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Enchanted Afternoon, Raucous Evening



Left, Sara Krulwich/The New York Times; Joan Marcus

Left, Paulo Szot and Kelli O'Hara in "South Pacific"; James Carpinello and Kerry Butler in "Rock of Ages."

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD
Published: January 17, 2010

REMEMBER double features? I barely do. They had mostly gone the way of VistaVision and drive-ins by the time I became a movie-mad youth. On a few occasions I created my own, sneaking in to see "Grease" one more time after paying for another movie. (Apologies, AMC Theaters; the check's in the mail.) Luxuriating in a two-movie afternoon was the closest thing to decadence a 13-year-old can achieve. Or at least should.

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I was feeling in a double-feature kind of mood as the holidays wound down. The season can sometimes be more grueling than gemütlich, but this year in particular I felt in need of a restorative, having attended the funeral of a friend who died on Christmas Day. To perk myself up and prepare for a new year of theatergoing, I decided to create my own double-feature on the first Sunday of the year by paying return visits to two favorite shows. (This may seem perverse to casual theatergoers, but Ed Green, the culture-loving friend who had died, would understand; this was a man who'd attended Wagner's "Ring" cycle at least a dozen

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Sara Krulwich/The New York Times
Loretta Ables Sayre as Bloody Mary in "South Pacific."

times.)

The first choice was a no-brainer. [Kelli O'Hara](#) was making her last appearance as Nellie Forbush in "South Pacific" in the afternoon. The second half of the feature was going to be trickier, simply because not a lot of shows give Sunday-evening performances.

But lo! What happy chance! At the Brooks Atkinson Theater, the big-haired '80s Sunset Strip extravaganza "Rock of Ages" would be thrashing out its second round of the day starting at 7 p.m. After wiping away tears at the benevolent resolution to "South Pacific," I'd just have time to grab a cocktail and get downtown before the head-banging began.

From Rodgers and Hammerstein to Bon Jovi and Whitesnake in a single day: the surrealism of it tickled. And while Broadway traditionalists might use the occasion to illustrate and deplore the precipitous decline of the musical, you'll get no such argument from me. Granted, "Rock of Ages" is, um, no "South Pacific." But if the colonization of Broadway by pop songbooks of varying vintages and qualities has hardly been a phenomenon wholly worthy of celebration, there are pleasures to be had, and "Rock of Ages" is definitely one of them.

The day was chilly, frigid even. Flecks of icy precipitation stung my face as I entered the Vivian Beaumont for the "South Pacific" matinee. But it didn't take long for the glow of the director [Bartlett Sher](#)'s splendid revival to spread its warmth around the theater. Almost two years into its run the production retains the vitality and spontaneity of an opening night. If anything, the performances have gained in clarity, nuance and depth, a testament both to the richness of the material and the illuminations of the production. In Mr. Sher's staging "South Pacific" is truly an ensemble show, the superlative performances of Ms. O'Hara and Paulo Szot in the leading roles notwithstanding.

Bloody Mary, for example, the gimlet-eyed businesswoman who caters to the needs of the sailors, might just be the trickiest role in "South Pacific," capable of being distorted into a cute or cruel stereotype. She also sings one of the musical's seemingly more innocuous songs, the toxically catchy "Happy Talk." But while Loretta Ables Sayre allows us to laugh at Bloody Mary's rather savage entrepreneurship, which includes the marketing of her own daughter, she also reveals the urgency that drives Bloody Mary to seek a better life for Liat.

"Happy Talk," with its repetitive lyrics, perfectly fits the character and the moment. Bloody Mary's English is limited; hence the rudimentary lyrics. And the catchy melody is intended to do just that: capture Lieutenant Cable for her daughter, thus rescuing her from a life of virtual indentured servitude to a French planter. The desperate feeling beneath this casual ditty comes through with affecting force in Ms. Ables Sayre's performance.

Danny Burstein's brash comic turn as Luther Billis is as funny as ever, but there are more pronounced shadings to his tender, fraternal love for Nellie that make the character more than a source of comic relief and a plot device. Replacing Matthew Morrison (now of "Glee") as Lt. Cable, Andrew Samonsky emphasizes the cocky swagger in the early scenes that will melt so suddenly into sensual feeling and then lacerating self-contempt. Even the small roles of Commander Harbison and Captain Brackett are imbued with a natural humanity in the hands of Sean Cullen and Murphy Guyer.

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