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'Miss Saigon': Beautiful, raw, different

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Just two weeks ago, I stood with two of my students at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. The girls asked me about Vietnam, and I wished I had known more, but I was just too young to remember it myself. Instead of facts and dates, I told them to feel the mood of the Vietnam Memorial compared to the other memorials we had visited that evening. It's beautiful. It's raw. It's different.

I have the same words to describe the current Way Off Broadway production of the musical "Miss Saigon," running this weekend. It's beautiful. It's raw. It's different from any other musical you'll see in Fairfield this summer.

In a modern retelling of "Madame Butterfly," set in the years surrounding the fall of Saigon, the show's opening number happens in a seedy Vietnamese brothel called Dreamland. The money-hungry Engineer, played by Kevin Ray Johnson, crowns "Miss Saigon" and gets his girls to entertain the American G.I.'s.

Dreamland is filled with dreams



PHOTO SUBMITTED

Nicole Santiago-Barrendo and Brendan Thomas rehearse a scene as Kim and Captain Schultz in the Way Off Broadway production of "Miss Saigon." The show continues at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Friday and Saturday and at 2 p.m. Sunday at the Fairfield Arts & Convention Center's Stephen Sondheim Center for the Performing Arts.

Dreamland is filled with dreams in a time of war ... soldiers dreaming of ways to forget, girls dreaming of ways out to better lives. These dreams never manage to connect until the night a G.I. named John buys a girl named Kim for his buddy Chris (Chaz'men Williams-Ali, Nicole Santiago-Barredo and Robert Kemp, respectively). It's Kim's first night at Dreamland after escaping horrors in her war-torn village. Through Kim's innocence and love, Chris starts to hope and feel again. Their romance blossoms. As Saigon falls around them, and the last helicopters leave the U.S. Embassy, Chris and Kim are separated, and he must leave her behind. But Chris and Kim don't realize just how intricately their lives are entwined, and the second half of the show focuses on this complicated web, woven by their love in a time of chaos.

This musical, written by the same composers who created "Les Miserables," is one of my all-time favorites. It's sung through, with very little spoken dialogue. The songs are memorable and filled with

Center for the Performing Arts.

heartbreaking harmonies, especially in the duets. The show is filled with such a hopeful spirit, that even though we sense the tragic outcome playing out before our eyes (a Vietnam story really cannot have a happy ending), we can't help but wish that everything will work out in the end.

Director Randal K. West, musical director Chaz'men Williams-Ali, and choreographer Roy Lightner have created an exemplary production of this beautiful show. The staging and lighting are lovely. The singing is strong and emotional. One of the best examples is at the top of the second act when a stellar chorus of a capella men's voices fills the theater with "Bui-Doi," a wrenching song about the Amerasian orphans left behind after the Americans left Vietnam. Williams-Ali raises the number to the rafters with a show-stopping gospel flair. Lightner's choreography is sharp, complex, and riveting, highlighted in an intense number showcasing a machine gun in the

hands of every dancer.

The performances are excellent. The WOB interns and supporting chorus add depth and energy. Robert Kemp's Chris has an amazing vocal range. His voice soars in his solos and blends with luscious harmonies on the duets.

Diana Upton-Hill gives an emotional performance as Ellen, the American Chris marries after the war. She has some of the meatiest songs of the show including the gripping duet with Kim, "I Still Believe."

Conor Schulz plays Vietnamese soldier Thuy with ferocious passion.

Little Parker Lau doesn't say a single word in the show, but he made me grab the Kleenex more than once.

The performances are excellent, but make no mistake. This show is about Nicole Santiago-Barredo. As good as the rest of the show is, she reaches a whole new plane with her portrayal of Kim. I stopped counting the number of times she gave me goosebumps. She captures both Kim's innocence and her strength,

and can she sing! This little 5-foot wonder can singlehandedly fill our Sondheim. She has the audience in the palm of her hand every time she steps on stage. I've seen several Broadway tours of "Miss Saigon," and I've never seen a Kim this good. It's easy to see why she won Stage Scene L.A.'s award for Best Performance by an Actress for this very role. She's a giving performer who raises the level of all the performances around her. Nicole Santiago-Barredo's Kim will capture your heart.

Beautiful, raw and different, "Miss Saigon" won't give you the historical dates of battles or names of generals, but it will give you the feeling of the Vietnam War ... the helplessness and the hopelessness, the beauty amidst chaos, the inevitable tragic ending.

There are four more chances to see this incredible show: at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Friday and Saturday and at 2 p.m. Sunday at the Stephen Sondheim Center for the Performing Arts.