

Miss Saigon: An Insider's Perspective of the American Dream

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Miss Saigon closed on Broadway seven and a half years ago and may not be much more than a fleeting memory for some, so for those who may not know, "What's that I smell in the air?" begins the chorus of *Miss Saigon's* second act showstopper. The answer to the question also comprises the song's, as well as this seminar's, title, "The American Dream," and indeed constitutes one of the central themes of the play.

In seeking references for the topic to supplement my own experiences as a member of the original Broadway cast, I was not surprised to find little containing any substantial, objective critical analysis of the play, possibly since, after all, it first opened in London only 20 years ago. Furthermore, very little of what I was able to unearth refers to the Broadway production. In contrast, a considerable volume of writings has proliferated, since the Broadway opening, regarding the political and social firestorm surrounding the arrival of the production on the Great White Way. These writings emerged primarily in reaction to the casting of Jonathan Pryce in the role of the Eurasian lead, the Engineer, as well as to the portrayal of Asians and content of the play, as racist. As one might expect, I have been sorely tempted, in the 17 years since our production opened, to share my perspective regarding these controversies—a perspective rarely sought by any of those involved—but that is a topic for my memoirs! For our purposes, I will limit my remarks to those that directly address this paper's theme.

I feel compelled to assert that Broadway continues to represent the pinnacle of stage experiences for the vast majority of the global theatre community, and most especially for those in the musical theatre. Broadway represents the theatre world's American dream. Everyone wants to land there. Therefore during these several battles with the show's detractors, everyone's dream

was at stake.

That a piece was coming to Broadway, which was not only of monumental significance but that could also comprise one of the rare significant experiences an Asian American actor of that time might have, led to an assumption for those of us who were veterans in the New York Asian American performance community that we would naturally be the first to be cast. Imagine our shock in discovering that the original cast would be populated not with us, but with neophytes from outside the City, some of whom had never been on a theatre stage in their lives. Our Asian-American dream of Broadway, playing roles written for us, were crushed early on. By a stroke of luck, a cast member, the intended Gigi, got pregnant and left before the first day of rehearsals and I was added to the ensemble, the last actor to join the original cast.

To support my personal knowledge and understanding of the play and its goals, I am indebted to the documentation of Edward Behr and Mark Steyn on the process of *Miss Saigon's* creation prior to its London opening, and to Margaret Vermette's interviews of the creators and personal analysis of the themes addressed in the play. As a source for the libretto's lyrics, I have used my copy of the original Broadway piano rehearsal score. Therefore the version of the play I will discuss will be the version that opened on Broadway on April 11, 1991.

Miss Saigon updates the well-known 1904 opera by Italian composer Giacomo Puccini, *Madama Butterfly*, for a modern audience. In each version, a soldier from the West (specifically the U.S.), stationed in an Eastern land, meets a lovely prostitute of that land, takes her virginity, "marries" her, lives with her for a time, then leaves the country, vowing to return for her. He does indeed return, accompanied by a Western wife, and in the end is forced to reckon with his actions when his Eastern lover takes her own life, dying in his arms.

The fact was that the creators had had their own American dream. They had conceived *Miss Saigon* as a truly American musical, and indeed had originally expected to launch it on

Broadway rather than London, but could not find an available theatre. Richard Maltby discusses the Americanness of *Miss Saigon* with great poignancy and sometimes regret in the revelation that an American should have written it!

The authors filled the play with exceedingly down to earth, dimensional, if archetypal characters, all engaged in some way with the American Dream, whether chasing it, or trying desperately to hold on to their idealized version of it. Our director, Nick Hytner asked the ensemble to give our primary characters names, histories, and relationships. Mine was Coco, a young girl from a family of five who had no skills and found herself selling her body to survive. In the opening number, the bar girls aggressively strut, graphically flaunt their wares, and fight loudly with their pimp and one another. But in the beautiful first solo verse of "The Movie In My Mind," with Gigi as their mouthpiece, they reveal that they are fighting for their lives—fighting for an escape to America with each marine they "service,"—a seemingly unattainable escape from their dead-end existence that they nevertheless continue doggedly to fight for: "And in a strong GI's embrace, / flee this life, / flee this place."

