

Spring 4-29-2021

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Recommended Citation

Beeker, Karsten, "Miss Saigon: Racism and Sexism Portrayed in a Musical" (2021). *Graduate Academic Symposium*. 89.

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Miss Saigon: Racism and Sexism Portrayed in a Musical

"You are here like a mystery, I'm from a world that's so different from all that you are. How in one night did we come so far?" - Kim, Vietnamese bar girl in Miss Saigon

The musical Miss Saigon, directed by Nicholas Hynter, is an adaptation of the artifact Madame Butterfly from 1904 (Degabriele, 1996). Miss Saigon is one of the most commercially popular and critically contested musicals of all time. The hype around the musical, which premiered at West End in London in 1989, led to the largest advance ticket sale on Broadway in the 1990s (Pogrebin, 2000). It is closely associated with Asians and Asian Americans. In 1991, the Filipina actress who originated the role of Kim, Lea Salonga, was awarded as the first Asian actress to win the Tony Award (Chung, 2011). The musical, which was written by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg, is the eleventh-longest running Broadway musical in history with 4,111 performances to date (Gans, 2018). It is ranked the third most successful musical in West End history, has won more than thirty major awards, sold more than 31 million tickets in 18 different countries, and has been translated into 9 different languages (Chung, 2011).

In 2014, the musical was revived and celebrated equal success (Gans, 2018). While the musical gained a "legend" status right from the beginning, it has been controversial from the start (Kroll, 1991). While some see it as a musical that supports representation of Asian characters on Broadway, from Asian American theater and activist communities, the feedback was not too positive, claiming that the musical is racist and sexist towards Asian women (Ryde, 2019). After stopping white washing "the Engineer" (Nishime, 2017) and marketing Miss Saigon as the "first world musical in a third world country" (De Guzman, 2000), the creators of Miss Saigon have already reacted to some criticism from the past. However, the revival of the musical in 2014, for the musical's 25th anniversary, still shows many signs of racism and sexism. Thus, this paper will take a deeper look on racism and sexism portrayed in the revival of the musical Miss Saigon.

The musical Miss Saigon is more than just a story about Chris and Kim's personal tragedy. It shows serious signs of racism and sexism throughout the two hour and 40 minutes musical. The set design and costumes show that America is more desirable as it does not seem as

black and dirty as Vietnam. Lyrics in the musical like “Will you marry me and take me to America?” from a Vietnamese bar girl support the ethnocentric world view of the musical that says America is superior. Furthermore, the musical shows that white skin color seems more desirable. This belief is supported by the fact that Chris chooses his white, blond wife over his Asian wife, who he married first, but did not seem to take as serious as he married another woman. On the other hand, Kim chooses Chris even though her father married her to an Asian man. The feminine side of Chris’s competitor for Kim, shows signs of “orientalism”, as Thuy is not as muscular and tall as Chris and the sexualized way “oriental” women are shown in the musical. Finally, the musical shows different perceptions of genders. Kim seems passive while Chris is active in the musical. With lyrics like “I will do whatever you say”, Kim seems devoted to Chris and does whatever he wants her to do. Having passive women roles can damage the perception of young women in their view of the world. The hyper sexualized view on the bar girls does not help and embraces that thought. Women in the musical are seen as objects while men are seen as “the makers”. The argument that it helps representation on Broadway seems weak as the represented Asian characters leave an audience closed minded with the impression white people are superior and a hyper sexualized image of Asian women. While a musical in the 1990’s may have been socially accepted, times and audiences change, and audience’s views of race, gender change raising the question whether a musical like Miss Saigon should still be performed. It seems that the musical is past its time and does not fit in a world of #metoo and racial awareness movements anymore.