

THEATER REVIEW: Miss Saigon at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora (4 stars)

At the Paramount, a riveting new take on a falling Saigon

THEATER REVIEW: "Miss Saigon" at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora

★★★★

November 04, 2013|Chris Jones

The massively popular mega-musicals of the 1980s — a list dominated by "Les Miserables," "The Phantom of the Opera" and "Miss Saigon" — are returning to Broadway and the touring circuit in new and rethought stagings. "Les Miserables" just enjoyed a boffo tour and is headed back to Broadway this spring. A new "Phantom" hits Chicago early next year. "Miss Saigon" is the Vietnam-era musical that launched the directing career of Nicholas Hytner and was derided by some (although loved by others) as the height of conspicuous theatrical consumption. For an idea of what could be done with this show, producer Cameron Mackintosh, or his many minions, should head to Aurora.

In a locale that gets less and less unlikely with every self-produced show at the Paramount Theatre, director Jim Corti's thrilling new staging of this show manages to be at once progressive, counterintuitive and simply spectacular.

This production — which, for "Miss Saigon" fans, is worth the drive to Aurora from anywhere in Chicagoland — has several formidable weapons, beginning with a truly inspired setting created by Chicago scenic designer Linda Buchanan (note to the Paramount: never rent a tired old set again; see what Chicago designers can do with a huge stage). Buchanan, whose work here truly is eye-popping (as are Linda Roethke's re-thought costumes), has built a network of bamboolike trellises, columns and bars that move horizontally and vertically and that can be lit internally. They thus can evoke the traditional quiet of the Vietnam countryside, the precarious but effective barriers barring refugees during the fall of Saigon, and the corruption of young Asian women by the sex trade.

Buchanan's network combines with Mike Tutaj's massive projections, which use archival footage from Vietnam, including, for the show's most famous moment, an image of the helicopter evacuation of American personnel from Saigon, which is also reimagined live. Replete with actors dangling over the stage, this stellar set-piece packs an emotional and theatrical punch far greater than the arrival of a half-size chopper in Hytner's original production. I have some qualms about images of actual human suffering being used in a show, but there's no questioning the dramatic excellence of Tutaj's work here; his faces stare down at you from this huge stage, only to fade into the back wall as the story takes over.

The lead role of Kim is played by a young actress from South Korea named Shawna Haeji Shin, a woman of

diminutive stature but formidable pipes, who I'm told was cast via the Internet. Wow. Even if you've seen any number of Kims from Lea Salonga on down, there is still something remarkable about Shin's Kim, a combination of youth, vulnerability and rectitude that gives the production gravitas and a moral force that one typically does not experience with this title, even though it is crucial for the emotional music of Claude-Michel Schonberg, not to mention the roots of the plot in "Madame Butterfly." Shin shows us a voyage from confusion to determination — a girl's coming of age in hell, you might say.

Playing opposite her is the young Chicago actor Brandon Moorhead, who clearly had to reach to get to Chris, the G.I. who finds himself in love and in deep in 'Nam. There no doubt were temptations to cast a standard-issue Chris from New York or wherever, but Moorhead's aspiration, reach, youth and emotional cracks in his voice are what makes this show so moving. He raises his game particularly when alongside Emilie Lynn, who knocks the Act 2 power ballad "Now That I've Seen Her" halfway to Bangkok.

Which brings me to Joseph Anthony Foronda, an actor I first saw years ago in the national tour of that original "Miss Saigon" production (he has played The Engineer, the show's narrator-fixer-trickster, hundreds of times over several years). You might say he knows what he is doing. I saw Foronda two or three times back then and I expected to see much the same thing all these years on. Wrong. A couple of decades have gone by and Foronda is a much older, deeper actor who has added a looser, deadlier and more caustic bite to his striving guy. The stakes for such a character rise with age, a truth that Foronda has the guts to grab by the neck.

Those four performances anchor the show, although they're supported by a top-drawer ensemble whose commitment is intense indeed.

Those who know this piece very well will be intrigued by some other savvy Corti choices here, including the decision to make the famous "American Dream" number a solo for The Engineer (instead of the usual campy pizzazz) and, in the last moments, the way Corti himself engineers a complete change of focus away from what will happen to the child in the future (the focus of the original staging) to an unstinting and deeply emotional exploration of what could and would have been a beautiful, loving family, were it not for the betrayal of war.

This sting in the show's tail had me sniffing in my seat Sunday night. "Miss Saigon" used to smack you over the head and make you emotionally numb, but this truly formidable (and, note, affordably priced) staging, replete with full orchestra playing the original orchestrations, embraces the populism of the piece without losing emotional complexity. "Miss Saigon" feels fresh, and I did not expect to write that again.

Twitter @ChrisJonesTrib

When: Through Nov. 24

Where: Paramount Theatre, 22 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes

Tickets: \$36.90 to \$49.90 at 630-896-6666 or paramountaurora.com