensure that non-officer classes had as much access to the show as higher up officials, so the show’s impact was not just limited to the military elites. Due to this, several ordinary veterans or servicemen reached out to Rodgers and Hammerstein regarding the show’s impact on their own lives. Some of the performances of the show were put on in “god-forsaken areas” like the Alaskan Kodiak, enabling men with few options for entertainment “to see first-rate productions” (Bowman). At other points, the company took a special interest in certain units like the VR 781 Naval Air Squadron and enabled them to attend performances of *South Pacific* (Kernodle). In some cases, if the show wasn’t brought to them, former military men attended the show in New York or even requested to perform the show on their ships (Hammerstein). The military embrace of *South Pacific* was not just a

phenomenon among the elites, it was prevalent across all strata of the military machine, showing how integrated it was within the military culture.

Conclusion

War memory and representation are never static; they are malleable and ever-changing products of history and myth, which *South Pacific* reflects. *South Pacific* is a piece of Second World War memory and historical fiction several degrees separated from historical fact that sought to mythologize the war with notions of island escapism. The show sought to glamorize the pleasantries, adventure, and romance of service in a tropical region surrounded by beautiful nurses and ‘exotic’ peoples without the shadow of post-traumatic stress and death to temper it.

While the Second World War is the setting for *South Pacific*, discussing the importance of racial tolerance and acceptance was the purpose of the show. The duality of the show in addressing racism challenges some notions of racial politics in Cold War America while also reinforcing other preexisting stereotypes and caricatures. The show’s celebration of the war allowed it to be extremely progressive in pushing boundaries of racial discourse in the 1940s, while paradoxically exhibiting racism towards Asian characters within the show.

These elements made *South Pacific* uniquely suited to the postwar military because it celebrated American militarism and war mythology, while it also socialized the military towards racial tolerance. The show reached all levels of the military, ranging from the lowest ranking men to Pentagon officials, indicating its pervasiveness and its resonance with those associated with the military. Its relationship to the military as a piece of thematically and historically important piece of entertainment started before the show was created and continued after the hype of the show died down and served as a way to spread ideas of racial tolerance and pride for American militarism through contemporary musical theatre.

Due to the *South Pacific*'s emphasis on fostering World War II nostalgia while also encouraging racial tolerance, the musical was widely accepted by and utilized by the military and related organizations to help ease the blow of changing military culture through entertainment. While the show seems like yet another trend in popular culture, Rodgers and Hammerstein created a piece of theater that also has a place at the American cultural and military history table. By focusing on the interplay between wartime history, myth, memory, and popular culture in post-World War II American society, *South Pacific* is a piece of musical theater that's useful in examining the cultural legacy of American war and racial discourse. In the end, musical theatre is not solely about entertainment. It is an instrument to support and uphold changing policy and culture, of which *South Pacific* is the perfect example.

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