Each item in the bar girls' American dream denotes something iconically American, drawn perhaps from the movies that transmit images of America to the rest of the world. Gigi sings, "He takes me to New York, he gives me dollar bills. / Our children laugh all day, they eat too much ice cream, / and life is like a dream."

In "The American Dream," it is the Engineer's skewed, naive, tunnel-vision perception of America, probably also fed by American films, and his admiration for its well-oiled engine of capitalism and materialism, that makes him at once maddening and intriguing. We find that the excess of his passion renders his person pathetically and almost endearingly luminous. Again, each item on the list exemplifies his specific situation—a staple of "small time hustles" he's "fed up with,"—and some of the ways he plans to solve this problem in the U.S., including "a club

that's four-star," personal lawyers and bodyguards, and selling blondes to johns "that they can charge on a card."

Sometime during the building of that scene in London, Bob Avian, who had inserted the iconic Cadillac into the end of the number, asked Nick in a moment of epiphany, "Can he fuck the car?" For the Tony Awards telecast in which we were to perform the number live, that Nick mitigated that moment by having Jonathan merely dance around the Cadillac when the potentially offensive moment arrived. Unfortunately, as the camera rolled, a demon overtook our star, or perhaps he suffered a seizure, for the car found itself molested once more, and this time on national television.

The lyricists assigned The Engineer several more references to his unrelenting pursuit of the dream throughout the play. He names his bar "Dreamland;" uses Kim as barter for exit papers to the U.S., with the marines—Embassy employee John ("The Transaction"), and later Embassy chauffeur Chris ("The Telephone Song"); fosters his aspirations toward escape to America during the North Vietnamese re-education process ("The Morning of the Dragon"); escapes his captors and immediately begins to plan his path to America ("If You Want To Die In Bed"); formulates a scheme to use Kim's Amerasian child, Tam, to gain entrance into the U.S. as Kim's brother ("Let Me See His Western Nose"); longs for the easily-bought U.S. marines he knew in Saigon ("What A Waste/Bangkok"); and aggressively engineers the success of his scheme to escape with Kim and Tam ("Chris Is Here," "Paper Dragons").

Then there is the balance of the Vietnamese. The flashback sequence, "Kim's Nightmare," that details the final evacuation of the Embassy in April 1975—separating the lovers and abandoning thousands of Embassy workers and friends of the U.S.—can never have worked as well as it did without the much-maligned helicopter, which represents, for the friendly Vietnamese, screaming outside the Embassy gates for entrance, their dream of rescue and a new

life, in safety, in the United States. It must arrive, and it must subsequently depart, snatching away the dream, as the stranded Vietnamese helplessly turn, sobbing with grief, to watch it "fly" over the audience's head. The arrival of the helicopter serves as a climax for the onstage action that builds to it—the accelerated events of the weeks before the final American evacuation, culminating in the desperate attempts of Saigon citizens to scale the gates or negotiate with marine guards, who must unwillingly comply with their superior's directives not to heed their pleas of "Take me with you, take my children! / They'll kill who they find here! / Don't leave us behind here!" This sequence was the most emotionally draining for our cast to rehearse, the impact of the action of the scene quite serious, particularly for a group of actors who had just spent the first two full weeks together thoroughly researching the central events of that time period of the war via quite moving, sometimes disturbing documentary footage, news articles, films, and testimonials from people who were in Saigon during its fall and the final American evacuation.

Kim's American Dream comprises the most sweeping arc, shifting partway through the play from her own aspirations to those for her son, Tam, Chris' child. The expression of this dream, like her character, is simpler and more straightforward. Kim has grown up in a small village, the daughter of rice farmers ("This Money's Yours"). Less canny than either Gigi or the Engineer, she generally says what she feels. Her dream begins, as does that of Gigi and the girls, with a hope for escape from poverty, fear, harm, and loneliness ("The Movie in My Mind"). It appears to her, early on, that Chris will quickly help her fulfill this dream when he tells her "Yes, I'm going to leave / And take you out with me" during the segue into their soaring duet, in which they dance like it's "The Last Night of the World." In the very next scene their song's title proves prophetic, as Saigon falls.

We next see that Kim has become a refugee and it seems for a moment that the dream has

been thwarted, but indeed it has not. Kim's verse of "I Still Believe" almost directly echoes *Madama Butterfly's* heartbreaking "Un Bel Di," both gorgeous arias in which both heroines insist with utter conviction that their lovers will return to rescue them from their plight and fulfill the dream. In each case, the heroine supports her belief partly with a surprise revelation: the existence of the absent lover's child, whose destiny is to unite all three at last.

"I Still Believe" juxtaposes Kim and Ellen, Chris' American wife, on a single set that places the women in the same moment in time, but on opposite ends of the world, together building to a climax of simultaneous vows to commit to Chris "until we die." We realize later, during the Act Two confrontation between these two women, that Ellen has her own dream—perhaps that of a quintessentially American life involving a white picket fence and 2.4 children that do not include her husband's illegitimate Amerasian son. In "Room 17," she replies to Kim's insistence that Tam accompany her and Chris back to America with "But Kim, your child needs you. / Chris is married to me, we want kids of our own." We are also made privy to Ellen's fear and determination regarding the fulfillment of this dream, in her subsequent solo song, "Now That I've Seen Her," with lyrics such as, "In her eyes, in her voice, / in the heat that filled the air / part of him still lingers there," and "but if it all comes down to her or me, / I won't wait, / I swear I'll fight."

In her Act One aria, "I'd Give My Life For You," Kim first fully communicates that her American dream has shifted from the original expectation of her own escape from war-torn Vietnam to that of her child's, as well as the sacrifices she is prepared to make to accomplish this, as she sings to Tam, "I'll give you a million things I'll never own. / I'll give you a world to conquer when you're grown. / You will be who you want to be." The song, which the authors clearly intend to foreshadow the end of the play, transitions into the arresting final image of Act One, the parallel escape of a human river of Vietnamese refugees crossing into Thailand.

In the end, we come to realize that Tam embodies the play's *raison d'être*, with the events of Act One serving as preparation for his arrival, and over whose fate virtually every main character feels empowered in Act Two to exert control, from the Engineer, who in "What A Waste/Bangkok," confirms Tam's existence, telling John "Yes, we're blessed. / And Kim's on a trip for citizenship / and I am her brother," to Chris and Ellen, who decide in "The Confrontation" that, "In Bangkok he will go to American schools. / They will start a new life. / We'll provide for their needs."

We also come to realize that Tam serves as the representative of a segment of Vietnam's population known in the play as the "bui-doi," literally translatable as "the dust of life," a term that came to be used in reference to the illegitimate children of Vietnamese women and foreign soldiers. In Vietnam, these half-Western children are considered to be of tainted blood and by and large dismissed as dead or non-existent, in many cases by the children's own families. This was especially true during the establishment of the communist regime, when those deemed to have been in collusion with opposition forces during the war were severely punished. Kim is aware that, should something occur to separate her from her child, Tam would be in very grave danger of either being executed, sent to live out his life at some holding place with other half-caste children in unacceptable conditions, or reduced to begging in the streets to survive—hence her inexorable drive to bring him and his father together.

One of the more fascinating aspects of our topic surrounds the resounding Act Two opener, "Bui-Doi," in which, backed by a full-throated male gospel choir, John describes the plight of these young casualties of war during a fundraiser for an international relief organization's effort to connect them to their American fathers in the U.S. Intense backlash from several quarters comprised some of the response, deploring especially the playing of actual archival documentary stills of Vietnamese-American children left behind by their fathers, on a

large projection screen behind John as he sings, in what was described in essence as a cheap, offensive assault on audience sentimentality.

Conversely, over the course of several years, our company had a handful of visits from a Dr. Phyllis, a former nun who had spent the prior 20 years of her life traveling to and from Vietnam, devoted to finding and bringing children of American soldiers to the United States with the hopes of uniting them with their fathers. On each visit, Dr. Phyllis would, with great animation, repeat her belief that "*Miss Saigon* is saving these children." Apparently, the spate of news articles on American soldiers and the children they had fathered, children who had either been left behind in Vietnam or managed to emigrate to the United States, had so turned the spotlight on these young products of war that she was finding herself more successful in her mission. Many of these articles included information on where to go for information and help in tracking these lost children.

During the first few years following the Broadway opening, we felt lucky to meet many young Vietnamese-Americans born during the Vietnam War and living in the United States, who had traveled to the City to see the play and attend post-show talks with the cast. One young woman shook my hand, and told me candidly that "Movie in My Mind" was helping her to hope that her own Vietnamese mother had been more than a prostitute. Many others had similar things to say. Most seemed happy and lucky to be counted Americans.

One of the presents I received on opening night was a simple black and white card from producer Cameron Mackintosh. Opening it reveals a photograph of a handsome young Asian American man, and these words:

Dear Mirra: I would like to introduce Hoang Giang. Hoang was
born in Saigon, Vietnam, is 20 years old and celebrates his birthday

on May 2nd. He is currently at Saint Rita's Asian Center Cluster Group. Saint Rita's offers programs from remedial reading to technical and vocational training in an effort to assist the Amerasian children to succeed in American society. Hoang likes watching movies and his hope for the future is to become a security person. I have sponsored Hoang Giang in your name for one year and hope you have an opportunity to communicate with him. Best wishes.

CAMERON. 11 April, 1991.

I was astonished and moved to receive the card and to subsequently learn of further similar gestures by the creators. I surmise now that these actions, some of which predated the eruption of the controversies, were attempts on the part of the creators to follow through on the story they tell in "Bui-Doi."

With regard to the bui-doi and American responsibility, John furthermore sings, with utter candor, "They are a living reminder of all the good we failed to do," which lands our examination squarely on Chris, the play's hapless hero and erstwhile symbol of American involvement in Vietnam. Another underlying theme that we can identify in the play concerns Kim's and Chris' relationship as a metaphor for America's interactions with the East, and more pointedly the U.S. military's failure to rescue South Vietnam in spite of their good intentions. Many of the American soldiers were very young, idealistic, and in some cases caught up in an adventure they had chosen no part of. Chris appears no different. We see him first, restless and disillusioned, as events escalate toward an imminent fall to the North Vietnamese, and in his plaintive Act One solo following his first night with Kim, in lyrics such as, "How can I feel good when nothing's right?" and "I'm all through here, on my way / There's nothing left here that I'll

miss. / Why send me now a night like this?" we may imagine it is America asking the question, "Why are we here?"

The creators had determined from the beginning that Chris would not be an unfeeling bastard, unlike Lieutenant Pinkerton, his counterpart in *Madama Butterfly*. They therefore fashioned the play's romantic hero with a Southern boy's conscience, his regret deepening as the play progresses. During his climactic solo in "The Confrontation," he wrestles with a rage that threatens to engulf him—certain that he should have done more and that in losing control of the situation, much as the soldiers lost control of their excursion into the East, he has managed to compromise everyone and everything he values—as he confesses to Ellen, "So I wanted to save her, protect her. / Christ, I'm an American! / How could I fail to do good?" His American dream involves a question of identity as well as pride in that identity—a pride now compromised. While John spurs himself toward more action in an attempt to prove that he, as an American, can rectify some of the ills visited upon the East, Chris appears too hampered by destiny throughout his dramatic journey to choose his actions wisely, and too deeply affected by his failures to avoid self-blame and a kind of inertia, continually relying on others, whether John, or Ellen, or Kim to lead him.

Kim's final act invites derision from those who see her suicide as another unnecessary piece of sensationalism. What I find important about it about it, is that throughout the play, Kim never wallows. Even during her pretty ballads, we hear her planning, making choices, choosing action over inertia. In the twelfth hour, Kim acts again, foils the neat contract that Chris and Ellen have come to offer, and herself engineers the fulfillment of her American Dream.

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